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RELATIONSHIP FADING  
IN BUSINESS-TO-CONSUMER CONTEXT

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ASTON UNIVERSITY  
September 2015

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Aston University

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2015

Thesis Summary

The objective of this thesis is to develop a better understanding of the relationship fading phenomenon in business-to-consumer context. Fading relates to a gradual decline in consumer's willingness to continue a relationship with a company. Therefore, understanding the fading process may help to elucidate the 'unexplained' relationship dissolution and customer defection. Led by an assumption that a relationship between a consumer and a brand is like the one between individuals, the thesis proposes that the trajectory of relationship fading reflects the disaffection processes similar to the ones suggested in marital and romantic relationships between individuals. The approach taken to answering this research question is a multi-study approach. This type of approach allows addressing each individual research question independently, using the most appropriate research methods. As a result, the thesis comprises three adjacent studies. All three studies are linked and together contribute to a better understanding of the relationship fading process, which is the main topic of the thesis. Based on the results from the first study, a set of boundary conditions of relationship fading is identified. The results of the second study suggest that predictors of relationship fading stage can be uncovered. Thirdly, different restoration techniques are explored, aiming to describe their effectiveness in various relationship fading stages. Individual objectives of the three studies are accomplished. All three studies contribute to achieving the overall objective of the thesis, namely to developing a better understanding of the phenomenon of relationship fading.

**Key words:** *relationship fading, romantic relationships, relationship trajectory*

## **Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Andrew M. Farrell and Prof. Heiner Evanschitzky (in no particular order). Thank you for your guidance, support and patience throughout the process of my studies. Even though I am far from being an 'ideal student', you were always available to meet, provide feedback and answer any questions. You were offering reassurance when I was not certain how to proceed and what to do next. I would like you to know that your help was invaluable and I have deep appreciation for all that you have done.

I also would like to thank my external supervisor, Prof. Kishore Pillai, for his feedback and guidance, especially when working on the qualitative part of this thesis. I am also grateful to Dr Julien Schmitt for his feedback and guidance received at many stages throughout the process.

I would like to thank my parents who have always encouraged me to realise my dreams even when that meant that their only child was many miles away from them.

Special thanks go to Hamid who was always next to me throughout this process, who helped me survive the stressful situations and did not let me give up whenever I had doubts.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and colleagues, especially Rozanna and Katharina who in various ways supported me in bringing this project closer to a completion.

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# **1. Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research problem by which this study has been motivated and main objectives of this thesis. Subsequently, the research approach and thesis structure are also presented.

## **1.2 Research problem**

The setting of this research is within the business-to-consumer context and specifically draws from the knowledge relating to satisfaction, loyalty and consumer-brand relationship building and decline.

In the literature, consumer satisfaction is commonly linked to loyalty (Bolton 1998; Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Heskett et al. 1994; Szymanski and Henard 2001). Nevertheless, it has been reported that although customers appear satisfied, they defect from organisations (Bolton 1998; Reichheld et al. 2000). Research shows that as many as 60 to 80% of satisfied customers defect from organisations (Reichheld et al. 2000). Additionally, defection rates are reported to be higher than service failure rates (Oliver 1999), which suggests that service failures are not entirely responsible for customer defection.

In fact, neither lack of satisfaction, nor service failure completely justifies defection and switching behaviour among customers commonly leaving service providers with no opportunity to restore relationships. Such behaviour may cause issues for companies, as it has been acknowledged that a relationship between a company and their customers is pivotal for existence and success of businesses (Bendapudi and

Berry 1997). Companies usually find out about an issue only once the consumer has made their decision and brought it to life. Moreover, it may seem that consumers sometimes defect without a clear reason. It appears therefore that customers somewhat naturally fade from organisations, although companies continuously try to maintain relationships with their customers.

Based on the findings of Evanschitzky et al. (2011, p. 15), the phenomenon of fading is described as “a process of gradual decline in consumers’ intention to continue the relationship with a brand (company) manifested in negative feeling towards the brand (company), diminishing frequency and/or volume of transactions with it and initiation of switching intention”. It may be that relationship fading is a process that is a part of the overall relationship dynamics, and it may help to elucidate the ‘unexplained’ relationship dissolutions and customer defections.

This approach to the problem of consumer switching behaviour without an obvious reason and defection from organisations is new to the marketing literature, since the marketing discipline, to the best of my knowledge, does not discuss the phenomenon of relationship fading in business-to-consumer context. In order to explore this phenomenon psychology literature is investigated in search of suitable theories that will help explain the mechanisms behind this process.

### **1.3 Thesis and research objectives**

Based on the research problem explained in the preceding paragraph, the purpose of this research exercise is to consider the gaps identified in the literature and address them in a comprehensive way. In order to do this and on the basis of an initial conceptualization and definition of consumer-brand relationship fading, the boundary conditions of relationship fading are explored and discussed. Next, the fading

trajectory is investigated and finally, relationship restoration techniques are discussed and evaluated. As a result, this thesis is presented as a series of three adjacent studies with a common relationship fading theme, which together contribute to gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon of consumer-brand relationship fading. Consequently, the following detailed research objectives have been identified:

**Objective 1:** *to identify the boundary conditions of relationship fading in the business-to-consumer context*

This research objective is addressed in Study 1, where a qualitative enquiry identifies and categorises moderators in the fading process.

**Objective 2:** *to investigate the trajectory of relationship fading and uncover the main predictors of the relationship stage*

This research objective is addressed in Study 2. Specifically, understanding of what drives a consumer to be in a particular fading stage is developed.

**Objective 3:** *to explore and describe restoration techniques in the relationship fading process*

This research objective is motivated by the previous studies and relates to the potential possibility of applying certain actions and techniques, aiming to restore a fading consumer-brand relationship. This research objective is addressed in Study 3.

## 1.4 Research approach

The thesis aims to improve the understanding of the phenomenon of relationship fading in three different aspects. Having discussed various approaches to this investigation a decision was made that a multi-study approach is most suitable. This is the case because it allows the researcher to address each individual research question independently, using the most appropriate research methods. All three studies, however, are linked and together contribute to a better understanding of the relationship fading process. In order to best meet each of the research objectives, suitable data was collected using various data collection methods. Overall, the thesis is intended to present a mixed method design in order to draw from the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). The main benefit behind the application of a mixed method approach is the opportunity to use various methodological approaches while investigating the phenomenon of relationship fading. As a result, each of the studies is a standalone research enquiry that is presented in individual chapters: 4, 5 and 6. The below figure illustrates the research approach.

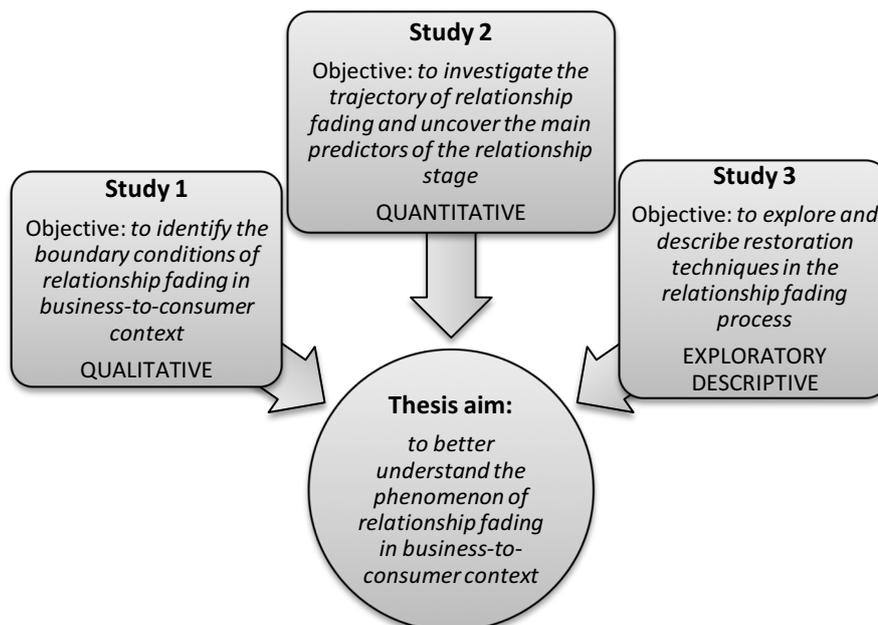


Figure 1 Research Approach

## 1.5 Thesis structure

In total the thesis comprises seven chapters, including this introductory one and is organised as follows:

The **second chapter** reviews the relevant literature and presents the conceptual model. Three main streams of literature are considered. Firstly, the concept of relationship fading is introduced and explained. Long established conclusions of the link between consumer satisfaction and loyalty are discussed (Bolton 1998; Churchill and Surprenant 1982; Heskett et al. 1994; Szymanski & Henard 2001). Subsequently, some reported obstacles to loyalty creation are reviewed, including an observation stating that customers reporting high levels of satisfaction are still likely to defect from organisations (Bolton 1998; Oliver 1999), challenging the long-established satisfaction-loyalty link. The chapter continues by discussing service failure and recovery, which are frequently associated with consumer switching behaviour (Anton 2007). It is also pointed out that service failure does not always lead to defection (Jones, Dacin & Taylor 2011), which supports the need for an enquiry into other possible explications of unexplained consumer defection.

Secondly, based on the assumption that people engage in relationships with brands in a similar way to how they do with other individuals (Fournier 1998), literature related with the process of marital disengagement and disaffection is considered. By doing so, a context for investigation of boundary conditions of the consumer-brand relationship fading process (Kersten 1990) is presented.

Thirdly, building on the knowledge obtained in the area of romantic relationship dynamics and specifically relationship decline, literature debating restoration and recovery opportunities is reviewed. Finally, drawing from the review and concluding

the chapter the conceptual model is presented, explaining the link between the three studies presented in this thesis.

**Chapter three** presents the research methodology adopted in the thesis. A summary of the epistemological approach is presented, followed by an explanation for the use of the mixed method approach to address the research questions. Furthermore, motivation for the suitability of the use of specific methods in individual studies is offered. Finally, the data collection methods and approaches to analysis are described.

**Chapter four** discusses the first of the three studies aiming to answer the question about the context in which relationship fading is most likely to occur. The chapter presents the results of the exploratory qualitative study, discussing individual, dyadic (relational) and contextual (relating to the external environment) conditions that increase the likelihood of consumers becoming disaffected in their relationship with a brand.

The **fifth chapter** reports the results of the second study aiming to investigate the main predictors of relationship stages in the relationship fading trajectory. The chapter presents the results from the analysis of the longitudinal diary study. Hypotheses state that relationship stage can be predicted by a) past relationship stage, b) external positive and negative experiences and c) individual's attitudes and personality is tested.

The **sixth chapter** presents the results of the third exploratory descriptive study aiming to present initial insights into restoration techniques applied at various stages of a relationship with a brand. The intention is to find out whether consumers have

preference towards specific restoration techniques depending on the relationship stage they are in.

**Chapter seven** provides an integrated synthesis of the findings of the three studies and discusses their contribution to answering broader research question, aiming at improving the understanding of the relationship fading phenomenon. It also presents theoretical and practical implications. The chapter concludes by providing suggestions for future research.

## **2. Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Model**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive review of the relevant literature associated with concepts comprising the nomological network of this thesis.

The first section introduces the phenomenon of relationship fading in the business-to-consumer context. It highlights how satisfaction and loyalty are embedded in the literature and managerial practice. It also discusses potential deficiencies associated with the fact that these constructs are often being treated as central to the success of any consumer – business relationship.

In the following paragraphs literature on service failure and recovery is discussed. Frequently consumers' lack of satisfaction or loyalty followed by relationship termination is attributed to service failure and inadequate recovery from such incident. Research suggests, however, that failure does not always lead to termination of a relationship. Moreover, it is observed that failures occur rather rarely and should not be regarded as the main reasons for consumer relationship termination nor switching intentions, which are also discussed in this section.

In the second section literature on marital disaffection processes is explored in the search for explanations to understand how the consumer relationship fading process evolves. Theories explaining relevant processes are discussed.

In the third section boundary conditions of marital disaffection are discussed. Three categories of conditions that may increase the likelihood of spouses becoming disaffected are discussed. These categories include individual characteristics,

relational conditions and contextual circumstances. This part of the review informs the research conducted in study one of this thesis.

In the fourth section factors affecting the trajectory of relationship fading are explored. In particular, key groups of potential determinants of relationship fading stage are discussed informing the second study of this thesis. Three comprehensive categories of factors are identified: time-related factors, individual factors, and situational factors.

In the fifth section the literature review presents the overview of techniques leading to relationship restoration in a marital context. This part of the review informs the research conducted in study three of this thesis.

The chapter concludes by presenting a synthesis and a conceptual model, explaining the research gap and how the three studies forming this thesis are linked together for the purpose of answering the research questions presented earlier.

## **2.2 Phenomenon of Relationship Fading**

Based on the findings of Evanschitzky et al. (Evanschitzky et al. 2011, p.15), the phenomenon of relationship fading is defined as “a process of gradual decline in consumers’ intention to continue the relationship with a brand (company) manifested in negative feeling towards the brand (company), diminishing frequency and/or volume of transactions with it and initiation of switching intention”. The process of relationship fading is developing through a three-stage trajectory. Consumers enter the first stage of the fading process, **disillusion**, after they have experienced some unfavourable, disappointing events during their interactions with the brand. Those events are considered minor disappointments because the consumer would still be in a strong and

overall positive relationship with the brand. Those unexpected disappointments, if not dealt with appropriately, can lead to the consumer entering the second stage of the fading process, **disaffection**. The accumulation of unfavourable events and lack of resolution leads to further disappointment and feeling of a variety of negative emotions, such as frustration and anger. In case the situation persists, consumer loses trust towards the brand and enters the **crossroads** stage of relationship fading. Consumer becomes more receptive to competitive offerings and is more likely to switch to another brand. They lose emotional attachment and become indifferent toward the brand, which may lead to relationship termination (Evanschitzky et al. 2011). Relationship fading may be part of the natural relationship dynamics, and it may help to elucidate the 'unexplained' relationship dissolutions and customer defections.

### **2.2.1 Satisfaction and loyalty**

The first part of literature review discusses the satisfaction and loyalty literature, as the research problem of this study is directly linked to and emerges from this area. The concept of customer satisfaction represents one of the most fundamental constructs in marketing, leading to satisfaction becoming one of the major goals and outcomes of all marketing activities (Churchill and Surprenant 1982). "Conceptually, satisfaction is an outcome of purchase and use resulting from the buyer's comparison of the rewards and costs of the purchase in relation to the anticipated consequences" (Churchill and Surprenant 1982, p.493). It is also defined as consumer's conscious acknowledgment that consumption has fulfilled some desire, goal or need which in reward brings pleasure (Oliver 1999).

According to the service profit chain, satisfied customers remain loyal to a company (Heskett et al. 1994). The predominant view in the past research is that satisfaction should guarantee a long-term successful relationship between the two parties (Bolton

1998; Churchill and Surprenant 1982). Although these claims have been recognised for a number of years, it has been observed, that although customers are satisfied, they still defect from organisations (Bolton 1998). Satisfaction's importance might therefore seem overrated, since not only is satisfaction an unstable and temporary state, but as many as 60-80% of customers who defect from organisations report that they are satisfied or even very satisfied (Reichheld et al. 2000). These findings lead one to question the value of satisfaction in predicting likelihood of a long-term relationship with a brand.

The literature suggests that loyalty can be explained in various ways. Loyalty is a multidimensional construct, which consists of attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty (Dick and Basu 1994). Some research also discusses cognitive loyalty (Oliver 1999). Dick and Basu (1994) define loyalty in terms of the attitude-behaviour relationship, whereby they distinguish four types of loyalty depending on relative attitude and repeat patronage. This approach is motivated by the argument that purely behavioural understanding of loyalty is unable to explain how loyalty develops.

Interestingly, according to the behavioural and attitudinal characteristics, consumers can be classified based on their loyalty as single users, multiple users and non-users (Bandyopadhyay and Martell 2007). Single users are characterised as loyal to a brand and being constrained buyers, multiple users are seen as variety seekers who are deal prone, and non-users are defined on the one hand as indifferent, but at the same time they represent potential consumers.

For the purpose of this research, a definition of loyalty by Oliver (1999, p.34) is applied, with loyalty viewed as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronise a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, *despite* situational influences and marketing efforts having

the potential to cause switching behaviour". Whereas the presence of loyalty is expected to take account of satisfaction as an antecedent, and satisfaction is expected to be present when loyalty occurs, satisfaction can exist on its own and not lead to loyalty in return. Consumers can experience satisfaction without loyalty, but this does not mean that satisfaction is not present. Some obstacles to loyalty creation have been reported as one's variety seeking, multiband loyalty or withdrawal from the product category – they all result in 'disloyalty', however they do not imply customer dissatisfaction (Oliver 1999). Therefore, one should be mindful when explaining the link between satisfaction and loyalty as unconditional and straightforward, especially since satisfaction is not only said to have a direct impact on loyalty, but also, according to the literature, on complaining behaviour, negative word of mouth and repurchase intentions (Szymanski and Henard 2001).

At the same time, another aspect is found to be important when referring to loyalty. Companies would ask the question, what, if not only customer satisfaction, makes consumers loyal? What do they have to do to retain their customers? Some may claim that a product's unique proposition is not enough. In order for the consumer to become committed, regardless of any unfavourable factors, a unique relationship has to exist between them. Here, commitment is considered as "an exchange partner believing that an on-going relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely" (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p.23). The attribute of being 'lovable' appears to have a strong impact on a relationship's quality (Oliver 1999) and is widely experienced by consumers. According to Batra et al. (2012), 89% of respondents claimed to truly love at least one brand. According to Sternberg (1986), there are some elements of love present in all kinds of close relationships that can be distinguished. He points to intimacy, passion and decision/commitment as three

components of all kinds of love. Consumers' perception of existence of these attributes can be considered a factor contributing to a brand being 'lovable'.

Another factor affecting interaction between buyer and seller is the existence of trust, defined as "the perceived credibility and benevolence of a target of trust" in a relationship (Doney and Cannon 1997, p.36). Credibility is the expectancy to be able to rely on a partner's declarations. Benevolence is one's genuine interest in the other's welfare. Another definition of trust explains this concept as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party" (Mayer et al. 1995, p.712). This explanation implies that trust is not only an act of risk taking but also an actual willingness to take it.

Due to its importance and value, trust has been found to have a significant influence on satisfaction and long-term orientation (Geyskens et al. 1999). Therefore naturally, the more the customer trusts the service provider, the more likely a successful relationship between them. As a result, investment in the relationship with a consumer appears to contribute to the quality of the bond. Consequently, relationship marketing practices are widely implemented, since they are perceived to increase the level of trust and loyalty, as well as to improve the overall mutual experience (De Wulf et al. 2001).

One could ask at this stage whether satisfied consumers are not sufficient to provide sustainable profits and long-term commitment for a brand or service provider. In fact, since satisfaction does not guarantee customer retention, the sustainability of any business based on measurement of customer satisfaction is questionable (Reichheld et al. 2000). Companies strive to ensure customer retention not only to increase profits, but also to improve performance and deliver products and services more closely suited to consumers' needs and to create better value. Furthermore, loyal customers tend to

increase their expenditure over time and become less price sensitive and therefore easier and less pricey to manage (Reinartz and Kumar 2000).

In the end, an answer explaining reasons as to why defection rates are as high as 90% among satisfied customers (Oliver 1999) has to be sought. One of the most prevailing views in literature indicates that direct responsibility for the defection rates should be assigned to service failures.

### **2.2.2 Service failure and recovery**

If the service profit chain framework was appropriate across all situations, and if satisfied customers stayed loyal to a service provider, the need to explore why the opposite happens would not arise. Organisations would retain their customers for a lifetime if only they could keep them satisfied with the service. Nonetheless, it has been observed that this premise does not always apply and for this reason scholars tried to investigate the possible motives of why customers switch between service providers or brands (Burnham et al. 2003).

Reasons for switching behaviour and defection from organisations with no 'obvious reason' have been researched in the literature. Keaveney (1995) reported that in service industries "core service failures, service encounter failures, failed employee responses to service failures, and inconvenience cause customers to switch services". Similarly, Anton et al. (2007, p. 135) blame some of the company's actions as the main reasons for customers switching to another provider. They point out that the main motives for switching are: "service quality failures, unfair price, low perceived commitment and anger incidents".

Relationship termination can be initiated not only by particular failures but also a common reason can be lack of satisfaction followed by failure to complain (Chebat and

Slusarczyk 2005). In such situations the service provider is not given an opportunity to resolve the issue. Not surprisingly, a customer might expect some form of action by the organisation, whereas the company, unaware the customer is unhappy, is usually left without a chance to provide a solution to the problem and restore satisfaction.

Although successful service recovery is regarded as being so powerful that it can turn dissatisfied customers into loyal ones (Hart 1990), it should also be noted that whereas this finding applies to loyalty itself, it does not apply to customer repurchase intentions (de Matos et al. 2007). Additionally, service failure represents a threat to consumer's trust, since even after successful service recovery, levels of trust were found to be lower than the levels expressed before service failure occurred (de Matos et al. 2007). The phenomenon of turning dissatisfied consumers into loyal ones is referred to as the service recovery paradox and is defined as a condition when post recovery loyalty is greater than before service failure occurred (Maxham 2001).

A recovery is expected when a customer experiences an unjust situation (e.g. a failure) and as a result seeks a company reaction that will compensate for the imbalance caused (Chebat and Slusarczyk 2005). Therefore companies are advised not only to resolve failures to consumers' satisfaction, but particular attention should be paid to whether consumers perceive the recovery as just (Gelbrich and Roschk 2011; Goodwin and Ross 1989). The complaint resolution management process is also an important factor affecting consumer's decision whether to make a complaint (Tax and Brown 1998). The reasons behind not complaining are mostly the time and effort needed to complain, as well as the perception of provider responsiveness (Voorhees et al. 2006). In terms of emotional factors, resignation has been found to be the main driver of not complaining (Chebat and Slusarczyk 2005).

Experience of service failure does not always have to lead to defection. Jones et al. (2011) introduced a notion of a 'damaged customer' who experienced a transgression within a service relationship and who does not exit the relationship immediately following the incident, but becomes much more likely to do so should subsequent transgressions occur. Interestingly, the authors found that committed customers are more tolerant of transgressions and may even forgive what happened. If commitment is present in a relationship, a consumer is more likely to make a complaint. Further, commitment is one of the key constructs in buyer-seller relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Palmatier et al. 2006). It represents a power that makes one willing to remain in a relationship, making one more forgiving and ready to sacrifice more. Therefore building commitment is one of the aims for service providers. In the business to consumer setting, commitment represents a combination of psychological attachment, loyalty, identification with the organisation and pride in being associated with it (Garbarino and Johnson 1999). Furthermore, consumers high in affective commitment are more likely to voice complaints, even in situations where complaint barriers are high (Evanschitzky et al. 2011). Among the three types of commitment, affective, continuance and normative; affective commitment is a psychological state that is characterised by the presence of emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation (Meyer and Allen 1991) expressed by one's willingness to continue a relationship with an organisation. Consumer's level of commitment is therefore an important variable when resolving a complaint situation.

Although service failures are regarded as one of the main disadvantageous events leading to relationship termination, they occur rather rarely and do not justify the rates of consumer switching and defection.

### **2.3 Relationship dynamics in business-to-business context**

B2B relationships are essentially different from B2C relationships, since the latter can be characterised by more personal and direct interactions where more emotions are created in the course of interactions. More frequently they are also subject to personal, social and institutional influences. Therefore, papers in the business-to-business context present a different perspective of relationship dynamics.

Literature suggests that B2B exchange should not be treated as discrete events, but rather as an ongoing relationship (Dwyer et al. 1987). Researchers have noticed the suitability of this approach to various contexts (Akerlund 2005; Blut et al. 2010; Jap and Anderson 2007; Jap and Ganesan 2000; Terawatanavong et al. 2007). Consequently, one of the approaches that could be applied to answer the research question would be to look at this phenomenon in terms of its dynamic nature and continuous development. Relationship is an active construct and evolves over time (Fournier 1998). Various classifications of stages of relationship lifecycle have been explored. In the context of B2B relationships it has been recognised that relationships develop through five stages: awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment and dissolution (Dwyer et al. 1987). In the first phase parties recognise each other as exchange partners. In the stage of exploration parties explore the possibility of exchange. The buyer may consider a trial purchase in order to assess the benefits of the transaction. Expansion occurs following the examination period and means increased mutual dependence between partners. This is due to the intensified relationship and more mutual benefits. The most advanced phase is the commitment stage when loyalty is realised and continuous benefits are collected. The last stage of the relationship is dissolution, which naturally follows the commitment stage. This framework explains how interaction between the two parties progresses and then declines. It takes into account mutual dependence as well as benefits gathered during the most intense

phase. Decline and dissolution are perceived here as naturally following after and being part of the overall process. This model consequently describes the trajectory of development of B2B relationships and points out that somewhat naturally, some of the relationships are more prone to loyalty, whereas others, due to lack of motivation, are not.

Whereas the framework proposed by Dwyer et al. is fairly rigid, another theory, proposed by Van de Ven (1994) introduces a cyclical approach, in which the stages of the lifecycle repeat. According to Dwyer's theory, a relationship that failed will be abandoned, whereas following an argument presented by Van de Ven, the cycle can be repeated although the relationship has gone into decline, suggesting possible revival of the relationship. Although both of these theories are widely recognised in literature, they "are typically invoked to support single hypotheses referring to correlations at one point in time, as opposed to relationship development over time" (Jap and Anderson 2007, p.261).

Relationship fading has been discussed in the literature in the business-to-business context. Akerlund defines fading as "the process of a temporal or a permanent weakening in the relationship strength, defined as the weakening of relationship strength, where the outcome of the process is not yet known" (Akerlund 2005, p. 157). Through an analysis of 42 qualitative interviews she derives four types of fading processes. The first one, *crash landing*, can be characterised by a visible turbulence and abrupt weakening of the relationship, caused by some negative critical incidents (Akerlund 2005). The second type, *the altitude drop process*, can be characterised by a smooth fading process dominated by behavioural factors. Affective factors of the relationship remain largely unchanged (Akerlund 2005). *The fizzle out process* can be described as passive and in the absence of communication a relationship almost vanishes whereby loss of commitment and involvement seem to be the driving forces

of this process (Akerlund 2005). *The try out* type of fading can be experienced by customers who are not certain the choice was suitable for them and, in some cases, where high and unrealistic expectations have not been met (Akerlund 2005).

More recent work of the same author points out the challenges related to managing fading relationships (Renström 2014). In her attempt to understand the silently fading relationships, the author does not try to measure the state of relationship at a time, which is attempted as part of this thesis, but rather she tries to investigate the passive engagement style, that often is associated with this type of relationship. Based on the same data as presented in the earlier paper, Renström does not consider a relationship passing through a number of distinctive phases, as suggested by Evanshitzky et al. (2011), but it rather “more or less just vanishes” (Renström 2014, p. 540). Although the relationship fading concept may appear to be similar due to the same name given to describe both phenomena, the dynamics of both of those types of fading vary.

The above descriptions may seem similar to the *fading* that is the subject of this study, there are differences, which ultimately will become contributions of this project. Firstly, this research project takes a longitudinal approach to investigation of relationship trajectory, through which behaviours, feelings and interactions are observed in real time and over a prolonged period of time in order to observe any changes in more depth and without the potential bias of retrospection. Where Akerlund’s study is concerned, professional banking services are very specific in nature. Complexity and long-term investments, as well as the difficulty of comparing different providers based on customised needs, make this setting highly exclusive. This context and nature of professional banking services creates a special background for Akerlund’s study, the findings of which may not be generalisable. Perhaps that is why Akerlund does not intend to provide generalisations based on her results. Limited detail is presented about the actual trajectory of the relationships, how they evolve, what stages they pass

through; neither is there a framework of fading included. This research study, on the other hand, attempts to establish those relationships in order to determine what factors lead to fading and the stages of a fading relationship. Additionally, this study explores potential boundary conditions for fading, as well as investigates the effectiveness of various restoration efforts, further extending Akerlund's work.

Because of this reason, an alternative approach to look at why does satisfaction not always lead to loyalty would be to observe relationships between consumers and service providers from the perspective of a lifecycle. However in this case, I apply existing frameworks from marital literature, which try to explain similar phenomena, namely the process of marital disaffection. This approach looks into events that may or may not lead to a relationship moving onto the next stage of its lifecycle, together with antecedents. In contrast to the previous approach, it is possible to look at a relationship as a dyadic process involving many more factors not included in the explanations proposed above. Given the similarity of consumer–brand relationships to interpersonal relationships (Fournier 1998), marital disaffection literature appears suitable for investigating this research question.

#### **2.4 Relationship dynamics in interpersonal romantic relationships**

The disaffection process present in close romantic relationships seems to reflect the patterns in the business-to-consumer context (Fournier 1998) and helps to understand the process.

Marital literature may be more suitable for certain types of relationships, such as contractual, due to their nature. On the other hand, non-marital relationships have more voluntary characteristics, are less formal and may be more suitable for

transactional relationships. Both streams of literature present processes of relationship weakening that contain specific characteristics and stages. Since there is no tested framework of the relationship fading process in the business-to-consumer context, it is a matter of exploring which patterns, characteristics and behaviours occur in the trajectory of a relationship. Marital relationships seem to most closely reflect the relationship patterns present in the business-to-consumer setting and therefore this literature was examined in detail.

#### **2.4.1 Marital disaffection theory**

Marketing literature does not provide suitable explanations for the phenomenon of relationship fading and therefore in the section below marital literature is explored.

Relationships that people share with other individuals are constantly being affected by mutual interactions. Depending on the type of interaction and direct outcome, relationships evolve (Fournier 1998). They all pass through a lifecycle, which includes various phases. In numerous cases a stage of weakening of a bond may lead to termination of a relationship (Fournier 1998). Similar to a relationship between individuals, the relationship between a consumer and an organisation evolves or, one could say, adjusts to new circumstances, as time passes.

Having mentioned similarity of relationships between individuals and between a consumer and a brand, the marital literature on relationship lifecycle will be explored in order to understand the process of how a relationship evolves over time, what stages are included in the lifecycle, what are the reasons of disaffection and possibly dissolution. It might be that the bond between the two parties is similar in many ways. As a result, the way a relationship is created, how it evolves and ends is similar too.

The theory of marital disaffection developed by Karen Kersten (1990) is the first I will refer to. This theory, when applied to relationship fading, gives an insight into the process of relationship disaffection. According to Kersten (1990, p. 257) “marital disaffection is the gradual loss of an emotional attachment, a decline in caring about the partner, an emotional estrangement, and an increasing sense of apathy and indifference. By disaffection is meant the replacement of positive affect with neutral affect”. Kersten (1990) argues that emotions play an important role in this process and contribute to the dynamics of the evolution of the relationship. In the marketing context, Bagozzi et al. (1999) argued that not only are emotions moderators of consumer behaviour, but they also affect the cognitive process.

Based on her study, Kersten (1990) concludes that there are three main stages of the process. The beginning phase is mostly characterised by disillusionment with the partner. It is not very likely though that partners in this stage think of termination of marriage. In the middle phase partner(s) mainly feel apathy, which results in increased thoughts about relationship ending. In the final stage, termination of marriage is the most frequent thought. In this stage also, it is most likely that partner(s) will take action to eventually terminate the marriage.



**Figure 2 Phases of Marital Disaffection**

**(Kersten 1990, p. 260)**

In conclusion, the disaffection process can be divided into stages that can be characterised by specific feelings, behaviours and thoughts. The first phase, disillusion, is a natural element of the lifecycle in a relationship between individuals (Houston 2001). After the initial stage of 'honeymoon' persons may start adjusting to the new circumstances and may become disappointed with the present reality and as a result, a relationship may enter the disillusion stage. If the disillusion stage continues, the relationship may enter the next stage of its lifecycle, namely disaffection. Disaffection does not have to lead to dissolution and is usually experienced more strongly by one of the partners. In the final stage a spouse may be experiencing apathy and indifference, start considering possible outcomes and evaluate the risks. They may still, however, decide to continue the relationship, either unhappily, which would usually be characterised by withdrawal, or by taking up some actions in hopes of improving the state of the relationship.

Scholars other than Kersten have discussed the disaffection process in the literature. Herrington et al. (2008) offered another explanation and has referred to this phenomenon as 'disruption of emotional attachment', that has a direct impact on relationship events. This does not have to mean, however, that lack of conflict for instance promotes intimacy and emotional support in a relationship. To build on this

topic, Kayser (1996) has built a Marital Disaffection Scale in order to measure feelings between partners. The purpose of this measurement is that having measured the level of disaffection the best treatment plan can be implemented, which should help achieve potential recovery of the relationship. Unfortunately, recovery is not always possible. If recovery does not appear at this stage, the least desirable outcome of the relationship lifecycle eventually occurs, namely its dissolution.

To date empirical findings discussed in the literature reveal possible drivers of marital dissolution. These findings also help to understand surrounding processes and antecedents of relationship fading. The key drivers are summarized in the below table.

**Table 1 Drivers of marital dissolution**

Study	Driver of marital dissolution
(Becker et al. 1977)	Unanticipated events, whether favourable or unfavourable, marriage outside of one's religion, marriage at your age, previous divorce
(Cramer 1993)	Wife's personality, high neuroticism and extraversion
(Eysenck and Wakefield Jr 1981)	Sexual behaviour and attitude, background and personality, social attitude
(Gottman and Levenson 1992)	Lack of marital satisfaction
(Gottman 1993a)	Husband's defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling; Wife's criticism, contempt and disgust.
(Kelly and Conley 1987a)	Neuroticism of both partners, impulsiveness of the husband
(Kersten 1990)	Decisions made without partner's consent, lack of emotional support during stressful event, abusive behaviour, problem between partner and children, partner's controlling behaviour, lack of responsibility
(Kurdek 1993)	Lack of preparation for or doubtful competency in performing marital roles or resolving interpersonal conflict constructively, dysfunctional beliefs regarding relationships and neuroticism, discrepancy between spouse's value on attachment and intrinsic motives for being married
(South and Lloyd 1995)	Romantic involvement with someone other than a spouse, remaining open to forming extramarital relationships while being married, the aggregate rate of geographic mobility
(White 1990)	Macro structural: law, economic cycles, the family institution, gender roles, social integration, cultural values; The life course and demographics: marriage order and stepchildren, parental divorce, cohabitation before marriage, early age at marriage, premarital childbearing and pregnancy; Family process: lack of marital happiness, thinking about divorce
(Zimmer 2001)	Socioeconomic factors: for wives – assets, family income, degree on dependence on husband; for husbands – unexpectedly high wages Noneconomic factors: for husbands – age at first marriage, duration of marriage, measured marital happiness Factors emerging prior to marriage: for wives – previous marriages; for husbands - cohabitation before marriage

Among others, it has been found that emotional involvement with someone other than a spouse in substantial percentage leads to a divorce (South and Lloyd 1995). In this context, the volume of marital alternatives affects marital dissolution. Additionally,

results suggest that many married people remain open to the possibility of forming extramarital relationships.

Another variable that has been reported to influence marital satisfaction and stability is personality (Cramer 1993; Eysenck and Wakefield Jr 1981; Kelly and Conley 1987a). High levels of neuroticism could result in dysfunctional behaviour occurring, leading to dissatisfaction and marital instability. Personality traits were also found to be strong predictors of compatibility between spouses. A wife's personality was reported to have greater influence on marital stability than her husband's. In general, personality was found to substantially influence one's satisfaction or dissatisfaction derived from a marriage. This might imply that individual traits are motivators of certain behaviours or that individuals possessing certain traits are more likely to switch/stay/be satisfied/be dissatisfied etc.

Another set of factors are economic and they may also be taken into account when assessing the probability of relationship termination. One of the assumptions suggests that the smaller the expected gain from marriage, the greater the probability of divorce (Becker et al. 1977). Optimal marital sorting is expected to have a positive influence on marital stability. Positive assortative mating in relation to individual characteristics, such as education, intelligence, height, age, physical attractiveness is expected to occur in relation to traits not substituting in the production of commodity income. Such setting assures of greater gains in marriage than when being single and as a result leads to lower probability of divorce.

Many studies look at marriage dissolution at a point in time when both of the spouses have already made the decision to separate or divorce. Zimmer (2001) looks at marital dissolution from a perspective of a single individual. He points out that before the common decision about divorce is made, a process on an individual level has to take

place. It is usually one of the partners who is less 'satisfied' with the relationship and they are the one to initiate the whole procedure. Additionally, Zimmer addresses the fact that wives and husbands are motivated by different socioeconomic factors when making decisions relating to the stability of their marriages. Dissolution is the ultimate point of a process usually initiated long before by one of the individuals. This individual's behaviour and attitude may affect the mutual relationship and lead to disaffection and potentially dissolution. Reasons for disaffection may differ from one individual to another. Couples' circumstances should not only be analysed as combined, but also individual conditions should be looked into.

#### **2.4.2 Measurement of dissolution likelihood**

A stream in the literature represents an attempt to predict possible marriage dissolution empirically. Many studies have been conducted in order to develop tools and determine possible antecedents leading eventually to dissolution. The measures are summarized in the table below:

**Table 2 Marital instability scales**

<b>Study</b>	<b>Measure</b>
(Booth et al. 1983)	Measure of Marital Instability: 24-item assessment of affective and cognitive states along related actions precedent to terminating a relationship
(Gottman 1993a)	Balance Theory of Marriage: cumulative over time sum of negativity is measured and reduced or balanced by positivity. If a threshold is exceeded, 'perception' of interaction is affected increasing the likelihood of divorce. Measured by using an observational system - Rapid Couples Interaction Scoring System – RCISS
(Kayser 1996)	The Marital Disaffection Scale: 21-item self-report scale measuring level of disaffection towards spouse
(O'Leary et al. 1983)	Positive Affect toward Spouse – 18-item positive feeling questionnaire to measure positive affect being important characteristics of good marriage
(Snyder and Regts 1982)	Disaffection and Disharmony Scales: disaffection scale (26 items) reflects the experience of inadequate support and understanding; disharmony scale (18 items) relates to more specific conflicts in problem solving capabilities

Among others, Kurdek (1993) examined couples over five years on the basis of annual assessment in order to predict marital dissolution. Personal demographic variables, individual differences and interdependence were measured in order to evaluate their potential relationship with marital dissolution. All of these factors have been found to influence potential marital dissolution. Gottman and Levenson (1992) made an attempt to create a model that would empirically predict which couples are more likely to divorce. By implementing the 'cascade' model in their study, they have concluded that dissatisfaction is an antecedent of separation or divorce.

Booth et al. (1983) introduced a scale that measures marital instability. Instability in this context means how likely a couple is to dissolve an existing marriage. Instability as a result is seen here as precursor of dissolution. Twenty-four items have been included in the final index, including thoughts and actions, for instance 'thinking about divorce' and that 'the marriage is in trouble', 'talking about counselling', 'talking to others about

the marital problems'. This scale allows for marital instability to be assessed even when one or both partners appear fairly satisfied with the relationship.

Another measure of likelihood of dissolution is implemented in the Balance Theory of Marriage (Gottman 1993b), which claims that trajectory toward marital dissolution can be predicted by two variables: positivity and negativity. This theory could be applied in order to test whether long-term emotional balance (more negativity vs. positivity) will determine a relationship's dissolution.

It seems that due to the nature of interpersonal relationships it is difficult to predict marital dissolution as an event that will either surely happen or surely not happen. Expected antecedents, however, can become valuable clues when assessing the condition of a relationship and when trying to understand how certain variables may influence development of the relationship, its dissolution or revival. In order to help evaluate this possibility, the scales could be applied in the B2C context.

### **2.4.3 Non-marital relationship disengagement**

Due to its specific characteristics, such as voluntary nature, as well as less formal character, non-marital relationships are also explored in search of similarities and possible applicability to explain the relationship fading phenomenon.

Romantic relationships are described as "mutually acknowledged on-going voluntary interactions; (...) typically have a distinctive intensity, commonly marked by expressions of affection (...)" (Collins et al. 2009, p. 632). Romantic relationships can be characterised in terms of high or low quality. High quality relationships are marked by supportiveness and intimacy which improves the functioning and well-being of

partners. Low quality relationships, on the other hand, are characterised by irritation, antagonism, frequent conflict and controlling behaviour (Collins et al. 2009).

Similar to marital relationships, research has been conducted aiming to investigate factors leading to romantic relationship success. Love has been found to be one of the most important factors to relationship successful continuation (Hendrick 1988). As a construct love has been referred to as a combination of passion, commitment and intimacy. Furthermore, it is expected that the greater the rewards and investment in the relationship the greater the commitment in a relationship. Commitment is represented by willingness to stay in the same relationship over time (Simpson 1987). It seems also that it is easier to find a partner who can provide rewarding outcomes rather than a partner with whom a close long-term relationship can be built. Therefore, such relationships that involve intrinsic investments tend to build closer ties and are more difficult to replace for an individual, since they are aware of the emotional distress to be caused by the termination of such a relationship.

One of the essential components of relationship stability over time is closeness (Berscheid et al. 1989). Closeness is defined as the high level of interdependence between two individuals, disclosed in the following properties of their relationship: having frequent impact on each another, the degree of impact being strong on each occasion, impact involving varied activities for each individual, as well as interconnected activities taking place over a prolonged period of time (Kelley et al. 1983). By measuring the aforementioned, one can establish the degree of closeness present in an interpersonal relationship and estimate whether the relationship is stable and likely to last a long time.

Closeness as a construct contains elements of love, commitment and caring, all of which are associated with a successful interpersonal relationship. Closeness may also

be linked to forgiveness (Tsang et al. 2006) in a way that restoring closeness may help toward forgiveness and forgiveness may help maintain closeness. Interestingly, in the marital literature closeness is not so often mentioned as one of the components of a successful relationship.

One of the most desired outcomes of a romantic relationship involvement which emerges as mutually rewarding contact and increases the confidence in a relationship is emergence of trust between partners (Rempel et al. 1985). The level of trust rises with the duration of a relationship as the relationship matures (Norris and Zweigenhaft 1999; Rempel et al. 1985). As the relationship evolves, trust is also expected to build. Although actions taken by partners help to shape judgements about one another, trust is placed in a person, not in their actions. Trust also can be looked at in different stages of its maturity, starting from predictability, through to dependability and ending in faith that is a sign of emotional security enabling an individual to 'trust' their partner to an extent greater than available evidence.

Presence of faith (an element of trust) was also found to have the greatest correlation with love and happiness, as well as perception of partner's intrinsic motives (Rempel et al. 1985). Intrinsic motives reassure partners of unselfish intentions and therefore are a key to successful interpersonal relationship. Lack of trust, on the other hand, may generate decreased levels of closeness and commitment from partners (Simpson 1990) whereas closeness and dependency were found to underlie attachment – another important element of helping to build long-term interpersonal relationships (Collins and Read 1990).

Similar to marital literature, pre-marital relationships have greater chances of survival when the number of available alternatives is low and when the level of satisfaction and happiness are high (Berscheid 1994).

Another interesting factor present in individuals in the context of romantic relationships is self-monitoring, which represents a style of presenting one to the world (Norris and Zweigenhaft 1999). High self-monitors present themselves as different people in different situations, whereas low-monitors consistently express themselves irrespective of circumstances. Depending on a style, an approach to dating and to a romantic relationship will vary, whereby high self-monitors tend to stay uncommitted, more concerned with extrinsic factors; and low-monitors tend to be committed, intrinsically oriented, who value faithfulness and loyalty more than the other group (Norris and Zweigenhaft 1999).

To conclude, a number of factors reported in the literature have been found to have positive and negative influences on a romantic relationship's stability and success. They are presented in the table below.

**Table 3 Factors affecting non-marital relationship's stability**

<b>Study</b>	<b>Positive factors</b>
(Berscheid et al. 1989)	Closeness
(Hendrick et al. 1988)	Love, commitment, investment
(Norris and Zweigenhaft 1999)	Low in self-monitoring
(Rempel et al. 1985)	Faith as aspect of trust, intrinsic perceptions, perception of empathic identification, unselfish concern by one's partner
(Rubin 1970)	Love
(Rusbult et al. 1998)	Commitment, satisfaction, quality of alternatives (negative), investment size
(Simpson 1987)	Closeness, length of a relationship, satisfaction with current partner
(Simpson 1990)	Secure attachment style
<b>Study</b>	<b>Negative factors</b>
(Norris and Zweigenhaft 1999)	High in self-monitoring
(Simpson 1987)	Ease of finding an alternative partner
(Simpson 1990)	Anxious and avoidant attachment styles
(VanderDrift et al. 2009)	Low commitment, dissolution consideration

Trust, commitment, closeness, love and intimacy prevail as being the most important intrinsic motives, while satisfaction and self-monitoring were other significant elements reported.

One of the issues regarding measurement of the success of a romantic relationship is the question of how long such relationships should last to be considered successful. Unlike marriages, pre-marital romantic relationships can still be considered successful even though they reach termination.

Another issue is that people are more likely to get involved in such relationships in particular age (12-18) and the same applies for ending of relationships. Also perceptions of partner's interdependence, closeness and supportiveness increase with age (Collins et al. 2009). This could highlight the importance of determining a set of boundary conditions under which the expected process of fading (or relationship decline) is likely.

Similar to marital relationships, non-marital relationships have also been investigated from the perspective of their trajectory. Lee (1984) presents a framework for romantic break-ups and includes a model built of five stages of dissolution: discovery of dissatisfaction, exposure, negotiation, resolution and transformation. These stages reflect the process of dissolution that begins with one or both individuals experiencing a problem, conflict or dissatisfaction. This is then expressed openly to the other partner (exposure), and later an open discussion follows (negotiation), during which partners may consider to repair the relationship or for instance try separation. Resolution involves the decision point and at last transformation reflects the actual changes taking place.

In general, shorter, less intense relationships may not include all previously mentioned stages of dissolution. In such cases partners usually avoid discussion, which in turn

results in these relationships being less committed and more superficial. Therefore, communication is one of the factors important in producing strong relationships, whereas lack of it leads to disengagement (Lee 1984).

Another factor reflecting the quality of a relationship is whether partners decide to scale-down their relationship instead of completely terminating it. Relationships characterised by more intensity, cooperativeness, intimacy and dependency on one another, creating strong positive feelings are less likely to be immediately terminated but rather scaled-down (Lee 1984). Nevertheless, close romantic relationships can be characterised by having a clear break up point (Berscheid et al. 1989). Therefore, in most situations relationship dissolution can be anticipated. This does not mean, however, that all romantic relationships end in termination and also that nothing can be done to avoid dissolution.

## **2.5 Boundary conditions of disaffection**

In the following section the boundary conditions considered in the context of romantic relationships will be discussed. This part of the literature review is linked directly to and forms a background for the first study presented in Chapter 4.

Disaffection in a romantic relationship includes gradual fading of emotional attachment between partners. It is usually demonstrated by a decline in caring about the partner and experience of indifference towards the spouse. In the context of marital relationships, disaffection can be characterised by decreased level of marital satisfaction, lower levels of mutual attentiveness and love (Huston and Houts 1998).

In the marital literature three types of conditions that increase or decrease the likelihood of spouses becoming disaffected have been characterized (Hill and Peplau

1998b; Kelly and Conley 1987b; Kurdek 1993): individual (intrapersonal), relational (interpersonal) and contextual (environmental). The individual level refers to the individuals themselves, their traits and characteristics. Relational factors relate to interaction between spouses. Contextual factors relate to external circumstances, outside the individual's control.

### **2.5.1 Individual (intrapersonal) characteristics as boundary conditions**

At the individual level, most prominent are several personality characteristics. Personality traits may predispose a partner to overreact or behave in a certain, negative way in response to marital events. The literature suggests that there is an association of some personality traits with marital adjustment and divorce (Cramer 1993). In particular, neuroticism or emotional instability have been found to be negatively correlated with marital adjustment and satisfaction (Eysenck 1980). High levels of neuroticism may become reasons for dysfunctional behavior, such as increased level of punishment towards a spouse compared to levels of rewards (Kelly and Conley 1987b). Deficiencies in basic social skills may also lead to increased reciprocity of negative behaviors between partners.

Findings also suggest that a wife's personality may have a greater influence than a husband's on marital stability (Cramer 1993). According to Huston and Houts (1998), husband's anxiety correlates with expression of anger and impatience, complaint behavior, and not keeping promises in marriage. Those husbands tend to be more ambivalent about their relationships, be less in love with their wives, be less satisfied and see more conflict in their marriages. As a result, wives of husbands high in anxiety perceive their partners as less responsive. Also, wives themselves become less satisfied with their marriage, less affectionate and less in love in relationships with such partners. Wives' anxiety, although unrelated to their own negative behavior, is related

to the amount of conflict and ambivalence they and their husbands observe in marriage, to the level of satisfaction and love they experience (Houston and Houts 1998).

Another boundary condition of disaffection is commitment. In this context, commitment is not seen as a unidimensional construct, but can be differentiated between institutional and voluntary (Kayser 1993). An individual with an institutional commitment sees marriage as an establishment based on a lifetime commitment. Even if marriage becomes unrewarding, commitment to this institution should not be destroyed. Voluntary commitment, on the other hand, makes the spouse focus rather on individual happiness and fulfillment in marriage. In this case, marriage is evaluated daily and if emotional needs are not met, the spouse starts questioning the purpose of continuation of such a relationship. Based on the empirical findings, considering the two types of commitment, voluntary commitment has been found to positively correlate with marital disaffection (Kayser 1993). Therefore, couples who believe in marriage as fulfilling one's need for happiness are more likely to experience marital disaffection.

Intrapersonal distal risk factors refer to another set of conditions increasing the chances of falling into disaffection (Kurdek 1993). Those factors can be defined as person's characteristics observable at the outset of marriage and reflecting the aggregated life experiences up to that moment. Factors included in this classification are demographic variables: low income, previous divorce of at least one spouse; as well as individual-differences factors, such as dysfunctional beliefs about relationships (Kurdek 1993). Dysfunctional beliefs can lead to categorizing, evaluating and processing marital events in a dysfunctional manner. In general, individuals who possess such characteristics tend to be less competent to perform marital roles and deal with conflict in a less constructive manner (Morgan and Rindfuss 1985).

### **2.5.2 Relational (interpersonal) factors as boundary conditions**

At the relational level, several boundary conditions have been identified. Discrepancies between partners in relation to their leisure interests and role preferences may lead to incompatibility problems (Huston and Houts 1998; Kelly and Conley 1987). Issues related to partners' compatibility are usually exposed later in the course of relationship development rather than at the beginning when partners are less likely to express any concerns over incompatibility and when they are more likely to act in a way which does not represent their real preferences. It may also be that partners are aware of the incompatibilities during courtship but decide not to voice and address them, which leads to growing impact of those unexposed issues on established marriages.

Generally, men tend to be aware of the compatibility or incompatibility in the leisure interests with their partner and based on this awareness men seem to feel more or less in love. For wives compatibility appears to become relevant later in the relationship, starting from the second year of marriage (Huston and Houts 1998). Similarly to men, women report more love and satisfaction, and less conflict when compatibility in leisure interests is high. They also perceive their partners as more responsive. Likewise, role preferences are found to correlate with women's reports of love, ambivalence and perceptions of the husband. Lack of consensus about roles and responsibilities expresses itself in greater amounts of reported conflict and negativity during courtship and in early marriage. Additionally, anxiety and incompatibility create an effect that weakens marriage's ability to sustain (Huston and Houts 1998).

Some research suggests that in premarital relationships, perceiving a relationship as low cost should be related to higher satisfaction and increased relationship stability (Hill and Peplau 1998). Relational problems, such as conflicting interests, boredom or one's desire for independence are associated with lower relationship satisfaction, greater

likelihood of breakup and lower probability of marriage (Hill and Peplau 1998). Issues related to conflict are fairly significant and the literature reports various instances of how it can affect a marriage. Premarital conflict can be seen as a cost and can lead to an unstable marriage. Poor conflict resolution before marriage may also be related to lower marital satisfaction and potential divorce (Hill and Peplau 1998). Couples who avoid conflict are at higher risk of building negative feelings. Not expressing one's concerns may lead to an increased risk of disaffection. Additionally, spouses with greater differences in values, attitudes, and beliefs may encounter marital difficulties because they assess the relationship from different perspectives (Kurdek 1993). When forming long-term relationships it is important for the partners to get to know each other really well before committing to such relationships. It has been found that shorter dating periods may not be sufficient to exclude the incompatible partners or to experience some of the worrying differences before making decisions to marry. As a result, problems may occur following poor familiarity with one another (Larson and Holman 1994).

### **2.5.3 Contextual (environmental) circumstances as boundary conditions**

Contextual circumstances surrounding the couple, as well as individuals themselves, may also have an effect on marital stability and the course of development of marriage. It has been reported that a friend's approval and their positive perceptions of the partner increase the positive outcomes of the relationship (Booth and Johnson 1988). On the contrary, numerous pressures may lead to negative outcomes. Those can include career circumstances, pool of potential partners, political or economic circumstances (Larson and Holman 1994). Below a summary of boundary conditions from the romantic relationships literature is presented.

**Table 4 Boundary conditions in interpersonal relationships**

<b>Individual level</b>	<b>Relational level</b>	<b>Contextual level</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In a situation where there is a mismatch in perception of responsibilities (expectations vs. reality) and the scope for improvement is limited (Huston and Houts 1998)</li> <li>• Individual's change in perception of their partner – once positively attributed characteristics or behaviours are later attributed negatively. "Illusionary intimacy" creates an idealised perception of the partner during courtship. This is also time when partners try to be on their best behaviour. The "need" to continue a relationship creates distortions and once the relationship is formalised, the distortion is no longer necessary. This together with more "relaxed" behaviour of the partner leads to disillusionment (see Kayser 1993, pp. 33-35)</li> <li>• Partner's belief about how they should be committed to marriage plays a crucial role. Individuals who believe that marriage is based on a voluntary commitment are more likely to experience disaffection. For them, while the relationship is important, more important is their personal happiness and how the partners feel about one another (Kayser 1993, pp. 122-126)</li> <li>• Additionally, voluntarily committed individuals may have higher expectations of marriage – they seek individual happiness and fulfilment. If happiness is not apparent, they can become more easily disillusioned. Voluntary commitment is</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Couples who avoid conflict are at higher risk of building negative feelings by not expressing their concerns and as a result ultimately leading to disaffection (Kayser 1993, p. 14)</li> <li>• In the early years of the relationship, authority tends to be evenly distributed whereas in the later stages of marriage, authority is concentrated around one of the partners, creating unilateral dominance, leading to conflict and disaffection. (This can be, however, attributed to external factors, such as pressures at work, or other societal demands). (See Dizard 1968 in Kayser 1993, pp. 17-18)</li> <li>• Lack of mutuality in a relationship whereby individuals believe that they do not have equal privileges or rights in a relationship is often a cause of disaffection. Dominating a partner or disregarding one's opinions and desires can also be a factor.</li> <li>• Partners' compatibility: courting and married couples who do not share similar leisure interests and role preferences are more likely to experience conflict. Poor match between partners may lead to more negativity expressed towards each other and more</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disaffection in a relationship can only occur if at the outset of this relationship some positive feelings towards the other party existed (Kayser 1993, p. 6)</li> <li>• Disillusion and disenchantment often occurs if individual's expectations of marriage are not met (Kayser 1993, p. 2). It may be that the hopes are too high or that marriage serves a different function nowadays and people search for fulfilment of various emotional needs through this relationship.</li> <li>• Insufficient search for the mate can lead to marriages that are at higher risk of a mismatch and hence have a higher likelihood of dissolution (Becker, Landes and Michael 1977 in Zimmer 2001, p. 465).</li> <li>• Couples who have a history of previous marriage are at a higher risk of repeated dissolution of a relationship. Additionally, risk of divorce is higher for individuals who cohabit before getting married. They tend to be less conventional. This type of union offering similar benefits yet being less formal may weaken one's concept of</li> </ul>

<p>conditional upon one's happiness and fulfilment and will only continue if meets the expectations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Furthermore, voluntarily committed spouses are more likely to closely monitor a relationship, are more sensitive to problems, conflicts and errors in the partner.</li> <li>• Neuroticism is a personality trait that has been found to be a source of marital instability (Kelly and Conley 1987)</li> <li>• Anxiety (which captures disposition of emotional stability, neuroticism and negative affectivity – see p. 123), in courtship correlates with higher ambivalence about the relationship, as well as premarital conflict (see Houston and Houts 1998, p. 139).</li> <li>• In marriage, the impact of anxiety is also visible. Especially in husbands, high levels of anxiety correlate with husbands expressing more anger and impatience; increased complaining behaviour, and expression of negative feelings by failing to keep promises. High in anxiety husbands also are more ambivalent about the relationship, less satisfied with it and are also less in love with their wives (Houston and Houts 1998, p. 142). Wives high in anxiety view their partner as less responsive and are perceived by their partners similarly.</li> <li>• Impulsivity has been identified as being negatively related to marital stability (Kelly and Conley 1987).</li> </ul>	<p>ambivalence felt about the relationship (Houston and Houts 1998, p. 120).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unstably married couples are more dissimilar on certain personality traits (see Eysenck 1981, p. 152)</li> <li>• Couples who show large differences in attitudes, values and beliefs may assess events in a relationship from incompatible points leading to marital problems (Kurdek 1993).</li> <li>• Short dating periods do not facilitate individuals to get to know that a partner is incompatible or to experience some troublesome differences before marriage. Those who are not well familiar with each other are more likely to experience problems after marriage (Larson and Holman 1994, p. 232).</li> <li>• Couples usually ignore premarital conflict. It may, however, erode positive feelings over time. Poor conflict resolution before marriage has been identified as predictors of marital dissatisfaction and divorce (Larsen and Olson 1989 and Hill and Peplau 1998, p. 251).</li> </ul>	<p>marriage (Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010, pp. 260-262).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family of origin may affect suggests that the higher quality in the parent's marriage, the higher the quality of marriage of the adult children (for more see Larson and Holman 1994, p. 229). Based on this experience adult children may form attitudes towards marriage and relationship in general.</li> <li>• Friends are not only an important place for finding a mate, but also individuals seek friends' approval and positive perceptions. If friends do not support the choice, negative outcomes of the relationship are higher (Booth and Johnson 1988).</li> </ul>
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## **2.6 Predicting stages of the relationship fading process**

The chapter began with a review of the literature and provided insights into theories explaining particular expectations and assumptions. Those theories help to identify potential groups of factors that may help explain why consumers happen to be in a specific relationship fading stage.

The aim is to gain a better understanding of what can predict a relationship fading stage (honeymoon (no fading), disillusion, disaffection and crossroads) and what are the signals that consumer are or may be fading away. Understanding the antecedents of the relationship fading process helps to distinguish between consumers who are likely to switch between providers and those who are likely to build long-term relationships with brands. Knowing those customers who are most receptive to maintaining relationships is essential to firms (Bendapudi and Berry 1997) as this is where they can concentrate their marketing efforts. This can be achieved by identifying the customers with tendency to build and remain in a successful relationship with a service provider. Nevertheless, due to growing problems with customer base expansion, some companies consider even reacquisition of defected customers (Kumar et al. 2015) as another way of dealing with this problem.

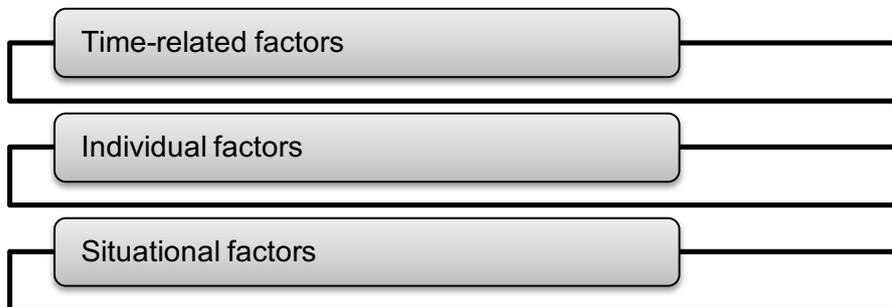
It may seem challenging to select and assess certain factors only based on an expectation that the results will be representative of a wider tendency and will help to predict one's future behaviour. It is, however, reasonable to expect that some aspects, such as personality traits, are in fact stable over time (Block 1971, McCrae and Costa 1984). Furthermore, personality psychology addresses the subject of individual differences (Eysenck and Eysenck 1985). Differences in personality and ability are anticipated in individuals and therefore it is also expected that a variety of responses are obtained when measuring the impact of individual variables on a consumer's

relationship fading stage and its drivers. Every human being is genetically unique and when combined with a mixture of individual experiences, such as upbringing, education and culture, they become an even more structurally complex and distinct unit, with distinct personality and ability. On the other hand, people from the same environment or culture, of similar age and sharing similar interests and aspirations, are more likely to share more similarities in terms of their behaviour.

Individuals also express different ways of dealing with situations, and perform different actions as a result of a combination of factors. Social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986) considers acts of behaviour being an outcome of a learning process, which consists of a dynamic combination of personality, one's past experiences and environment in the social context. According to the theory, reciprocal influences are expected between all three sources of impact, however it is not imperative that one has a stronger effect over another and that they take place simultaneously. In a fading consumer-brand relationship a variety of factors will have an impact on individual's perception of a relationship stage. However, due to numerous factors having an influence simultaneously, it is not expected that they will always have the same effect on individual's behaviour and movement between relationship stages.

Based on the above, it is reasonable to say that a variety of factors can influence individuals in different ways simply because every person is different. Therefore, to aid conceptualization and help with explanation of the relationship fading process, factors that may have an influence on why consumers switch between stages of the process have been put into three comprehensive categories. These categories represent key groups of variables which could have an impact on predicting relationship fading stages. These three comprehensive categories include: time-related factors, individual factors, and situational factors. For the purpose of this research study a selection of

variables in each category is included in the analysis in order to demonstrate predictive validity of the categories.



**Figure 3 Three Categories of Variables**

### **2.6.1 Time-related factors**

Time-related factors are those variables that represent temporal influences on the relationship fading process. Examples include the frequency of interactions, how recently interactions occurred, and past relationship stage. When explaining consumer's decision-making process and behaviour, an inertia model can be applied in order to evaluate the impact of time-related explanatory variables on consumer brand choices (Jeuland 1979). Inertia models treat brand loyalty as a multidimensional construct and aim to assess consumer brand choice probability with this in mind. For goods that are consumed frequently, it is expected that a consumer derives utility from repeated experiences and their past satisfactory experiences will lead to repeat purchases (Bawa 1990). Additionally, switching may be considered inconvenient (Colgate and Lang 2001) or purchasing a specific brand may become habitual (Bozzo 2002) which may also lead to repeat purchases. Individual past experiences may also have an impact on the relationship trajectory in a sense that if a consumer has been using a similar product in the same category, their experiences may, for instance, dictate higher or lower expectations.

## **2.6.2 Individual factors**

Individual Factors relate to consumers' own characteristics, feelings, beliefs and opinions. Examples include personality, attitudes towards a brand, and overall satisfaction. Stability in personality has been reported to influence experiences of relationship satisfaction (Cramer 1993; Eysenck and Wakefield Jr 1981; Kelly and Conley 1987). High levels of neuroticism could result in dysfunctional behaviour, leading to instability in a relationship, potentially making consumers more likely to move to further stages or experience negative behaviours.

In general, personality is found to substantially influence one's satisfaction or dissatisfaction derived from a relationship. This might imply that individual traits are motivators of certain behaviour or that individuals possessing certain traits are more likely to switch (be dissatisfied) or stay (be satisfied) with a brand. Overall satisfaction with the brand may also be one of the drivers. According to service profit chain, satisfied customers remain loyal to a company (Heskett et al. 1994). The predominant view in past research is that satisfaction should guarantee a long-term successful relationship between the two parties (Bolton 1998; Churchill and Surprenant 1982). As a result, if a consumer experiences satisfaction, they would be less likely to move down the trajectory.

Consumers experiencing high levels of loyalty are thought to be making repetitive purchases despite any potential distractions that may occur in the process (Oliver 1999). Consumers can experience satisfaction not leading to loyalty and in fact it does not mean that satisfaction is not present. Some obstacles to loyalty creation are reported as one's variety seeking, multi-brand loyalty or withdrawal from the product category – they all result in 'disloyalty', however they do not equal customer dissatisfaction (Oliver 1999).

Another factor affecting interaction between a consumer and a brand is the existence of trust in a relationship (Doney and Cannon 1997), perceived as an ability to rely on a brand's declarations. Due to its importance and value, trust has been found to have a significant influence on satisfaction and long-term orientation (Geyskens et al. 1999). The more the customer trusts the service provider, the more likely a successful relationship between them will last.

Attitudes represent associations between the object and one's evaluation of this object (Fazio 1995). The evaluation can be based on various things, such as emotions or previous behavioural experiences. Evaluations made by individuals can refer to cognitive, affective or behavioural types of responding. Since anything that can be held in mind can be evaluated, it can become a function of an attitude (Eagly and Chaiken 2007). Especially in terms of behaviour, if a consumer holds strong attitude about a specific brand, they are more likely to choose this brand over another (Priester et al. 2004). Park et al. (2010) consider attitude valence in terms of the degree of positivity or negativity and highlight that brand attitude is one of the key antecedents to consumer behaviour. Based on that it can be expected that consumer brand attitude is associated with relationship trajectory and consumer's behaviour during this process.

### **2.6.3 Situational factors**

Situational factors relate to specific external experiences or encounters (both positive or negative). By definition they are not dependent upon the individual nor the relationship between the consumer and the brand. They relate to situations and incidents that occur in the duration of the relationship, mostly during interactions between the consumer and the brand. The incidents can be both positive and negative. The most commonly known typologies by Bitner et al. (1990) and Kelley et al. (1993) provide useful insights into what situations can be classified as critical incidents.

Examples of such negative incidents include service errors, slow service, lack of attention paid to customer, or experience of poor customer service. Positive incidents can be experienced in relation to a number of dimensions, e.g. reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, communication, etc. (Parasuraman et al. 1985). It is natural that both negative and positive incidents will take place, however it can be expected that if a consumer experiences a majority of negative or positive incidents over time, this accumulation may have an impact on the relationship with the brand.

## **2.7 Restoration of fading relationships**

Identifying predictors of the stages in the consumer relationship fading process is one of the steps in increasing our understanding of the fading phenomenon. The next step is to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of potential relationship restoration efforts. Well-implemented restoration efforts would lead to improving the general condition of a relationship, e.g. (de Matos et al. 2007). However, there is a potential risk that some of the company's actions would not be welcome by consumers in certain stages of fading. The third study of this thesis presented in chapter six aims to explore the restoration efforts, their appropriateness and effectiveness.

### **2.7.1 The importance of taking action**

Customer defection is one of the most difficult problems for companies to solve (Reichheld et al. 2000) and its significance cannot be ignored. Although it seems unavoidable that some customers will defect, companies willing to increase retention rates should not watch their customers leave and invest in gaining new customers, rather they should learn from mistakes and try to increase retention rates in order to increase long-term profits (Reichheld et al. 2000). It should not be assumed that all lost customers are impossible to be won back if appropriate techniques are used

(LeBoeuf et al. 1989). In order to aid the process, all of the defected customers' cases should be investigated to determine a consumer profile of those who are at the highest risk of defection.

Maintaining relationships with customers is expected to be less costly for firms than gaining new customers (Stauss and Friege 1999), therefore firms should concentrate their efforts on applying restoration techniques before a consumer is lost. Kumar et al. (2015) point out that for consumers who have had an overall positive experience with the firm, reacquisition is more likely. As a result, it is expected that applying restoration techniques could become a vital strategy in situations when a consumer is likely to defect or is fading in the relationship.

### **2.7.2 Marital therapy and relationship dynamics**

In this section, the psychology literature is explored in a search for relational maintenance strategies being applied in romantic relationships. Individuals who become dissatisfied with their relationships can undertake a number of actions to demonstrate their decreasing level of satisfaction. According to Rusbult et al. (1982) there are four general categories of responses, namely exit – termination of the relationship, voice – active attempt to improve it, loyalty – a passive condition of waiting for the situation to improve, and neglect – passive lack of action and indifferent attitude towards the issue. As a result, relationship dynamics are considered in terms of two potential outcomes: separation or divorce in case of relationship decline (Rusbult and Zembrodt 1983). Relationship termination and voicing one's concerns are active behaviours, indicating that although termination may not be the most desirable outcome, the individual has taken action. Loyalty and neglect can be characterised as more passive approaches, which may not initially lead to termination, but that could be destructive in the long term.

Relationship maintenance has been defined as “pro-relationship activities that help relationships persist and promote healthy functioning in ongoing relationships” (Rusbult et al. 1994, p. 116). It is assumed at the same time that relationships are dynamic constructs and require constant maintenance in order for them to stay in good health. They should not be left unmaintained until a major issue occurs since the usual maintenance efforts may not work. Additionally, it is noted that different types of maintenance efforts can be particularly helpful in one stage of the relationship but ineffective at another stage (Kayser 1993). Therefore, it appears to be a valuable insight what interventions could be applied at various relationship stages.

### **2.7.3 Effectiveness of marital restoration techniques**

One group of maintenance techniques are premarital prevention programs (Carroll and Doherty 2003). Those programmes are designed to make the marriage stronger and prevent relationship termination. They help spouses to understand and learn how to overcome marital problems and improve the relationship. It is a way of helping a relationship whereby spouses realise they have certain responsibilities and learn how to cope with deficiencies. It is important to recognise that because of the nature of a relationship, no relationship will last if it is not maintained. Kayser (1993) divides the appropriateness of the interventions based on the relationship stage. She distinguishes between early interventions, which aim at preventing marital disaffection, middle interventions aiming to revive the marriage and end phase interventions. In the early interventions Kayser emphasises the fact that relationship maintenance should be applied in the early stages of marriage in order to avoid disaffection. It is not a usual practice for couples to do, as it is assumed that relationship in its early stage does not require any type of ‘help’ and is sustainable on its own. The advantage of providing maintenance to a relationship in its early stage is the opportunity to build on the

positive attitudes and hopeful feelings that the spouses share. Expectations can be discussed and adjusted during this process.

In the middle stage of the marriage, the restoration techniques aim to revive the marriage. After the initial disappointments occurred, spouses should be exposed to some interventions that will help them regain willingness to work on the relationship. The aim is to increase the number of positive versus negative interactions and learn to maintain the positive change.

A very careful consideration should be given to interventions applied in the end phase of the relationship (Kayser 1993). Not only is it difficult to convince a spouse to take action at this point but also the fact that very often spouses are emotionally withdrawn from the relationship may lead to more negative effects rather than a repair. Finding problems and accepting responsibility for them may be one of the starting points, however for some couples whereby the decision to terminate the relationship has already been made, the most effective intervention may be to help spouses to disengage rather than to force them to rebuild the relationship. It can be concluded that relationship stage can have an impact on how maintenance and restoration techniques are perceived by individuals and hence on the effectiveness of their application. This question will be answered in chapter 6 of this thesis.

## **2.8 Synthesis and conceptualisation**

Based on the above discussion, many explanations are available when investigating why customers defect from organisations without an obvious reason. It seems, however, that more drivers are possible and a thorough analysis is necessary in order to more comprehensively understand the fading phenomenon.

Based on the findings of Evanschitzky et al. (2011, p. 15), the phenomenon of fading is defined as “a process of gradual decline in a consumers’ intention to continue the relationship with a brand (company) manifested in negative feelings towards the brand (company), diminishing frequency and/or volume of transactions with it and initiation of switching intention” and this explanation is used as the basis for this study.

To date there are no empirical reasons describing why consumer relationships would fade with time. A question then arises what triggers such behaviour and whether any action can be taken by a company to resolve the issue. According to Akerlund (2005), relationship termination may have natural causes that would imply that a company would be unable or would not need to manage this process in any way. Additionally, a relationship could weaken in an active (intentional) or passive (not deliberate) way. One of the factors with major impact on relationship strength is situational context. In her research she describes fading of a relationship in the following way: “(...) the process of a temporal or a permanent weakening in the relationship strength defined as the weakening of relationship strength, where the outcome of the process is not yet known” (2005, p. 157).

According to Akerlund (2005), a number of factors were identified as helpful for understanding the context in which fading takes place. Among others, the relationship background, the dynamics in the relationship progression, as well as changes in relationship’s strength were identified as drivers of this process. Interestingly, the author also points out that relationship fading is a result of a process rather than a specific incident. This argument therefore supports consideration of a relationship in terms of a lifecycle, where changes develop gradually over time.

The marketing literature does not discuss the phenomenon of relationship fading in the business-to-consumer context. As a result, the psychology literature has been explored

in search of suitable theories. As mentioned earlier, the relationship between consumers and brands can be treated as similar to the one between individuals (people treat brands as humans), therefore the marital disaffection theory (Gottman 1993; Kersten 1990) and non-marital disengagement trajectory (Lee 1984) are seen to be the most useful theories to explain the phenomenon of relationship fading and underpin this research study.

The disaffection process present in close romantic relationships seems to reflect the patterns in the B2C context and helps understanding of the process. According to Kersten (1990, p.257) “marital disaffection is the gradual loss of an emotional attachment, a decline in caring about the partner, an emotional estrangement, and an increasing sense of apathy and indifference. By disaffection is meant the replacement of positive affect with neutral affect”.

Relationship disaffection in interpersonal relationships includes phases during which specific feelings and attitudes can be observed. During the initial stage of disaffection, namely disillusion, individuals often experience feelings of disappointment, anger and hurt. They evaluate costs and rewards of the relationship, but nevertheless stay patient and hopeful. Such situations may occur due to discrepancy between initial expectations, or what the individual wishes for, and actual outcomes. Such a feeling of disillusionment can also take place in a relationship with a brand or a company. For instance, a consumer purchasing a product or service evaluates the relationship after the initial excitement and fascination have dispersed. Such a state is somewhat natural and follows the initial feelings of delight and fulfillment.

Should minor unfavorable events continue to occur in a romantic relationship, negative feelings predominate and lead to further loss of enthusiasm, loss of emotional attachment and commitment, apathy, indifference and frustration. Additionally, in this

stage of disaffection, specific behaviors start to occur, such as hypercriticism, search for alternatives and lack of communication. In a consumer's relationship with a company, the individual can similarly feel indifference, helplessness and lack of motivation to continue their relationship with a brand. As a result, he or she may look for alternatives, reduce frequency of encounters and spend less money and time with the particular company. It has been reported that if trust, commitment, satisfaction, closeness or intimacy are present in the relationship, it is more likely that the relationship will last. On the other hand, lack of communication, prevailing extrinsic motives of a high-monitor can be signs of prospective issues in a relationship and possibly faster fading leading to termination or unhappy continuation of the relationship.

If the unfavorable events further persist in a relationship, one of the partners may decide to terminate the relationship, although this does not have to be the case. Some individuals decide to continue the relationship without a change and some will take actions to restore it. By the same token, in the last phase of relationship fading, consumers become more vulnerable to competitive offerings, they may take final action to terminate a relationship with a brand or, on the other hand, they may take actions to repair it.

Based on the above discussion it is assumed that the process of relationship fading in the business-to-consumer context can be viewed in terms of the trajectory present in the marital disaffection process. Consumers gradually lose their interest and willingness to engage in a relationship with a company due to various minor events in the process. At the same time specific feelings, thoughts and behaviours are distinguishable, making it possible to assess the current stage of the relationship. Since the events that occur in the course of relationship development determine the

direction in which the relationship will progress, it is essential to investigate which actions taken at specific stages drive the move from one stage to another.

In this study theories from marital and romantic relationship literatures will be applied to argue that a relationship between a service provider and a customer develops through similar phases. Relationship fading stages will be identified and described by their special characteristics. As a result, it will be possible to distinguish antecedents or a process which lead to relationship termination and which follow the relationship fading stages. Knowing how relationship fading is structured and the conditions of its emergence should allow for conclusions on what are the visible indications signifying that a relationship is in a phase of fading and facing possible termination.

The figure below presents the conceptualisation of the research project.

Conceptual model

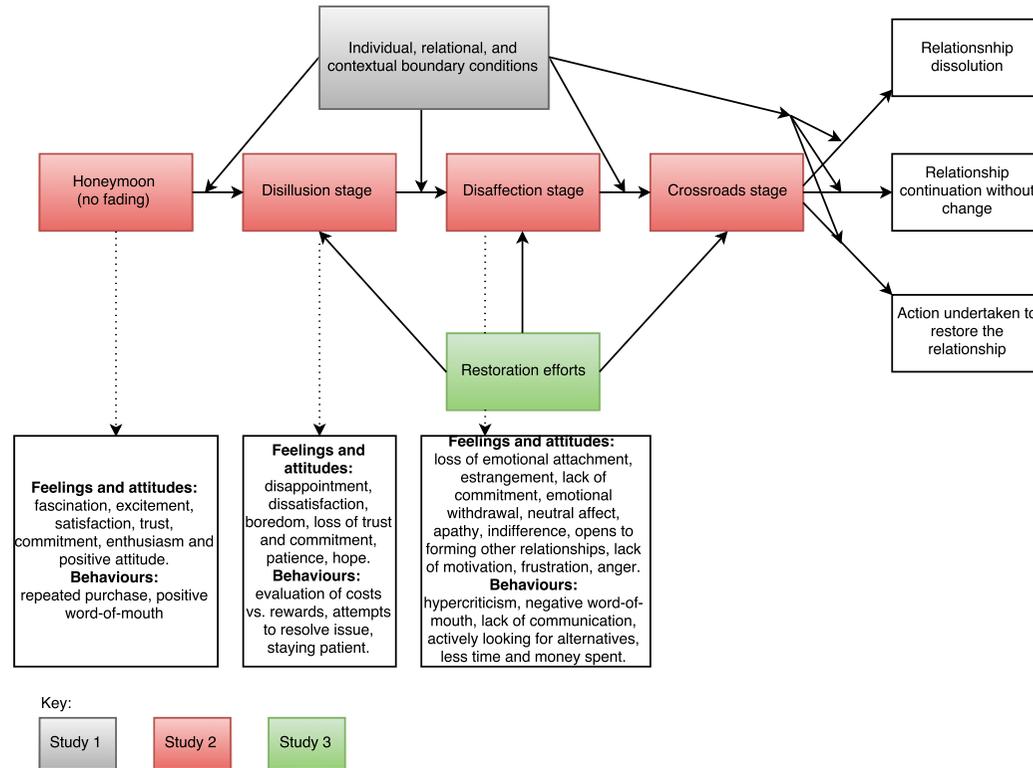


Figure 4 Conceptual Model

## **3. Chapter 3: Research methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The following chapter describes the general methodology applied in this thesis to investigate the relationship fading phenomenon. The research design strategy aims to fulfil the overall aim of the thesis being to gain a better understanding of the relationship fading phenomenon and those of individual studies, namely investigation into the boundary conditions of relationship fading, prediction of relationship fading stage membership, and determination of restoration techniques to be applied in fading relationships. The detailed descriptions of methods used in each study are presented in corresponding chapters.

This chapter begins with introducing the philosophical paradigm motivating the approach to conducting this research. Following is the presentation of rationale for the use of a mixed method approach, whereby justification for choice of the design and descriptions of approaches to analysis in individual studies are presented.

### **3.2 Research Paradigm**

In general, research philosophy guides how research is conducted and acts as a lens determining how the researcher views the world. Therefore, it is essential to clarify which philosophical research approach is applied in any research (Creswell 2013). Philosophical approaches are frequently related to specific research designs and make use of particular research methods as a result (Easterby-Smith et al. 2012).

### 3.2.1 Paradigm, Epistemology and Ontology

The approach to knowledge development is guided by various sets of beliefs that underpin the process. A way of comparing different philosophical positions is to consider them through the elements of epistemology, ontology and methodology (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

**Epistemology** encompasses what is acceptable as knowledge in a specific field of study. In the social sciences there are two main epistemological approaches: positivism and interpretivism (Lee and Lings 2008). According to the positivists the world is objective. According to the interpretivists, an observer who has an impact on the situation is not objective and hence the reality is the interpretation of this researcher rather than an objective truth. Hence, the world is not objective.

According to positivism only observable phenomena can result in credible data (Saunders et al. 2011). While developing research strategy, an existent theory can be used and hypotheses developed as a result. Once tested, if hypotheses are confirmed or disproved, the theory will be further developed and new hypotheses proposed for further research. Moreover, positivist researcher will often develop quantifiable observations, allowing for statistical analysis (Saunders et al. 2011). Positivists will only consider things that can be observed and what cannot be empirically tested would not be of interest to them. This principle leads to positivists not testing any propositions where the variable in question is unobservable (Lee and Lings 2008). Since many research questions in modern science are not directly testable, the issue of verifiability for positivist researchers persists, excluding those questions from consideration.

Realism as an alternative to the positivist philosophy has been established by Feigl (1950). The main difference between positivism and realism is that while the latter still

assumes that the world is objective, it also allows the researcher to investigate things, the existence of which cannot be directly confirmed (Lee and Lings 2008). It argues for the fact that if we cannot directly confirm the existence of something, this does not indicate that those things do not exist. Additionally, realist philosophy does account for errors in measurement of the observations. Ultimately, the benefit of accepting realism over positivism is that unobservable entities can be tested and should the effects of those entities be observable, one can claim that the unobservable entity itself also exists (Lee and Lings 2008).

Interpretivism is a contrasting epistemology to positivism. Led by the assumption that social research is fundamentally different from the natural sciences (Bryman 2007). According to the interpretivist approach the focus is on understanding of human behaviour rather than explaining the triggers of it. The reality in this philosophical approach is not objective and is based on social construction that is created in the researcher's mind (Lee 2008). As a result, knowledge created is based on individual experiences that are inseparable from the context in which the observations took place. Furthermore, it is impossible to arrive at a final and only result (knowledge) because another observer can interpret the *same* reality in a different way.

**Ontology** encompasses the understanding of *what is*, so it is the study the nature of being and discussion of what reality is (Gray 2013). Every researcher makes assumptions relating to the way the world functions. There are two aspects of ontology: objectivism and subjectivism (Saunders et al. 2011). According to the position represented by objectivism, social entities exist in the world and are independent from social actors. On the other hand, subjectivism (also known as constructionism or interpretivism) emphasizes the position that social actors create social phenomena based on their perceptions of the reality (Saunders et al. 2011). Consequently, in the latter approach, the context of the situation will have an impact on how the situation is

perceived and as a result how the reality is constructed. The table below summarises the philosophical positions through their elements: ontology, epistemology and methodology.

**Table 5 Scientific paradigms and their elements**

<b>Elements</b>	<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Constructivism</b>	<b>Realism</b>
<i>Ontology</i>	Reality is real and apprehensible, i.e. able to comprehend	Multiple local, specific and situation based realities	Reality is “real” but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehensible
<i>Epistemology</i>	<i>Objectivist</i> : findings are true	<i>Subjectivist</i> : Created findings	<i>Modified objectivist</i> : findings probably true
<i>Common methodologies</i>	<i>Experiments/surveys</i> : verification of hypotheses, chiefly quantitative methods	<i>Hermeneutic/dialectic</i> : researcher is a “passionate participant” within the world being investigated	<i>Case study/ convergent interviewing</i> : triangulation, interpretation of research using qualitative and quantitative methods, e.g. structural equation modelling

Partially adapted from Healy and Perry (2000, p.119)

Based on the above discussion, the epistemology adopted in by the researcher is realism. The researcher views the reality as objective, however takes into account the fact that pure objectivity is impossible to achieve. In order to achieve most objective results, the researcher will seek to reduce the bias by applying a variety of research methods.

### **3.3 Research Design**

Research design is closely related to the type of questions the research is aiming to answer (Sarstedt and Mooi 2014). Newly identified problems most likely require asking exploratory questions and as a result an exploratory research design will be most suitable. For research problems that have been somewhat designed, descriptive research is applicable. If a researcher is interested in determining the causal link between variables, an experimental research design is most appropriate (Mooi 2010). Research design is the way in which the research question is turned into a research project (Saunders et al. 2011). The most important thing to remember is that the research design needs to be coherent and in line with research philosophy selected.

#### **3.3.1 Mixed Methods Approach**

Mixed methods approaches combine qualitative and quantitative research and data in one research project (Creswell 2013). The main benefit of applying this approach is that it allows for a more complete picture to be drawn. Additionally, advantages of using a specific methodology can be maximised and disadvantages minimised (Gelo et al. 2008). By providing results from mixed methods it can be argued that the answers to the research questions are more comprehensive and reliable. The practice of using a mixed method approach is relatively new, whereby work embracing this approach stems from the mid-to-late 1980s (Creswell 2013). Methodological pluralism applied in cases of mixed research is thought to provide better quality results than single method research (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). It is often argued that qualitative and quantitative methodologies are positioned at two ends of a continuum, motivated by different research philosophies. There is, however, a growing discussion over whether mixed research could be the third research paradigm, almost bridging the gap between the other two (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). Many definitions have been offered in

the literature, however the one presented below from Johnson et al. (2007, p.123) encompasses the developments in the mixed methods field:

*“Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (...)*

*A mixed methods study would involve mixing within a single study; a mixed method program would involve mixing within a program of research and the mixing might occur across a closely related set of studies.”*

The mixed method approach applied in this thesis is therefore using multiple phases in the study (a closely related, complementary set of studies) whose overall objective is to improve the understanding of the relationship fading phenomenon. Results will be synthesized and discussed in chapter seven. In the following section the research design applied in this thesis will be discussed.

### **3.3.2 Choice of Research Design**

This paragraph presents the argument for the choice of a specific research design in this thesis. In a mixed design, both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used. Mixed method design can be achieved, for example, by integrating different types of data in one study or by applying qualitative and quantitative approaches in a set of separate yet closely related studies (Creswell 2013). Because of the unusual design, a clear strategy must be identified, outlining the rationale and structure of the design. According to Creswell et al. (2011) there are six main mixed method research designs.

**Convergent parallel mixed methods** design proposes that qualitative and quantitative data is merged in order to provide complete analysis of the research problem.

**Explanatory sequential mixed method** design is structured in a way that quantitative research is conducted first and based on the results obtained a qualitative enquiry is developed, allowing the researcher to explain the results in more detail.

**Exploratory sequential mixed method** design presents the reverse sequence of data collection and analysis. A qualitative study can be used to inform the second stage of the enquiry, being the quantitative phase.

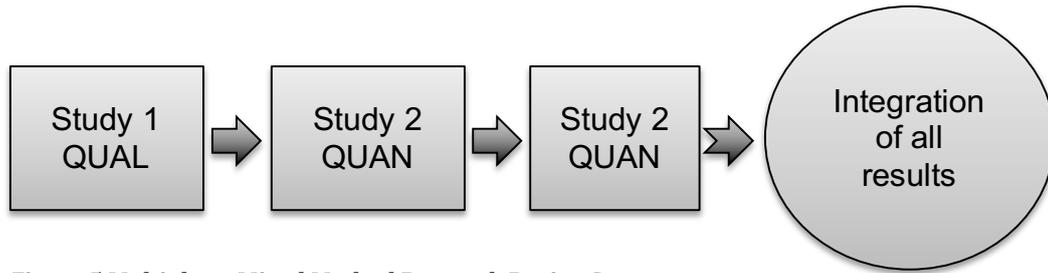
**Transformative mixed method** design applies a predominant perspective that draws from social justice or power. The order of data could be either convergent or sequential.

The main idea behind **embedded mixed method** design is that either qualitative or quantitative data are embedded in another, larger design.

The last main research design is the **multiphase mixed method** design in which concurrent or sequential strategies are used together over time aiming to meet overall programme objective (Creswell 2013).

Based on the above typology, the research design applied in this thesis is multiphase mixed method design. This design “provides an overarching methodological framework to a multiyear project that calls for multiple phases to develop an overall program of research” (Creswell et al. 2011, p. 100). In case of this thesis, the topic of relationship fading is investigated from different yet closely related angles, over a series of study phases. Results from each individual study answer individual research questions and overall contribute to achieving the general thesis objective.

The general structure of the multiphase research design applied in this thesis is illustrated below.



**Figure 5 Multiphase Mixed Method Research Design Structure**

In the below paragraphs descriptions of used methods are described, reiterating that the method chosen is the most appropriate option when answering each individual research question.

### **Study 1: Qualitative research**

**Objective:** *to identify the boundary conditions of relationship fading in the business-to-consumer context.*

Qualitative research methods such as observation and in-depth interviews have been broadly used in social sciences. They are also increasingly being used in consumer research since they explore the importance of the context in which the behaviour takes place (Belk et al. 1988). Use of these methods is an appropriate approach to gain thorough understanding of various aspects of consumer behaviour. Therefore, given the first research question presented in this study, a qualitative approach appears more appropriate in order to gain better understanding of the phenomenon of relationship fading and explore the boundary conditions of relationship fading. In order to do that, in-depth interviews have been conducted.

## **Study 2: Quantitative research**

***Objective:** to investigate the trajectory of relationship fading and uncover the main predictors of the relationship stage.*

In the search for answers to the remaining research questions, other approaches appear more suitable, namely quantitative. This will be particularly useful when explaining the trajectory of relationship fading, as well as key predictors of relationship stage. Since the research study aims to explain a dynamic construct, the best approach would be collection of longitudinal data (Anderson 1995) rather than simply consider constructs from a historical perspective. As a result, longitudinal diary study is proposed as the most appropriate to collect suitable data.

A diary study approach has been employed to capture consumer experiences in real time. A diary is an instrument used repeatedly to self-report on-going experiences (Bolger et al. 2003). The greatest benefit of diary study is investigation of reported events as they occur in their natural setting, as well as reduced retrospection. Especially since obtaining estimates of within-person change over time, as well as individual changes in such difference is of interest to this study, diary study appears to be an effective tool to achieve this goal.

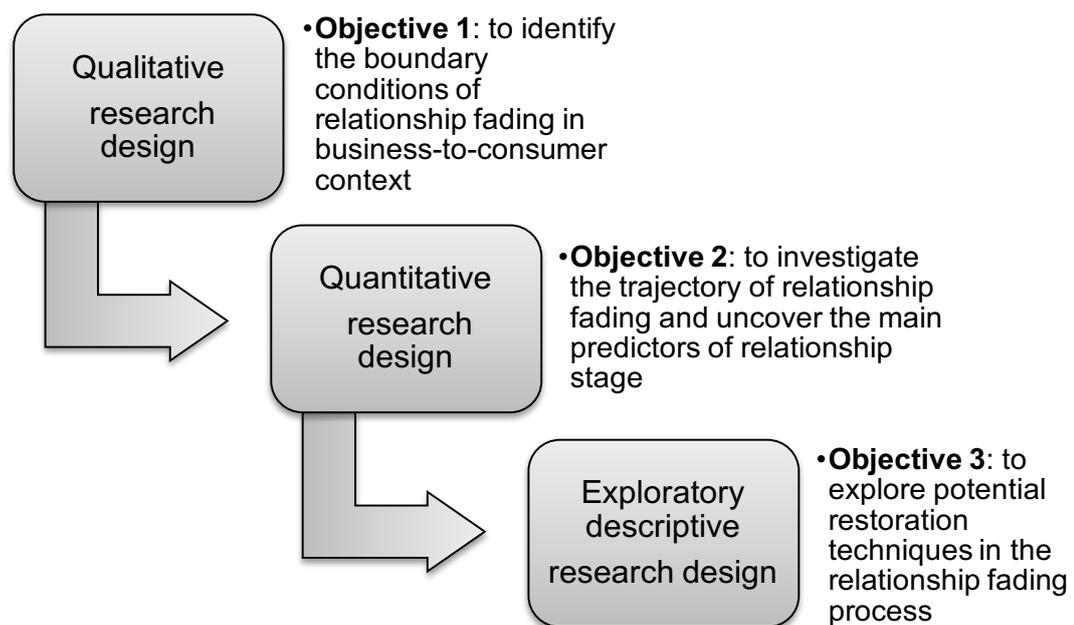
## **Study 3: Exploratory and descriptive research**

***Objective:** to explore and describe restoration techniques in the relationship fading process.*

The application of exploratory descriptive research in the case of this study is that it helps to focus the research question and establish priorities which should then be

further investigated by means of other methods. At the same time descriptive research aims to describe the characteristics of the phenomenon in question (Sarstedt and Mooi 2014).

Concluding from the above description, this project is structured such that it will incorporate qualitative and quantitative research methods, taking advantage of their strengths, in order to more fully and comprehensively understand and explain the process of relationship fading. Individual and detailed descriptions of data collection and analysis are provided in subsequent chapters, individually for each research study. The figure below presents the research design applied in each individual study.



**Figure 6 Multiphase Mixed Method Study Design**

### 3.3.3 Approaches to Analysis

A summary of the research methods and data analysis techniques used in this research project is presented in the below table.

**Table 6 Summary of research methods**

<b>Research question</b>	<b>Research method and sample</b>	<b>Data analysis technique</b>
1. What are the boundary conditions of relationship fading in the business-to-consumer context?	In-depth interviews 14 respondents	Thematic analysis, content analysis
2. What are the main predictors of the relationship stage?	Longitudinal diary study Approx. 700 respondents	Multinomial logistic regression,
3. What types of restoration techniques can be applied in the relationship fading process?	Questionnaire Approx. 700 respondents	Descriptives, variance analysis

## **4. Chapter 4: Study 1: Boundary Conditions of Relationship Fading**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents results of the first study. The objective of this study is *to identify the boundary conditions of relationship fading in the business-to-consumer context*. Relationship fading as discussed in chapter 2 on p. 14 is defined as “a process of gradual decline in consumers’ intention to continue the relationship with a brand (company) manifested in negative feeling towards the brand (company), diminishing frequency and/or volume of transactions with it and initiation of switching intention” (Evanschitzky et al. 2011, p. 15) and includes three stages: disillusion, disaffection and crossroads.

The chapter is organised as follows: in the first section the research problem is described. Following this, data collection and analysis procedures are described. Subsequently, findings are presented. The chapter concludes by presenting a summary of the results and providing a discussion of the findings.

### **4.2 Summary of boundary conditions in interpersonal relationships**

This first study aims to identify those conditions that are affecting the likelihood of fading occurring in a consumer-brand relationship. The arguments and background for the study have been presented in chapter two of this thesis. According to the findings from the marital literature, three groups of conditions can be identified. Those groups of conditions may have an impact on the process of disaffection appearing and advancing in marital relationships. These three groups of conditions include individual (intrapersonal), relational (interpersonal/dyadic) and contextual (environmental conditions). Elements included in the group of individual conditions refer to

characteristics and traits of the individual only. Relational factors refer to those influences that involve both spouses in the relationship and their mutual interactions. The third group of factors are contextual factors and they comprise features outside the individual's control.

### **4.3 Method: Interviews**

The aim of the research enquiry was to identify the boundary conditions of relationship fading. In order to achieve this goal, participants were asked to tell a story about their relationship with a brand they have or used to have strong feelings toward. The approach of opening the discussion and making the interviewee express their thoughts and stories was selected to gain detailed and truthful characteristics and descriptions of situations described. Conversation, as well as questioning seemed to be the most suitable approach to provide detailed insights into the contexts of the fading relationships. Therefore, the method used in this study is a face-to-face semi-structured interview.

*“The research interview is a purposeful conversation between two or more people, requiring the interviewer to establish rapport, to ask concise and unambiguous questions, to which the interviewee is willing to respond, and to listen attentively. Essentially, it is about asking purposeful questions and carefully listening to the answers to be able to explore these further” (Saunders et al. 2011, p. 372).*

The most common typology divides interviews based on their structure and proposes that interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Saunders et al. 2011). Structured interviews are commonly designed in a way that they do not allow for any unstandardized or unplanned questions to be asked. They are usually used to collect quantifiable data and although offer interaction between the interviewer and the respondent, no adjustment to the procedure and questions should take place because

of the principle of standardisation across all interviews. Semi-structured interviews offer more flexibility in terms of the structure. Such a questionnaire can be adopted, e.g. to include additional questions or to allow open discussion without a specific direction. The purpose behind is that too much structure may inhibit responses, which is not a desired outcome in the case of this type of an interview. The third type of interviews is an unstructured interview. Normally, the interviewer would not follow a set of specific questions but rather ask about the aspects relating to a broad topic area. Less direction is offered during such interview and the respondent will tend to guide the interview. The benefit of application of this type of an interview is that the interviewer can observe ideas as they emerge and are not prompted by the researcher (Saunders et al. 2011).

The use of a specific type of interview is usually determined by the research purpose. In case of an exploratory research exercise, semi-structured or unstructured interviews are recommended (Saunders et al. 2011). They allow the researcher to structure the interview instrument in such a way that it helps to answer the research question but at the same time provides depth of the answers, increasing the richness of the data. Semi structured and unstructured interviews allow respondents to be prompted, asked to build on or explain further any aspects of their responses.

Semi-structured interviews apart from their benefits can also create some issues relating to quality of the data. Specifically, reliability, bias, generalizability and validity should be discussed in this context (Saunders et al. 2011). The main disadvantage of an interview is limited consistency across interviews what can lead to reliability issues. Similarly, a bias can be created at different levels. Since an interview is an interaction between an interviewer and respondent, for example non-verbal behaviour can prompt the respondent to answer questions in a specific way. If the respondent forms some kind of perceptions about the interviewer, response bias will affect the data quality. Sometimes depending on the nature of research or even personal reasons, a

respondent may also provide an incomplete response to the questions, providing an incomplete picture of the issue discussed, leading to participation bias (Saunders et al. 2011). Another problem frequently pointed out with reference to qualitative interviews is limited generalizability of the results. This is due to an usually smaller sample of data collected and the argument claiming that results based on a smaller sample may not be applicable in other settings (Saunders et al. 2011). The last issue that can be observed is validity. Validity refers to the level of researcher's confidence that the respondent has understood the questions and the context and that they interpret those in the same way (Saunders et al. 2011). All of the above can cause serious issues and impact the quality of data. Therefore, the following sections will present the measures that have been deployed in order to minimise the potential impact they may have on data quality.

#### **4.3.1 Sampling**

The sample of respondents included 14 individuals, 7 males and 7 females. The age of the participants ranged between age groups of 18-21 and 41-50.

Detailed characteristics of the respondents are presented in the below table:

**Table 7 Characteristics of the interviewees**

<b>Participant no.</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Industry of the chosen brand</b>
1	26-30	Male	Indian	Postgraduate student	Electronics
2	26-30	Female	British	Postgraduate student	Fashion
3	26-30	Male	Nigerian	Postgraduate student	Fashion
4	26-30	Female	Russian	Postgraduate student	Telecom, mobile service provider
5	26-30	Female	Serbian	Postgraduate student	Fashion
6	26-30	Male	Indian	Higher education	Train service operator
7	22-25	Female	British	Postgraduate student	Fashion
8	26-30	Male	Turkish	Postgraduate student	Electronics, software designer
9	51-60	Female	British	Postgraduate student	Grocery retailer
10	26-30	Female	German	Postgraduate student	Personal hygiene product
11	26-30	Male	Malaysian	Project management	Internet service provider, train operator
12	31-40	Male	Greek	Postgraduate student	Fashion
13	31-40	Female	British	Postgraduate student	Mobile phones manufacturer
14	26-30	Male	German	Postgraduate student	Online retailer

The sampling used in this research was purposive. This type of sampling is a non-probability sampling technique (Vogt et al. 2014). The criteria used to select the sample were to exclude participants having detailed knowledge about the research study, e.g. close friends of the researcher, as this could potentially cause bias. Secondly, the researcher wanted to make sure that equal representation of genders is met. The email

invitation was sent to colleagues and friends of the researcher and the final sample was based on the positive response and availability of the potential interviewee. Due to the nature of the research enquiry the researcher believes that use of the purposive sampling technique instead of a random sampling technique did not decrease the quality of the research.

#### **4.3.2 Ethical considerations**

As with every research method, there are some ethical considerations to be discussed for any potential risks to be minimised. Since participants in an interview disclose their private views and opinions, every care should be taken to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality of responses (Easterby-Smith et al. 2012). As part of the preparation procedure, participants were informed of the research topic to ensure they were comfortable discussing it, should they decide to take part. They were informed that participation was voluntary and they were able to withdraw from the study at any time. They were informed of approximate duration of the interview and were offered a meeting at a convenient for them location and time. In the interview email invitation (see Appendix 1) they were also presented with a consent form (see Appendix 2) they would be asked to sign during the interview.

#### **4.4 Data collection**

Data was collected in October and November 2013. The participants were met at convenient locations and all signed the consent form before the interview commenced. As a brief introduction each participant was reminded of the voluntary character of their participation, possibility of withdrawal, and were told the interview would take approximately 30 minutes. They were also asked for permission to audio record the interview.

The interview schedule was discussed with supervisors and colleagues, who were asked to evaluate the clarity of questions, pace of the interview, and complexity of the questions.

### **Overcoming validity and reliability issues**

Reliability appears to be closely related with the level of structure in an interview (Conway et al. 1995). The higher the level of structure in the instrument (structured interview), the higher the expected level of reliability. Unstructured interviews would therefore have low reliability. The fact that in case of this research study the interview has been semi-structured helped increase the levels of reliability. Additionally, the interviewer tried to minimise any possible biases and has tried to ensure each interview is conducted in the same way. Essentially, a greater rigour is needed in the research process in order to demonstrate that the qualitative research is of high quality (Saunders et al. 2011). To ensure validity the interview schedule has been discussed with supervisors and an expert and pre-tested with three individuals. The schedule was constructed in such a way that the interviewer was able to prompt the interviewee for additional details, ensuring the richness of data.

### **4.5 Data analysis**

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using the QSR NVivo 9 software, commonly used in qualitative data analysis. To analyse the data, thematic analysis was used. Thematic analysis refers to “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006). Since thematic analysis can be regarded as a less rigorous approach and potentially, it makes the research quality difficult to evaluate and compare. In order to avoid any potential misunderstandings,

clarity of the process of analysis is needed and steps taken in this data analysis are described in this section.

Since the research question of this study is to investigate what factors increase or decrease the likelihood of fading occurring in a relationship, the questions were designed to consider the details of the situations described by the interviewees. The context, features and interactions, as well the process of relationship evolution over time was of interest to the researcher in order to observe what could have an impact on a specific outcome of described situations. Since the researcher has had some preconceptions about the themes that could emerge from the data, the type of thematic analysis used in this research was theoretical (deductive) (Braun and Clarke 2006). The theoretical thematic analysis is normally motivated by research interest in a particular area, which in this case is looking for possible boundary conditions of relationship fading. As a result, themes were organized according to the findings from the literature relevant to the research topic.

The six-step process described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used in the process of data analysis. Firstly, the recordings were listened to several times in order to gain familiarity with the data, with the way the answers were structured. Repeated listening also helped with understanding of the depth of the content and noticing patterns in the data. The researcher then transcribed the interviews. In the second step, initial codes have been produced from the data. "A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data" (Saldaña 2012, p.3). The main aim of producing a list of codes is to later organize them into meaningful groups (Tuckett 2005). In the next stage of data analysis, the codes have been arranged into broader themes. Extracts of data have been also assigned alongside the codes into the categories. In the fourth stage of the analysis, the themes and codes, as well as extracts have been reviewed and reorganised where necessary.

Following this step, the themes were named and defined. They were also evaluated in terms of the theory used initially and organized accordingly. In the final stage, a summary of the findings has been produced. The summary is presented in the following section.

## **4.6 Findings**

The researcher has identified a number of boundary conditions based on the fourteen interviews conducted. The conclusions suggest three broad categories of boundary conditions: *individual*, *relational* and *contextual*. These categories of conditions appear to be analogous to the boundary conditions reported in the marital disaffection literature. The findings are presented below.

### **4.6.1 Individual characteristics**

The first group of conditions are individual characteristics. Possessing specific individual characteristics such as neuroticism, voluntary commitment, impulsiveness, specific aggregated life experiences, and anxiety may lead to an increased risk of fading occurring in a relationship. Especially neuroticism can have an effect on how consumers behave and perceive their relationship with a brand. One respondent in the context of his relationship with electronics brand and when asked about his personality, admits:

*I think, to be honest, I think too much sometimes, I think I should let it go easily, that's how I think myself. [Interviewee 1, Male, Age 26-30]*

Similarly, anxiety experienced by a consumer may lead to them seeking more comforting or secure situations and if those are not found or if the situation changes in

the course of the relationship, fading is more likely to occur. For instance, in the context of mobile service provider an interviewee states:

*Sometimes I get scared of technology so I think if I touch it, it will break. They helped me to install the SIM card, they explained everything so I felt like there are people in (BRAND) to help me if I have any problem so that's why I was attracted to this network. [Interviewee 4, Female, Age 26-30]*

Another individual characteristic mentioned a number of times is voluntary commitment consumers experience towards a brand. One respondent comments on her relationship with a clothing retailer who no longer fulfils her needs and does not meet her expectations:

*I think before I was quite loyal so I always used to make sure (BRAND) was the first place I went to now it's like an after thought (...) After I've exhausted my options I might be like OK, let me consider (BRAND) but it 's not my first place, it's really down the rankings now, whereas before (...) if I needed a bag or shoes, or a coat I'd be like OK Lets check out (BRAND) first. [Interviewee 7, Female, Age 22-25]*

Consumers make choices based on various types of motivators. Individuals characterized by impulsiveness may make their decisions in a less informed way leading to more likelihood of fading. For example, a price and quality conscious respondent in the context of retailing states:

*I'm quite a busy person, I have a lot going on in my life which means that I often can be quite impulsive purely and simply because I don't have the time. I'll sometimes do things for convenience rather than meticulously going through the detail. [Interviewee 9, Female, Age 51-60]*

Another set of conditions under which consumers are more likely to fade within a relationship are aggregated life experiences. Those experiences, such as history of

financial constraints may have an impact on the perception of a relationship. In the context of retailing, one of the respondents recalls:

*I think I've gone through a period of unemployment and we had actually quite a drastic drop in our income and I'd been really struggling to make ends meet. Then when things got a little bit better I sort of went to (BRAND) because it gave me a bit of a feel good factor that I'd moved slightly upmarket that I was no longer going to the open street market and only being able to afford the end of day, you know any bag of fruit for a pound type thing, I felt that going to (BRAND) I was almost re-joining the human race. [Interviewee 9, Female, Age 51-60]*

The findings show that consumers who are characterized by certain personality traits: neuroticism, impulsiveness, and anxiety, as well as those who experience voluntary as opposed to institutional commitment towards a brand and whose individual characteristics reflect their aggregated life experiences are more prone to falling into the relationship fading.

#### **4.6.2 Relational characteristics**

The second set of conditions are relational characteristics. Factors such as poor fulfilment of one's role and responsibilities as well as dissimilarities in values, attitudes and beliefs have been shown to influence the fading process. Additionally, issues such as conflicting interests, poor conflict resolution, conflict avoidance and boredom have also been identified as having an impact on the relationship by making it more prone to fading.

One of the frequently reported conditions between partners are conflicting values and beliefs of the respondent and the brand. This disagreement may arise especially when comparing specific features of the brand or particular behaviours. As one interviewee in

the online retailing context points out:

*I saw them as a trustworthy, reliable thing. I see myself as a relatively trustworthy person, so yes it's very easy way for me to get hostile to someone or an organization if they fall short on this value and (BRAND) changed my perception from being trustworthy and reliable, of being basically a friend, to being sort of drain on society, which doesn't fall into where I see myself in terms of values so that is sort of where (BRAND) and I split. [Interviewee 14, Male, Age 26-30]*

Misunderstanding of the responsibilities of the consumer, lack of information as to how roles and responsibilities are to be shared may also lead to growing number of negative feelings and ultimately speed up fading. One of the respondents has pointed out the following in the context of electronics:

*During my last service, probably one or two months before the last warranty cleared, they didn't fix the bottom of the laptop properly, they just put one screw. It's fine but you feel that their customer service is not that great (...) and say, you give them a two years old laptop, they say like 'oh why don't you buy a new one' rather than try to help you to fix it. So probably that made me think, OK this is not the brand I want to go for. [Interviewee 1, Male, Age 26-30]*

Another respondent when referring to her relationship with a phone brand has also mentioned incompatibility issue:

*"I'd like to do stuff with you but you're just not making it easy for me, you're literally pushing me away and I don't want to go away." That's the way I kind of felt like. "I want you to do this but you won't" I still think that they're incredible when you discover them, (...) kind of good looking phones, kind of dependable software and built, but yeah they just don't play well with others. [Interviewee 13, Female, Age 31-40]*

*When you go into more the smart phones (...) they're slightly non mainstream and that can be fine, but you've got to want to be non-mainstream all the time, so sometimes it's*

*just easier to be a bit more (mainstream). It's kind of like, I'd imagine, like say you had a friend that I really liked but they couldn't interact with my other friends. [Interviewee 13, Female, Age 31-40]*

Further, the interviews revealed that a mismatch between what a brand offers and the interests of the consumer lead to more ambivalence and more negative feelings about the relationship, which influences the fading process. In the below extract, the interviewee comments on his relationship with an operating system manufacturer:

*It's like you have a friend, you want to go out and you ask him. "OK, we can go", he says. And you get prepared and you want to go out but then he says: "I'm going to sleep". Exactly the same situation, you're working, you're typing and suddenly it's all blue and it's so bad. [Interviewee 8, Male, Age 26-30]*

Another condition that may increase the likelihood of fading is poor conflict resolution. In the below extract, an interviewee comments on a conflict situation that arose between him and an online retailer, specifically reflecting on the resolution of the issue:

*(...) they did not comment on it, they had all these accusations on how they treat their workers. They made a policy of just not commenting; you could hear nothing from (BRAND) officially, except for that they issued a statement, which was a bit of joke. [Interviewee 14, Male, Age 26-30]*

Similarly, another interviewee also reflects on a poor conflict resolution situation in the electronics context:

*I was trying to ask you, (...) you have the pressure from your head office (...) but you did a half-baked cake job with it. So that's the reason I thought why am I going with someone who is not ready to accept their fault? [Interviewee 1, Male, Age 26-30]*

People who avoid conflict are at higher risk of building negative feelings towards the relational partner over time. By avoiding expressing concerns early on, potentially damaging feelings may cumulate over time – as one interviewee expressed her view when talking about her fashion brand:

*I can be more quiet and reserved around people I don't know. (...) I'm one of those people who like to get along with everyone without having confrontations or make arguments or anything like that. [Interviewee 7, Female, Age 22-25]*

Boredom and a desire or readiness to try something new may also increase the likelihood of fading. For example, as indicated in the below extract relating to a relationship with a personal hygiene product:

*On the one hand I was frustrated that it didn't fulfil my needs any more but on the other hand (...) I was just looking for something new so it got a bit boring, (...). No, but it's just sometimes I like to try new things and then if I'm not 100% convinced any more it gets easier to try new things. [Interviewee 10, Female, Age 26-30]*

To summarise, the findings show that dissimilarities in terms of partners' values, attitudes and beliefs, incompatibility relating to both interests and role preferences, conflicting interests, poor conflict resolution, conflict avoidance and boredom have all impact on the relationship and make fading more likely to occur.

#### **4.6.3 Contextual characteristics**

The third group of conditions is referring to contextual factors. Contextual factors are mainly outside consumer's control. However, they have shown that they have an impact on how a relationship with a brand evolves. Particularly, external pressures, peer pressure at the outset of a relationship, short dating periods and poor familiarity

with a partner have been revealed from the interviews.

Most frequently considered contextual conditions relate to various external pressures. Factors such as career circumstances, limited pool of potential partners and political and economic circumstances have been exposed as having an indirect effect on the relationship's development. For example, one of the interviewees refers to her relationship with a mobile service provider and explains her situation:

*If I only made calls around the UK, (...) I think if I was looking to buy a phone with them and found another contract, probably the relationship would have been changed, but as I said again, because of my circumstances, I felt it would be easier for me to leave them. [Interviewee 4, Female, Age 26-30]*

Another respondent comments on her career and financial circumstances that had an impact on her life in the context of a fashion brand:

*It was a transition for me, maybe my final year of undergraduate studies to my masters when I started working and earning a lot and became more financially independent and also maybe exposed to these other brands like (BRAND1), (BRAND2). [Interviewee 5, Female, Age 26-30]*

It appears that potential pool of alternatives also plays a role in shaping the course of relationship development. As one interviewee points out in the context of a clothing retailer and beginnings of her relationship with the brand:

*You've got to see from the fact that I come from like a town, it's a big town, but it's not like Birmingham and it's not like Bullring so you have stores but there weren't many stores that were in the age group of 16 plus, whereas with (BRAND) - it had just opened and it was quite popular as well, like everyone was going there to shop. [Interviewee 7, Female, Age 25]*

Another type of contextual factor relates to peer-pressure. Peer-pressure may increase the likelihood of making poor initial brand choices, which makes fading from these relationships more likely. As one interviewee in the electronics context points out:

*I was not a very technology-oriented person anyway, but it was the hype (...), and it was like a product you need to buy. There was a guy, one of my housemates, he used to be a very technology-oriented guy, and used to have a lot of (BRAND) products like mobile phones. So I thought, I need to buy that as well. [Interviewee 19, Male, Age 27]*

Similarly, peer pressure or more specifically consumer's reference to personal recommendations may also play a role in choosing a brand and may potentially lead to less adequate choices made, increasing the possibility of fading in such a relationship. As indicated in the statement about choosing a mobile service provider, a respondents states:

*I didn't have time and I didn't have opportunity to do any research, (BRAND) was advertised everywhere so I saw it, my friends were using it so it was quite popular at that time (...) so I went to a shop and obviously I purchased a SIM card from (BRAND). [Interviewee 4, Female, Age 26-30]*

Additionally, shorter search periods and limited product familiarity in particular may also make fading more likely to occur. One interviewee indicated limited search time when reflecting on her relationship with a mobile service provider:

*I think it was just when I moved, I was quite young and I just really had to buy a phone as soon as possible so I didn't have much choice, I didn't do proper research to check the prices so I just bought a phone. There was a local store so I went in and said I needed a SIM card, bought it and so I started using it. [Interviewee 4, Female, Age 26-30]*

Based on the interviews, there is evidence that suggests relationships with some

types of products are more prone to fading. For instance, as one interviewee mentioned when talking about a product that was of relatively low monetary value and for which it was relatively easy to find an alternative for:

*(...) on the other hand it's just a deodorant it's not worth a lot, I mean I really liked (BRAND) because we've been together for so long or I kind of got committed because I've been using it long and I liked the smell. But it's only a deodorant! [Interviewee 10, Female, Age 26-30]*

Additionally, it may be that both contractual and non-contractual types of products are equally prone to fading in a situation when the relationship does not perform up to expectations. As revealed below, one of the respondents indicates that in the context of mobile phone service a contract would not necessarily prevent a consumer from losing interest in the brand:

*They tend to ignore problems at the beginning, thinking if you're already having a contract with them for a year, you wouldn't go anywhere. Actually people get quite annoyed with that and might say "o.k. I'm going to purchase another phone and use another SIM card and leave it as it is. [Interviewee 4, Female, Age 26-30]*

In summary, it seems that various types of external pressures, peer pressure, along with insufficient partner search time, and poor familiarity with the brand can lead to increased chance of fading relationships.

#### **4.6.4 Summary of findings**

Relationship fading in business-to-consumer context can be affected by a number of boundary conditions which would either increase or decrease the likelihood of fading. In particular, consumers who are characterized by neuroticism, impulsiveness, and anxiety are more inclined to fade out of relationships. Furthermore, contrasting

values, attitudes, and beliefs, conflicting interests, as well as incompatibility between the consumer and the brand make fading more likely to occur. In terms of contextual group of factors, various types of external pressures and poor familiarity with the brand, leading to unrealistic expectations, are making fading more likely.

The table below summarises boundary conditions of consumer relationship fading. The number specified next to each condition indicates the number of times each characteristic appears in the data.

**Table 8 Summary of boundary conditions of relationship fading**

<b>Individual Characteristics</b>	<b>Relational Characteristics</b>	<b>Contextual Characteristics</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neuroticism (4)</li> <li>• Voluntary commitment experienced by one partner (4)</li> <li>• Impulsiveness (3)</li> <li>• Aggregated life experiences (e.g. low income, previous divorce, dysfunctional beliefs about a relationship) (2)</li> <li>• Anxiety (2)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dissimilarities in values, attitudes and beliefs (9)</li> <li>• Incompatibility relating to leisure interests and role preferences (8)</li> <li>• Conflicting interests (4)</li> <li>• Poor conflict resolution (3)</li> <li>• Conflict avoidance (2)</li> <li>• Boredom (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External pressures (e.g. career circumstances, pool of potential partners, political and economic circumstances) (7)</li> <li>• Peer pressure – when making an initial choice to use a brand/company (4)</li> <li>• Insufficient exploration time periods (2)</li> <li>• Poor familiarity with the other partner (2)</li> </ul>

#### **4.7 Discussion**

By identifying a number of types of boundary conditions in consumer relationship fading, this study makes a significant contribution in the area of consumer-brand relationships. Based on the analogies drawn from marital disaffection and interpersonal relationships literatures (Cramer 1993; Eysenck 1981; Hill and Peplau 1998a; Huston

and Houts 1998a; Kelly and Conley 1987a; Kurdek 1993) the study identifies for what type of consumer, brand and in what circumstances the fading is more likely to occur.

Therefore, from an academic point of view, the findings contribute to building knowledge in the area of relationship marketing. Knowing in what circumstances, driven by what individual characteristics and in what kind of mutual interactions consumers are more likely to fade, provides helpful insights for the managers and those taking care of consumer-brand relationships in firms. In addition, the findings confirm that consumer-brand relationships are highly complex. As a result, some current practices in relationship marketing would benefit from being aware of how the boundary conditions may shape the dynamics of relationship development.

#### **4.8 Limitations**

It is important to mention that this study has several limitations. The study took an exploratory approach to investigating the boundary conditions of the relationship fading process. As a result, a qualitative approach has been selected and data has been collected via interviews. Because of the limitations of the approach and method used, the next step could include empirically testing the effects of boundary conditions on the fading process.

Secondly, the sample used in this study was selected in a non-random procedure. As a result, generalizability of the study could be limited and therefore future studies could focus on identification of the boundary conditions in other samples and hence increasing the generalizability of the findings.

## 5. Chapter 5: Study 2: Stages of the Relationship Fading Process

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the second study. The objective of this study is *to investigate the trajectory of relationship fading and define the main predictors of the relationship stage*. Before the main question of the study is answered, the chapter will explain the trajectory of the fading process in more detail and describe the characteristics of each of the distinctive phases. It will also be demonstrated how individuals move within the trajectory, using an example of a case study and the qualitative data collected. The existence of the phenomenon of fading will also be demonstrated by presenting a table collated from quantitative data and including information about the overall consumer dynamics between stages observed in the sample. Having done that, the results of the successive incremental model building exercise are presented, highlighting the main predictors of the stage. As a result, the chapter is organised as follows: in the first section the stages of the fading process are described, including examples of verbatim from consumers to illustrate each stage. Following this, a case study of a consumer going through the fading process is presented. In the following sections the method, data collection procedure and analysis are described. Subsequently, results of the model building exercise are presented. The chapter concludes by presenting a summary of the results and by providing a discussion.

## 5.2 Stages of the relationship fading process.

The process of relationship fading develops through a multi-stage trajectory. Honeymoon signifies a relationship stage whereby consumers experience a plethora of positive emotions, such as excitement, fascination and overall positive attitude, and have not yet entered the fading process. Consumers in this stage will tend to repurchase frequently from the brand and spread positive word-of-mouth. This phase of relationship dynamics is important, as it is assumed that at the outset of a fading relationship, some positive feelings and attitudes have existed, before the fading occurred.

Consumers enter the first stage of the fading process, **disillusion**, after they have experienced some unfavourable, disappointing events during their interactions with the brand. A consumer will experience an unexpected disappointment which because of the likely earlier “honeymoon experience” will be somewhat uncomfortable for them. This negative disconfirmation of expectations is what initiates the disillusionment (Kersten 1990). The (negative) surprise associated with the moment when some uncomfortable truth is exposed may create feelings of hurt or temporary anger towards the brand. It may be that the consumer has not been aware of some facts or rules but now has to face them. A consumer in this stage will still be staying patient, trying to resolve the issue and although disappointed, they will be hopeful.

An example of a service encounter of a consumer who reported to be in disillusion stage is presented below. The consumer reflects on the negative press revolving around the brand following a negative incident and explains how it deterred him from more frequent purchase from the brand.

*My interaction with the brand has been less frequent mainly due to me trying to spend less money and also due to the recent issues with BRAND's meat content. It has become evident that they are using horse meat in various meat items. This is something that has really deterred me as a customer from buying meat from them. I used to feel sure and confident that what I was buying was a better quality than say from the Markets in the City centre, however I am now unsure. Not only has it deterred me a little from shopping there it has made me doubt the quality of some of its other foods. My shopping has taken a more vegetarian route. It will take me a while to re buy meat again (...). Overall not a good experience this week.*

Those unexpected disappointments, if not dealt with appropriately, can lead to the consumer entering the second stage of the fading process, **disaffection**. The accumulation of unfavourable events and lack of resolution leads to further disappointment and feeling of a variety of negative emotions, such as frustration and estrangement. Very often consumers may lose interest in solving “yet another issue” and as a result they will reduce the frequency of encounters or will stop communicating with the brand. The below extract illustrates the loss of willingness to take any action in a situation when a consumer has been experiencing some issues for a number of occasions.

*I have used the brand purely to send/receive text messages and phone calls, although I have a smart phone and the phone should be able to do much more I have lost all willingness to want to do anything with it due to the number of problems I have had with my BRAND. It works perfectly fine when I want to send a text message, although the light remains flashing even when I have read a text message which is slightly annoying.*

Nevertheless, a consumer in a disaffection stage is not yet ready to make a decision and switch to another brand. In case the situation persists, consumer loses trust towards the brand and enters the **crossroads** stage of relationship fading. Consumer becomes more receptive to competitive offerings and is more likely to switch to another provider. They lose emotional attachment and become indifferent toward the brand, which may lead to relationship termination (Evanschitzky et al. 2011). A consumer may

also become open to forming new relationships or to trying on new products or brands. They may also actively start searching for alternatives. On the other hand, another possible outcome in such a situation is unhappily staying in a relationship. This may be motivated by financial constraints, no better or more suitable offer available, or perhaps a commitment to a legal contract. The consumer still experiences emotional withdrawal in order to manage the dissonance between their lack of satisfaction and the decision to stay with the brand. The below extract illustrates how a consumer explains their consideration of switching to another brand due to repeated dissatisfaction with how the service was delivered.

*I Went to BRAND three times this week, twice in town and once in the Student Union, each time ordering my usual £3 meal deal. However, I now am bored and unhappy with purchasing BRAND's subs and am actively searching for alternatives. On my last few trips to BRAND, I have been unhappy with they way it has been prepared each time. The cutting of the bread in the BRAND in town is not very good and the filling keeps falling out of the sub and this is not something I would expect to keep happening from such a popular outlet. On my trip to the Student Union BRAND, I was disappointed with the quality of the bread I had ordered and it really did not taste very good. I have not bothered to confront staff about the quality once, as it is not something that majorly affects me and I do not believe there is any point of going back for something so trivial. For £3, the meal deal is not really of great value to myself either, I only buy it due to the convenience and because it is slightly more healthy than its alternatives, so I think it may be time for a change at this moment in time.*

### **5.3 A consumer fading in a relationship – a case study**

An example of a case study of a consumer who has reported to have been in honeymoon in week one of the diary, then in disaffection in week five. Finally, the consumer has reported they were in the crossroads stage when reporting on the relationship stage in week ten. The following extracts illustrate the trajectory of the

relationship and how the behaviours and feelings were reported by this consumer in the duration of the study and based on their weekly encounters and experiences. The consumer reports on their feelings and behaviours, as part of the weekly diary. The name of the brand has been replaced by "BRAND" in uppercased to preserve anonymity.

In the extract number 1 in the fashion context, the consumer expresses the feeling of love toward the brand and says they never get bored. They also mention that use the brand very frequently and appear to be willing to continue to do so. The real name of the brand has been replaced with "BRAND" to preserve anonymity.

- 1. BRAND is an online store which I visit every single day. Sometimes more than once daily. Most recently, I interacted with BRAND by browsing through the sale section and saving alms 40 items in my wish list. When these items are saved there, you can visit them later and be able to make up your mind about whether you wish to be the items or not. Looking through BRAND helps me see different outfits and enables me practise my favourite pastime which is panning and matching outfits together. Following the browse through BRAND and the item saving, I felt very good with myself. My spirit soared and my mood brightened immensely. This is what I do every single day, yet I never get bored or fed up because I love BRAND so much.*

Extract number 2 presents another example of an overall continued positive experience with the brand. The consumer reports happiness and repeat purchase.

- 2. This past week, the brand has made me very happy. All the items I envisioned, the dresses, blouses and skirts were available in my size. The brand introduced this new app called 'Gift User Guide'. All you need to do is drag the items of your choice and place it in your gift user guide so all my friends who wanted to buy me items just logged into my account and used the guide. I was very pleased.*

In the following extract number 3 the consumer expresses their change in feelings from being “obsessed with the brand” to being “fed up with the brand”. They mention a particular repeating issue, items being out of stock, as well as mention that due to poor service they feel “cheated and abandoned”.

3. *As of recent, I'm getting more and more fed up with the brand. I used to be so obsessed but now so many factors have been considered and I don't feel like the brand is working to its fullest potential. "Out o stock" is becoming a regular phrase with the brand and this is very sad because the brand used to deliver efficiently and effortlessly what the customer wanted. Restocking used to be done as soon as the clothes went out of stock. I'm not pleased with the brand this week. I feel cheated and abandoned.*

As the time went on, the relationship deteriorated further. In the extract number 4 the consumer mentions that although they have been supporting the brand for a long time, the repeated incidents of items not being in stock have had an impact on the overall relationship. The consumer is not patiently waiting any longer for the situation to improve. Also, they started noticing other issues that add up to the overall negative evaluation. They report frustration and the possibility of termination of the relationship.

4. *I've been the number one supporter of the brand for so long. However, these past few weeks, I've been completely disappointed with the brand because it hasn't met my expectations when you consider restocking items the minute they become sold out. The brand has taken so long to restock items and this has worn out my patience. I am currently a size 8 and this is a common size amongst girls my age, or so I feel. Recently when I've rushed to the saving embrace of the brand when it came to buying attires for upcoming events, the brand hasn't had anything that has caught my eye, and the things I like don't have my size. I'm so frustrated with the brand and I hope it buckles up very soon if not it may loose a most valued customer.*

The above case study illustrates how a consumer moves through the stages of a relationship, gradually fading within it. Many feelings and behaviours are also distinguishable in the above individual story, which have been recognised as distinctive for the fading stages described in this chapter. This example illustrates that fading consumes gradually reduce the number of encounters with brands they used to have strong relationships with, which is often motivated by accumulation of small rather negative events that build up and make the consumers experience negative feelings and thoughts. If not acted upon, this may lead to relationship termination or at least may make the relationship vulnerable.

#### 5.4 Description of the data and dynamics in the reported fading stages.

The following tables describe the split of consumers between four fading stages at three measurement points, in week one, five and ten.

**Table 9 Description of the sample: week one**

<b>stage in week one</b>				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
crossroads	20	2.8	2.9	2.9
disaffection	20	2.8	2.9	5.8
disillusion	271	38.4	39.5	45.3
honeymoon	375	53.1	54.7	100.0
Total	686	97.2	100.0	
Missing	20	2.8		
<b>Total</b>	<b>706</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

Table 10 Description of the sample: week five

<b>stage in week five</b>				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
crossroads	27	3.8	4.0	4.0
disaffection	40	5.7	6.0	10.0
disillusion	298	42.2	44.5	54.5
honeymoon	305	43.2	45.5	100.0
Total	670	94.9	100.0	
Missing	36	5.1		
<b>Total</b>	<b>706</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

Table 11 Description of the sample: week ten

<b>stage in week ten</b>				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
crossroads	28	4.0	4.8	4.8
disaffection	29	4.1	4.9	9.7
disillusion	267	37.8	45.3	55.0
honeymoon	265	37.5	45.0	100.0
Total	589	83.4	100.0	
Missing	117	16.6		
<b>Total</b>	<b>706</b>	<b>100.0</b>		

The table below is a summary table presenting the movement between stages between the measurement point in week one and week five.

**Table 12 Movement between relationship fading stages**

Movement between week 1 and week 5 fading stage	Crossroads (4)	Disaffection (3)	Disillusion (2)	Honeymoon (1)
-3 movement backward by 3 stages				2 / <b>0.3%</b>
-2 movement backward by 2 stages			8 / <b>1.2%</b>	1 / <b>0.2%</b>
-1 movement backward by 1 stage		5 / <b>0.8%</b>	12 / <b>1.9%</b>	60 / <b>9.9%</b>
0 no movement	0	9 / <b>1.4%</b>	165 / <b>25%</b>	230 / <b>35.5%</b>
1 movement forward by 1 stage	1 / <b>0.2%</b>	22 / <b>3.4%</b>	105 / <b>16%</b>	
2 movement forward by 2 stages	5 / <b>0.8%</b>	19 / <b>2.9%</b>		
3 movement forward by 3 stages	4 / <b>0.6%</b>			

The above table illustrates that the phenomenon of fading does occur and is visible by how the trajectory of individual relationships evolved over time. It is also worth noticing that the movement does not only occur down the trajectory, towards dissolution but is also visible the other way round. A small number of consumers have also moved by more than one stage within the process which also suggests that the fading may take individual course and not always progress stage by stage. This could imply that relationship fading is a dynamic process where the outcome could change. It may be that application of some restoration techniques, as discussed in the following chapter, can be used to revive the relationship successfully.

## **5.5 Summary of the predictors of the relationship fading stage and hypotheses for stage prediction**

The aim of this research study is to define the main predictors of relationship fading stage. There are four stages in the fading process: honeymoon (no fading), disillusion, disaffection and crossroads (see the above subchapters for detailed descriptions). Based on the review of the literature in chapter two, potential groups of factors that help explain why consumers happen to be in a specific relationship stage have been described. Those three comprehensive groups of factors include time-related, individual and situational factors. For the purpose of this research study a selection of variables from each group has been included in the analysis and tested in order to demonstrate the predictive validity of the categories.

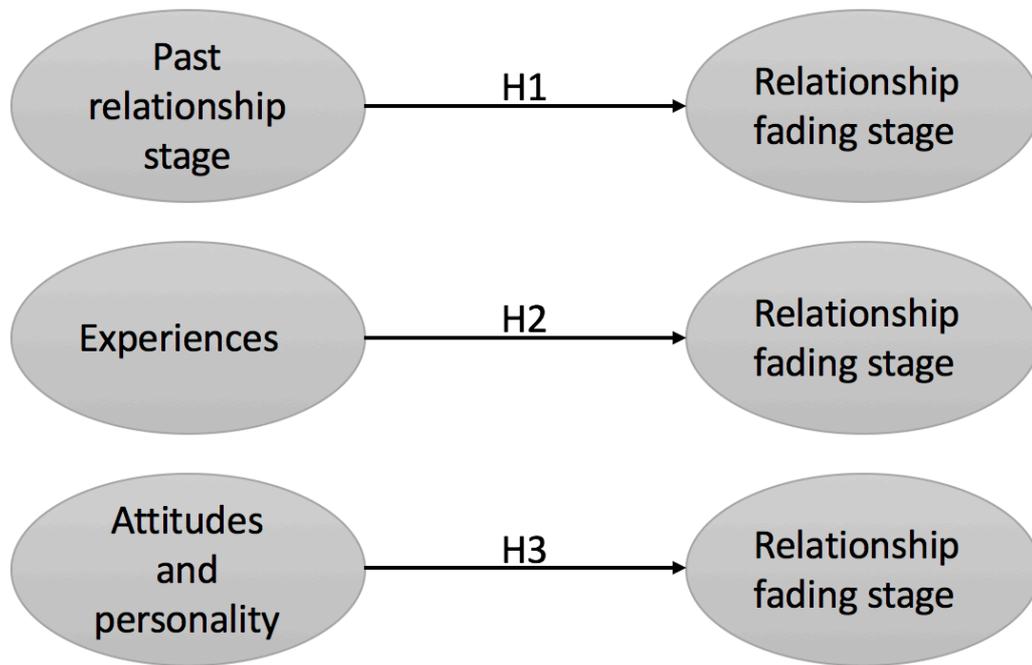
Since the study aims to define potential predictors of relationship fading stage, the hypotheses proposed are as follows:

H1: Relationship stage can be predicted by past relationship stage

H2: Relationship stage can be predicted by external positive and negative experiences throughout the relationship

H3: Relationship stage can be predicted by individual's attitudes and personality.

The hypotheses will be tested in three steps. The figure below illustrates the process:



**Figure 7 Hypotheses**

### **5.6 Method: Longitudinal diary study**

This research study aims to investigate relationship fading, which is a dynamic construct that develops over time. Therefore, it has been decided that the best approach to investigating this construct would include collection of longitudinal data (Anderson 1995). As a result, longitudinal diary study has been conducted as the most suitable approach for collecting this type of data. Consumer experiences have been captured in real time through completion of a diary. A diary is an instrument used repeatedly to self-report on-going experiences (Bolger et al. 2003). The greatest benefit of diary study is investigation of reported events as they occur in their natural setting, as well as reduced retrospection. Especially since obtaining estimates of within-person change over time, as well as individual changes in such difference is of

interest to this study, diary study appears to be an effective tool to achieve this goal. Questions included in the diary were both of qualitative and quantitative nature, allowing for a wide spectrum of data to be collected.

### **5.6.1 Sampling**

A total number of 960 individuals have been invited to take part in the study, with the final number of responses used in the analysis being 706. Specifically, students who took part in MB1134 (Introduction to Marketing Management) and MB2257 (Marketing) at Aston University, Birmingham, UK in the academic year 2012-13 have been invited to complete the diary entries. A student sample has been chosen for this purpose since students represent considerable purchasing power and form the basis of a substantial amount of consumer research. Therefore, although there exists some criticism over using student samples, the researcher believes that the quality of the data is not in any way affected because of the use of a student sample.

Participants have received credits for involvement in the study (up to 10% of the final mark) and belonged to a specific cohort of undergraduate students. As a result, the sampling procedure was non-random.

### **5.6.2 Ethical considerations**

Since students were receiving credits for involvement in the study and the diary exercise has been integrated into the modules, the participation in the study was not voluntary, which could potentially raise some issues relating to ethics of this data collection procedure. In order to avoid any concerns, the exercise has been submitted to and approved by the Learning & Teaching Committee of Aston University in advance of the commencement of the academic year and subsequently data collection.

Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to opt out and not complete any entries, which would result in no marks being given.

In order to ensure participants' consent for the data to be used in a research study, participants were given the opportunity to opt out of a) having their data used in the research study; and b) being contacted for follow-up work in the research study.

### **5.6.3 Data collection**

Longitudinal data has been collected over a period of 14 weeks and the study has been completed in April 2013. The diary study was designed using the Bristol Online Survey platform and available to complete online via the university-based Blackboard (virtual learning environment). Access to each diary entry was available for a week and after each week the entry was replaced with a new form. Participants had the opportunity to complete the diary entry only once for each weekly study in order to avoid double entries and ensure best possible quality of data. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask any questions, in relation to the questionnaire itself, the procedure or anything else, with a dedicated person (the researcher) being available to answer any of their queries. The questionnaire is presented in Appendix 4.

There were ten individual entries each of which was available to complete for a period of one week. At the outset of the study participants were asked to choose one brand with which they interact or used to interact frequently and have or used to have strong feelings (positive or negative) towards. A list of forty brands was collated based on the most popular brands among students in 2012 (according to Marketing Week magazine, UK) to include a variety of industry sectors. There was also a probability to self-select another brand which was not listed. Participants were required to continue reporting on the same relationship with this one brand throughout the duration of the study, unless

their circumstances changed (e.g. they stopped interacting with the brand). Should this happen, they were asked to notify the facilitator and were able to continue completing the entries about another brand. Such observations would have been excluded from the data for analysis, since the main purpose of the study was to capture the whole picture of relationship trajectory with the same brand. The questions were designed in order to collect data on individual's feelings, attitudes and behaviours. Entries one, five and ten asked the participants questions about their attitudes, perceived relationship stage, feelings and in the first entry about their personality. Entries two, three, four, six, seven, eight and nine were designed in such way that participants taking part were reporting on their recent interactions (experiences) with the brand. As a result, the measurement of feelings and attitudes was taken three times and reports of behaviours were taken seven times in between the three measurement points.

## **5.7 Data analysis**

### ***5.7.1 Data preparation***

The final number of responses included in the analysis was 706. This reduction of cases is based on data cleansing procedure, whereby incomplete, corrupt or meaningless (for example random answers or inconsistent brands) responses have been removed. Additionally, the researcher has only included in the final analysis those respondents who have completed at least two of the main measurement points (week one, week five and week ten). This was necessary in order to be able to evaluate the dynamics of the relationship over time.

All seven entries with open-ended question where participants were reporting on the recent interactions with the chosen brand have been coded into "positive", "negative", "neutral" and "mixed". Experiences whereby consumers would use positive

expressions, e.g. adjectives to describe and evaluate their experience were coded as a positive interaction. Interaction was coded as a negative experience when consumer used negative expressions, e.g. adjectives to describe and evaluate this experience. When a consumer did not provide any evaluative descriptors that could indicate if the experience was either positive or negative, such interaction was coded as neutral. When a consumer expressed both negative and positive evaluations of the same experience, the interaction was coded as mixed. The data was coded by two independent coders. They have both been trained to conduct this type of analysis. One of the coders was the researcher herself. The purpose of using two coders was to ensure that both judges come up with the same evaluation of the experiences and observed behaviours and ensure reliability of the coding. In order to estimate the degree of agreement between the coders, consensus estimate was used (Stemler 2004). The consensus estimate of interrater reliability was calculated by adding the number of cases that were coded equally by the two coders and dividing this figure by the total amount of cases. As a result, the interrater reliability score obtained was 78%, which is within the typical accepted guidelines suggested in the literature (Stemler 2004).

### **5.7.2 Analysis procedure**

According to Leeflang et al. (2000) models should be built in an evolutionary process. Starting from the most important variables, elements should be added step-by-step in order to build a parsimonious model. A desired level of prediction should be achieved with possibly few predictor variables. The aim of this process is to achieve a simple yet complete model.

The approach applied in this analysis is based on the recommendation to build the model stepwise, by adding variables one by one rather than starting with an overly

complex model and sequentially removing predictors, starting with those with highest p-values (also called backward elimination) (Agresti and Kateri 2011; Hosmer et al. 2000).

In terms of statistical analysis procedure, multinomial logistic regression, also called a discrete choice model (Agresti and Kateri 2011) is applied by use of the SPSS 21 statistical package. Multinomial logistic regression is used to analyse relationships between a categorical or metric independent variable(s) and categorical dependent variable, which has more than two outcome categories. This procedure is regressing for the probability of a categorical outcome (in this situation relationship fading stage: honeymoon, disillusion, disaffection or crossroads). The categories, stages, are unordered, implying that the distances between them do not have a specific meaning and cannot be defined. Stepwise approach to multiple logistic regression allows the researcher to test whether adding a variable will improve the overall fit of the model over and above those variables already included in the model. This approach follows the approach of starting to build a simple model first and then move on to building a complete model.

**Table 13 Key to the SPSS output**

<b>Variable name</b>	<b>Variable meaning</b>
wk1stage	Relationship stage in week 1
wk5stage	Relationship stage in week 5
wk10stage	Relationship stage in week 10
wk1stage, wk5stage, wk10stage =1	Crossroads stage of relationship fading in week 1, 5 or 10
wk1stage, wk5stage, wk10stage =2	Disaffection stage of relationship fading in week 1, 5 or 10
wk1stage, wk5stage, wk10stage =3	Disillusion stage of relationship fading in week 1, 5 or 10
wk1stage, wk5stage, wk10stage =4	Honeymoon stage of relationship fading in week 1, 5 or 10

## 5.8 Results

The hypotheses are tested in three steps. Hypothesis 1 states:

***H<sub>1</sub>: Relationship fading stage can be predicted by relationship fading stage in the past.***

In order to test H1, three simple models have been tested and one model taking into account all individual equations. The summary of the results is presented in Table 10 below.

**Table 14 Summary of the results for H1 test – stage predicted by past stage**

Stage in week 10		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
		B	Exp (B)	B	Exp (B)	B	Exp (B)
Crossroads	stage in week 1 = crossroads			3.997**	54.444	2.844*	17.185
	stage in week 1 = disaffection			3.486*	32.667	2.003	7.413
	stage in week 1 = disillusion			2.270**	9.679	1.818*	6.160
	stage in week 1 = honeymoon			0 <sup>b</sup>	-	0 <sup>b</sup>	-
	stage in week 5 = crossroads	4.032**	56.400			3.315**	27.535
	stage in week 5 = disaffection	3.627**	37.600			2.961**	19.310
	stage in week 5 = disillusion	2.241**	9.400			1.636*	5.134
	stage in week 5 = honeymoon	0 <sup>b</sup>	-			0 <sup>b</sup>	-
Disaffection	stage in week 1 = crossroads			1.615	5.026	.899	2.458
	stage in week 1 = disaffection			3.406*	30.154	1.838	6.286
	stage in week 1 = disillusion			1.209*	3.350	.872	2.392
	stage in week 1 = honeymoon			0 <sup>b</sup>	-	0 <sup>b</sup>	-
	stage in week 5 = crossroads	1.430	4.178			1.405	4.074
	stage in week 5 = disaffection	3.376**	29.244			3.078**	21.720
	stage in week 5 = disillusion	1.430*	4.178			1.279*	3.591
	stage in week 5 = honeymoon	0 <sup>b</sup>	-			0 <sup>b</sup>	-
Disillusion	stage in week 1 = crossroads			1.762*	5.822	.970	2.637
	stage in week 1 = disaffection			2.966*	19.406	1.613	5.019
	stage in week 1 = disillusion			1.608**	4.995	.996**	2.707
	stage in week 1 = honeymoon			0	-	0	-
	stage in week 5 = crossroads	1.736*	5.675			1.646*	5.184
	stage in week 5 = disaffection	2.601**	13.479			2.211**	9.123
	stage in week 5 = disillusion	2.383**	10.835			2.119**	8.322
	stage in week 5 = honeymoon	0 <sup>b</sup>	-			0 <sup>b</sup>	-
	-2 Log likelihood		44.984		42.445		108.694
	Chi square		185.572		104.642		218.011

Individual models as per the above table are discussed below.

**Model 0: relationship stage in week 5 can be predicted by relationship stage in week 1.**

This model has been tested before the three simple models in order to see if there is any relationship between these two variables. The model fitting information table from the output, shows several indices relating to the intercept model and the final model. In order to assess the fit of the model, the -2 Log Likelihood (-2LL) is evaluated. The -2LL should be lower for the final model than it is for the null model because lower values indicate a better fit (Hosmer et al. 2000). The Likelihood Ratio chi-square test is an alternative test of goodness-of-fit. In this analysis, the model fit is significant (45.025,  $p < 0.05$ ). The null hypothesis that there is no difference between the model without independent variable and the model with independent variable is rejected. It is supported that there is a relationship between independent and dependent variable. In other words, this indicates that the full model predicts the dependent variable significantly better than the null model.

In the likelihood ratio tests table each independent variable of the model is being compared to the full model in order to determine whether this variable should be included in the model. In other words, this states whether the predictor contributes significantly to the predicting value of the model. In case of non-significant results ( $p$ -value  $>$  than 0.05), the predictor does not contribute significantly to the model. In the table for variable wk1stage, this is not the case – the stage in week one appears to be a significant predictor in the full model. The “df” indicates the degrees of freedom of the chi-square distribution used to test the likelihood ratio Chi-Square statistic and is defined by the number of predictors in the model (3x3) (Hosmer et al. 2000).

The next output element to be interpreted are parameter estimates. The table presents the logistic coefficient (B) for each predictor variable for each alternative category of the outcome variable. The logistic coefficient is the expected amount of change in the logit for each one unit change in the predictor (Hosmer et al. 2000). For a unit change in the predictor variable, the logit of outcome relative to the reference category is expected to change by the parameter estimate expressed in log-odds units, provided that all other variables in the model remain constant. The table also includes other elements: the standard error, Wald statistic, *df*, Sig. (*p*-value); as well as the Exp(B) and confidence interval for the Exp(B). Exp(B) greater than 1 will increase the logit, those predictors that do not have any effect would have the Exp(B) equal to 1.0 and those which decrease the logit will have Exp(B) values less than 1.0 (Hosmer et al. 2000). In other words, the odds ratio Exp(B) indicates the odds of falling into the outcome category when the value of the predictor increases by one unit.

For the analysis, the referent group has been set as honeymoon stage and therefore the estimations are for three groups: crossroads, disaffection and disillusion. Honeymoon is the last and largest group and hence has been chosen as a reference category (Agresti and Kateri 2011) to compare the probability of fading in other stages to being in honeymoon stage. The table tells us how likely a consumer in disillusion, disaffection or crossroads stage in week 1 is to fall into those categories in week 5, relative to honeymoon.

Consumers who were in crossroads stage (1) in week 1 are more likely than consumers who were in disaffection (2) to fall into crossroads stage in week 5, relative to honeymoon stage. The odds ratio Exp(B) equals to 57.500, which means that the odds are greatest for consumers in crossroads category in week 1 to fall into

crossroads category in week 5. In other words, those consumers are 5750% more likely to fall into crossroads. These results are significant. The confidence interval indicates that the odds could be as little as 9.9 times or as much as 333 times larger with 95% confidence. Consumers who were in disaffection stage (2) cannot be differentiated from consumers in honeymoon category (reference group) (.054>.05).

For the disaffection (2) category, consumers who were in disaffection (2) stage in week 1 are most likely to fall into the same category in week 5, with the odds ratio  $\text{Exp}(B)$  being 53.077, relative to falling into honeymoon stage. The results are significant.

For predicting disillusion category in week 5, consumers who were in disaffection and crossroads category in week 1 are equally likely to fall into disillusion category in week 5 and at the same time they are both more likely to fall into this category than those consumers who were in disillusion stage in week 1, relative to falling into the honeymoon stage. The odds ratios are equal for consumers in disaffection and crossroads categories in week 1 to fall into disillusion category in week 5 and at the same time higher than for those who were in disillusion category in week 1. These results are significant.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that relationship stage in week 5 can be predicted based on relationship stage in week 1, except for the crossroads category and those consumers who have reported to be in disaffection stage in week 1.

**Model 1: relationship stage in week 10 can be predicted by relationship stage in week 5.**

Based on the model fitting information the fit of the model including the predictor is better than the intercept model. The model fit is significant (44.984,  $p < 0.05$ ). The null

hypothesis that there is no difference between the model without independent variable and the model with independent variable is rejected. The full model predicts the dependent variable significantly better than the null model. Additionally, the predictor wk5stage appears to be a significant predictor in the full model.

Results indicate that consumers who were in crossroads stage (1) in week 5 are more likely than consumers who were in disillusion (3) and disaffection (2) to fall into crossroads category in week 10, versus honeymoon stage. The odds ratio  $\text{Exp}(B)$  equals to 56.400, which means that the odds are greatest for consumers in crossroads category in week 5 to fall into crossroads category in week 10.

Consumers who were in disaffection stage (2) in week 5 are most likely to fall into disaffection category in week 10, relative to honeymoon with the odds ratio  $\text{Exp}(B)$  equal to 29.244.

For predicting disillusion category in week 10, consumers who were in disaffection (2) category in week 5 are most likely from among other groups to fall into the disillusion category, relative to falling into honeymoon. The odds ratio  $\text{Exp}(B)$  is 13.479.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that relationship stage in week 10 can be predicted based on relationship stage in week 5, except for the disaffection category and those consumers who have reported to be in crossroads stage in week 5.

**Model 2: relationship stage in week 10 can be predicted by relationship stage in week 1.**

Based on the model fitting information the fit of the model including the predictor is better than the intercept model. The model fit is significant (42.445,  $p < 0.05$ ). The null

hypothesis that there is no difference between the model without independent variable and the model with independent variable is rejected. The full model predicts the dependent variable significantly better than the null model. The predictor wk1stage appears to be a significant predictor in the full model.

The results indicate that consumers who were in crossroads stage (1) in week 1 are more likely than consumers who were in disillusion (3) and disaffection (2) to fall into crossroads category in week 10, relative to honeymoon stage. The relative log odds of being in the crossroads category versus in honeymoon category in week 10 increase by 3.997 for those consumers who were in crossroads category in week 1. The expected risk of staying in the crossroads category is highest ( $\text{Exp}(B)=54.444$ ) for consumers who were in crossroads category in week 1.

The relative risk of falling into the disaffection stage in week 10 is highest for consumers who were in disaffection stage (2) in week 1 ( $\text{Exp}(B)=30.154$ ), relative to honeymoon.

For predicting disillusion category in week 10, consumers who were in disaffection category in week 1 are most likely to fall into disillusion category in week 10, relative to honeymoon. The expected risk of falling into disillusion category (3) is highest ( $\text{Exp}(B)=19.406$ ) for those consumers who were in disaffection stage in week 1.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that relationship stage in week 10 can be predicted based on relationship stage in week 1, except for the prediction of the disaffection category and those consumers who have reported to be in crossroads stage in week 1.

**Model 3: relationship stage in week 10 can be predicted by relationship stage in week 1 and 5.**

The last model (3) combines both stage 1 and 5 as predictors. Based on the model fitting information the fit of the model including the predictors is better than the intercept model. The model fit is significant (108.694,  $p < 0.05$ ). The null hypothesis that there is no difference between the model without independent variables and the model with independent variables is rejected. The full model predicts the dependent variable significantly better than the null model. The predictors wk1stage and wk5stage appear to be significant predictors in the full model.

For predicting the crossroads stage in week 10 based on the stage in week 1 and 5, the results show that the relative risk of falling into the crossroads category are highest for those consumers who were in crossroads category in week 1 and 5 ( $\text{Exp}(B)=17.185$  and  $\text{Exp}(B)=27.535$  respectively), relative to honeymoon category.

For predicting disaffection category in week 10, the relationship stage in week 1 does not appear to significantly predict falling into disaffection category (2) in week 10, relative to the reference category, honeymoon (4). The highest relative risk of falling into the disaffection category (2) is assigned to those consumers who were in disaffection category in week 5 ( $\text{Exp}(B)=21.720$ ), relative to honeymoon category.

The expected risk of staying in the disillusion category (3) in week 10 is higher for those consumers who were in disillusion category (3) in week 1 and in week 5, versus for those consumers in honeymoon stage (4). Additionally, it should be noted that consumers who were in disaffection stage in week 5 are also more likely to fall into the disillusion category in week 10, versus those consumers in honeymoon category (4).

Based on the above it can be concluded that relationship fading stage in week 10 can be predicted by past relationship stage, however the more recent stage measurement (week 5) seems to be a better predictor of the stage in week 10.

The second hypothesis states:

***H<sub>2</sub>: Relationship fading stage can be predicted by external positive and negative experiences throughout the relationship***

**Table 15 Summary of the results for H2 and H3 test – stage predicted by brand attitude and overall experience evaluation**

Stage in week 10		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6		Model 7	
		B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Crossroads	Brand attitude in week 1							-1.317**	.268
	Brand attitude in week 5					-1.660**	.190		
	Overall experience evaluation in weeks 2, 3, 4	-1.376*	.253						
	Overall experience evaluation in weeks 6, 7, 8, 9			-1.925*	.145				
Disaffection	Brand attitude in week 1							-1.291**	.275
	Brand attitude in week 5								
	Overall experience evaluation in weeks 2, 3, 4	-1.338**	.262						
	Overall experience evaluation in weeks 6, 7, 8, 9			-1.782**	.168				
Disillusion	Brand attitude in week 1								
	Brand attitude in week 5								
	Overall experience evaluation in weeks 2, 3, 4	-1.524**	.592						
	Overall experience evaluation in weeks 6, 7, 8, 9								
	-2 Log likelihood		91.568		179.909		191.629		189.340
	Chi square		66.938		39.095		97.987		53.249

Individual models are discussed below.

**Model 4: relationship fading stage in week 5 can be predicted by the average evaluation of experiences in weeks 2 – 4 (E234\_AVER).**

Based on the model fitting information the fit of the model including the predictor is better than the intercept model. The model fit is significant (91.568,  $p < 0.05$ ). The null hypothesis that there is no difference between the model without independent variable and the model with independent variable is rejected. The full model predicts the dependent variable significantly better than the null model. The predictor E234\_AVER appears to be a significant predictor in the full model.

The results indicate that the higher the value of E234\_AVER, the more positive the overall average evaluation of the experiences in weeks 2, 3 and 4.

A one-unit increase in the variable E234\_AVER is associated with a 2.736 decrease in the relative log odds of being in crossroads stage versus honeymoon stage. A one-unit increase in the variable E234\_AVER is associated with a 1.661 decrease in the relative log odds of being in disaffection stage versus honeymoon stage. A one-unit increase in the variable E234\_AVER is associated with a 0.748 decrease in the relative log odds of being in disillusion stage versus honeymoon stage. Therefore, it can be concluded that the more positive overall average evaluation of the experiences in weeks 2, 3 and 4 the less likely consumers are to fall into disillusion, disaffection and crossroads stages in week 5, versus falling into the honeymoon stage.

**Model 5: relationship fading stage in week 10 can be predicted by the average evaluation of experiences in weeks 6 – 9 (E6789\_AVER).**

Based on the model fitting information the fit of the model including the predictor is better than the intercept model. The model fit is significant (130.920,  $p < 0.05$ ). The null hypothesis that there is no difference between the model without independent variable and the model with independent variable is rejected. The full model predicts the

dependent variable significantly better than the null model. The predictor E6789\_AVER appears to be a significant predictor in the full model.

A one-unit increase in the variable E6789\_AVER is associated with a 1.376 decrease in the relative log odds of being in crossroads stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10. A one-unit increase in the variable E6789\_AVER is associated with a 1.338 decrease in the relative log odds of being in disaffection stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10. A one-unit increase in the variable E6789\_AVER is associated with a 0.524 decrease in the relative log odds of being in disillusion stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10. Therefore, it can be concluded that the more positive overall average evaluation of the experiences in weeks 2, 3 and 4 the less likely consumers are to fall into disillusion, disaffection and crossroads stages in week 10, versus falling into the honeymoon stage.

The hypothesis number three states:

***H<sub>3</sub>: Relationship fading stage can be predicted by consumer's attitudes toward the brand and consumer's personality***

Individual models are discussed below (table 11).

**Model 6: relationship fading stage in week 10 can be predicted by consumer's attitudes toward the brand in week 5 (E5\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE).**

Based on the model fitting information the fit of the model including the predictor is better than the intercept model. The model fit is significant (191.629,  $p < 0.05$ ). The null hypothesis that there is no difference between the model without independent variable and the model with independent variable is rejected. The full model predicts the

dependent variable significantly better than the null model. The predictor E5\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE appears to be a significant predictor in the full model.

The results indicate that one-unit increase in the variable E5\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE is associated with a 1.660 decrease in the relative log odds of being in crossroads stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10. A one-unit increase in the variable E5\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE is associated with a 1.291 decrease in the relative log odds of being in disaffection stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10. A one-unit increase in the variable E5\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE is associated with a 0.979 decrease in the relative log odds of being in disillusion stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the more positive consumer's attitude towards the brand in week 5, the less likely consumers are to fall into disillusion, disaffection and crossroads stages in week 10, versus falling into the honeymoon stage.

**Model 7: relationship fading stage in week 10 can be predicted by consumer's attitudes toward the brand in week 1 (E1\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE).**

Based on the model fitting information the fit of the model including the predictor is better than the intercept model. The model fit is significant (189.340,  $p < 0.05$ ). The null hypothesis that there is no difference between the model without independent variable and the model with independent variable is rejected. The full model predicts the dependent variable significantly better than the null model. The predictor E1\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE appears to be a significant predictor in the full model.

The results indicate that one-unit increase in the variable E1\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE is associated with a 1.317 decrease in the relative log odds of being in crossroads stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10. A one-unit increase in the variable

E1\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE is associated with a 0.671 decrease in the relative log odds of being in disaffection stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10. A one-unit increase in the variable E1\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE is associated with a 0.823 decrease in the relative log odds of being in disillusion stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the more positive consumer's attitude towards the brand in week 5, the less likely consumers are to fall into disaffection, disillusion and crossroads stages in week 10, versus falling into the honeymoon stage.

It can also be concluded that consumer's attitude toward the brand appears to significantly predict the relationship fading stage.

As part of the hypothesis testing, personality traits have also been included in the equation. Specifically, as suggested by the literature, neuroticism has been included in the model.

**Model 8: relationship fading stage in week 10 can be predicted by consumer's personality traits (E1\_NEUROTICISM).**

Based on the model fitting information the fit of the model including the predictor is better than the intercept model. The model fit, however is not significant (153.526,  $p > 0.05$ ). The null hypothesis that there is no difference between the model without independent variable and the model with independent variable is not rejected. The full model does not predict the dependent variable significantly better than the null model. The predictor E1\_NEUROTICISM does not appear to be a significant predictor in the full model.

Based on the results it can be concluded that personality trait: neuroticism does not differentiate the crossroads, disaffection and disillusion groups from the honeymoon category. Neuroticism does not appear to be a significant predictor of relationship fading stage. Consequently, this model has not been included in the final summary tables.

**Complete Model: relationship fading stage in week 10 can be predicted by past relationship stage, the average evaluation of experiences in weeks 2 – 9 and consumer’s attitudes towards the brand in week 1 and 5.**

**Table 16 Summary of the results: complete model**

Stage in week 10		Complete model	
		B	Exp(B)
Crossroads	Brand attitude in week 1	.370	1.448
	Brand attitude in week 5	-1.582*	.206
	Overall experience evaluation in weeks 2, 3, 4	.340	1.404
	Overall experience evaluation in weeks 6, 7, 8, 9	-1.215*	.297
	stage in week 1 = crossroads	18.401	98051593.3
	stage in week 1 = disaffection	.787	2.196
	stage in week 1 = disillusion	1.094	3.988
	stage in week 1 = honeymoon	0	-
	stage in week 5 = crossroads	1.676	5.342
	stage in week 5 = disaffection	1.988	7.301
	stage in week 5 = disillusion	1.487	4.424
	stage in week 5 = honeymoon	0	-
Disaffection	Brand attitude in week 1	.049	1.051
	Brand attitude in week 5	-.734	.480
	Overall experience evaluation in weeks 2, 3, 4	.553	1.739
	Overall experience evaluation in weeks 6, 7, 8, 9	-1.208*	.299
	stage in week 1 = crossroads	-.585	.557
	stage in week 1 = disaffection	1.735	5.666
	stage in week 1 = disillusion	1.477*	4.381
	stage in week 1 = honeymoon	0	-
	stage in week 5 = crossroads	-5.498	.004
	stage in week 5 = disaffection	1.437	4.209
	stage in week 5 = disillusion	.755	2.129
	stage in week 5 = honeymoon	0	-
Disillusion	Brand attitude in week 1	.027	1.027
	Brand attitude in week 5	-.419	.658
	Overall experience evaluation in weeks 2, 3, 4	-.136	.873
	Overall experience evaluation in weeks 6, 7, 8, 9	-.430*	.651
	stage in week 1 = crossroads	17.963	63286349.5
	stage in week 1 = disaffection	.592	.359
	stage in week 1 = disillusion	1.934**	6.919
	stage in week 1 = honeymoon	0	-
	stage in week 5 = crossroads	.343	1.409
	stage in week 5 = disaffection	.679	1.973
	stage in week 5 = disillusion	.998*	2.713
	stage in week 5 = honeymoon	0	-
	-2 Log likelihood	496.301	
	Chi square	176.443	

Based on the model fitting information the fit of the model including the predictors is better than the intercept model. The model fit is significant (496.301,  $p < 0.05$ ). The null hypothesis that there is no difference between the model without independent variable and the model with independent variable is rejected. The full model predicts the dependent variable significantly better than the null model.

It has been concluded that the predictor E1\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE does not appear to be a significant predictor in the full model of predicting relationship stage in week 10. It has not been removed from the model because conceptually E5\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE is a function of this variable. All other variables: brand attitude in week 5, the average evaluation of experiences in weeks 2 – 4 and 6 – 9, relationship stage in week 1 and relationship stage in week 5 show statistically significant relationships with the dependent variable, relationship fading stage in week 10.

Not all independent variables, however, play a statistically significant role in differentiating the disillusion, disaffection and crossroads categories from the honeymoon category. This is illustrated in the parameter estimates table below.

Based on the parameter estimates, it can be concluded that for the crossroads category of the relationship stage in week 10, a one-unit increase in the variable E5\_BRAND\_ATTITUDE is associated with a 1.582 decrease in the relative log odds of being in crossroads stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10. A one-unit increase in the variable E6789\_AVER is associated with a 1.215 decrease in the relative log odds of being in crossroads stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10.

For the disaffection category of the relationship stage in week 10, a one-unit increase in the variable E6789\_AVER is associated with a 1.208 decrease in the relative log odds of being in crossroads stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10. The relative risk of falling into the disaffection category is highest for those consumers who were in disillusion (3) category in week 5 ( $\text{Exp}(B)=4.381$ ), relative to consumers in honeymoon category.

For the disillusion category of the relationship fading stage, a one-unit increase in the variable E6789\_AVER is associated with a 0.430 decrease in the relative log odds of being in disillusion stage versus honeymoon stage in week 10. The relative risk of falling into the disillusion category is highest for those consumers who were in disillusion (3) category in week 5 ( $\text{Exp}(B)=6.919$ ) and week 1 ( $\text{Exp}(B)=2.713$ ) relative to consumers in honeymoon category. Because all other relationships of individual independent variables are insignificant, it is concluded that the categories cannot be differentiated based on those variables.

## **Conclusion**

It has been found that there is not a statistically significant overall relationship between the combination of all independent variables and the independent variable. The classification accuracy surpassed the proportional by chance accuracy criteria, supporting the utility of the model.  $H_1$  and  $H_2$  are supported, meaning that relationship stage can be predicted by past relationship stage, as well as by the accumulation of past external positive and negative experiences that occurred throughout the relationship.  $H_3$  is not supported and it is concluded that relationship stage cannot be predicted by individual's attitudes and personality.

## **5.9 Discussion**

The aim of this study was to test whether variables included in distinct yet complete groups of factors expected to predict relationship fading stage have significant effect on predicting the stage. Based on the results, past relationship stage has been found to be a predictor of relationship stage in week 10, both in terms of the first measurement in week 1, as well as the second measurement in week 5. It appears that as expected, the more recent the stage measurement, the stronger the effect of the stage. In this case, stage in week 5 has a stronger effect than stage in week 1 on stage in week 10, which can be associated with the recency effect. Accumulation of positive and negative experiences during the encounters with the brand have also shown a significant effect in predicting the stage, which suggests that there may be a cumulative effect of positive and negative incidents on the fading process which supports the definition of the fading phenomenon and that can also be related back to the interpersonal literature whereby the overall balance of experiences can have an impact on the final outcome (Gottman 1993). Although personality was also expected to have an effect on predicting the fading stage, especially neuroticism, the effect has not been found. The

last predictor included in the model was brand attitude that on its own showed significant results, however when included in the complete model did not perform as well as a predictor. The loss of significance may be due to relatively high correlation between brand attitude in week 1 and brand attitude in week 5. It may also be that the predicting power has been overtaken by other predictors in the model, or that when included in the complete model the more recent brand attitude (week 5) had a stronger overall effect.

The results indicate that fading stages can be differentiated from one another and specific characteristics describe each of the individual phases a consumer can find themselves in. It has been demonstrated that consumers move within the trajectory, as movement back and forward is observed. This may suggest that fading is not necessarily a one-way process leading to an ultimate dissolution, but rather a dynamic process which if managed properly can be maintained and even revived. It has also been observed that the relationship fading stages can be envisaged by a number of predictors, some of which have been included in this investigation. Taking into account the fact that many relationships are long-term ongoing commitments, it is important to note that stage in the past will have an impact on future stage in a relationship. Additionally, consumer's attitudes, as expected, will also add to the predicting power. The more positive the attitude, the less likely the consumer is to negatively perceive any potential incidents and hence are less likely to fade in a relationship sooner. Personality has interestingly not been found to have a significant effect, however since these are only the initial steps in stage prediction, further analysis could be carried out in order to fully understand this situation.

## **5.10 Limitations and future research**

This study has some limitations. Only a selection of variables has been included in the analysis and model building exercise. Although the hypothesis cannot be supported, the stepwise model building procedure has uncovered some interesting findings, which should be investigated further in future research. The above discussion suggests that further analysis should be conducted in order to uncover other, potentially better predictors from within the identified comprehensive groups of factors.

It has been pointed out that a 3-month diary study may not be long enough in order to capture the phenomenon of relationship fading and the changes in the trajectory. The number of measurement points is limited and therefore it is recognised that in order to obtain a richer data a longer data collection period should be applied. This is especially because relationships evolve over time and are not expected to abruptly change their dynamics. As a result, it is anticipated that the study could be replicated and extended and the change in relationship dynamics observed for a longer time.

## **Chapter 6. Study 3: Exploring and Describing Restoration Efforts**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents results of the third study. The objective of this study is *to explore and describe restoration techniques in the relationship fading process*. The chapter is organised in the following way: in the first section the research problem is summarised. Following this, data collection method, analysis procedure and results are presented. The chapter concludes by presenting a summary of the results, discussion and limitations.

### **6.2 Restoring fading relationships**

Based on the review of the literature, it can be concluded that it is in the company's best interest to maintain relationships with consumers, not only because higher retention rates lead to higher profits (Reichheld et al. 2000) but also because relationship maintenance itself is less costly than gaining new customers (Stauss and Friege 1999). It is expected that if appropriate restoration techniques are applied to fading relationships, such relationships can be maintained or revived, leading to lower defection rates and increased consumer satisfaction. Drawing from the analogy that people engage in relationships with brands in a similar way to how they do it with other individuals (Batra et al. 2012; Fournier 1998), marital therapy and relationship dynamics literature have been investigated in search for effective restoration techniques in the marital disaffection context. The literature emphasizes that to accomplish an effective intervention, restoration techniques in relationships should only be applied once the relationship disaffection stage has been identified (Kayser 1993). This suggests that differences in how people react to various restoration efforts are

dependent upon the stage of their relationship. Furthermore, it needs to be pointed out that conceptually maintenance or restoration techniques (which many authors in the marital literature use interchangeably) are essentially different from recovery strategies that are applied to remedy a failure in a retail context (Kelley 1993). The former aim to restore the emotional bond and stop further weakening of the relationship (Kayser 1993) and should be applied not only in situations of distress or obvious decline in relationship. Recovery strategies, on the other hand, are applied in case of a company's failure or a mistake (Gronroos 1988), in order to recover from the situation in case of an incident. Based on the findings from the marital literature, a list of potential restoration techniques has been combined and by analogy a selection of potential restoration techniques relevant for the consumer – brand context has been put together, in order to explore whether consumers would perceive those interventions favourably and whether their evaluation would differ contingent upon the stage of their relationship with the brand.

### **6.3 Method: Survey**

This research study aims to explore and describe restoration techniques which could be applied to fading consumers, in order to maintain or revive their relationships with the brand and prevent defection. In order to achieve this objective a survey design has been applied. Surveys tend to be used for exploratory and descriptive types of research (Saunders et al. 2011). In this case, a survey using a questionnaire allows collecting standardised data from a large population. Since the data is collected only at one point in time with reference to this research question, the design of survey is cross-sectional by use of a web-based questionnaire (Bryman and Bell 2007). The purpose of the analysis is to identify patterns of association between variables, which in this case are relationship fading stage and the restoration technique. Given the exploratory character of this inquiry, a substudy has also been conducted. This study explores

whether there are any differences in preferences of restoration techniques contingent upon the industry to which the brand chosen by the participant belongs.

## **6.4 Data collection**

Students who took part in MB1134 (Introduction to Marketing Management) and MB2257 (Marketing) at Aston University, Birmingham, UK in the academic year 2012-13 have been invited to complete the questionnaire (made available in the 10<sup>th</sup> week of the diary study described in chapter 5). As a result, the sampling procedure was non-random. In the final week of the diary, participants were asked both open-ended and forced-choice questions relating to the restoration techniques. Participants have received credits for involvement in the study (1% of the final mark).

### **6.4.1 Nature of the sample and data**

A total of 589 people participated in this study. The groups of independent variables consisted of 14 participants in crossroads stage, 43 in disaffection, 267 in disillusion, and 265 in honeymoon-no fading stage respectively. All participants were students from the same undergraduate marketing courses at Aston University. Specifically, students who took part in MB1134 (Introduction to Marketing Management) and MB2257 (Marketing) at Aston University, Birmingham, UK in the academic year 2012-13 have been invited to complete the questionnaire. Participation in the study was incentivised with course credits for the module. The researcher believes there were no adverse effects of using a student sample in this study on the quality of the data. The sampling procedure used in this study was non-random.

#### **6.4.2 Analysis procedure**

For this study an analysis of variance (ANOVA) will be conducted by use of SPSS 21 statistical package. ANOVA can be used in order to compare the mean scores of three or more groups (Vogt et al. 2014). In this case, a one-way ANOVA will be used, which involves only one independent variable, which consists of at least three or more levels/groups, and one dependent variable that has to be continuous (Vogt et al. 2014). By comparing the means between the different groups it will be revealed whether “there are significant differences in the mean scores on the dependent variable” (Pallant 2013, p. 259) across the groups. Following this procedure post-hoc tests need to be conducted to detect where the differences between the groups lie.

The goal of this study is to test if consumers in different stages of the relationship fading process will have different preferences towards various restoration techniques applied by the brand. For this study the independent variable is the relationship fading stage. This independent variable consists of four different levels: the crossroads stage, the disaffection stage, the disillusion stage and the honeymoon-no fading stage. In total there are 12 dependent variables, namely the different restoration efforts a brand could apply to improve or maintain an existing relationship with the consumer. Different types of restoration efforts a firm could use are as follows: promotions, offers, discounts sent via email or post by the brand (1), any form of correspondence recognising the participant as a valued customer and thanking them for being a customer of the brand (2), personal phone call or email from the representative of the brand asking about participant’s experience with the brand and how it could be improved (3), creating an easily accessible method of sharing views and suggestions (4), creating a fair and easy complaint resolution process (5), making terms and conditions and/or policies available and easy to understand (6), providing information on what is available to a consumer (creating better access to information) (7), creating an experience of feeling welcome

and comfortable when interacting with the brand (8), providing support and help with use of product or service (9), recognising mistakes, apologising for them and providing compensation (10), keeping promises made to the consumer (11), and meeting and discussing any issues with a representative of the brand in order to resolve it (12). For each dependent variable, which were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, a separate ANOVA has been conducted.

## 6.5 Results

Participants self-selected one the four relationship fading stages according to how they perceived their relationship with their chosen brand (Group 1: crossroads; Group 2: disaffection; Group 3: disillusion; Group 4: honeymoon-no fading).

### 1. DV: promotions, offers, discounts sent via email or post by the brand

There was a statistically significant effect at the  $p < .05$  level of the relationship fading stages on promotion offers by post for the four conditions:  $F(3, 585) = 2.9, p = .035$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Group 1 ( $M = 3.79, SD = 1.89$ ) was significantly different from Group 3 ( $M = 5.24, SD = 1.76$ ). Group 2 ( $M = 4.93, SD = 1.99$ ) and Group 4 ( $M = 5.01, SD = 2.07$ ) did not differ significantly from each other and neither did they differ from Group 1 or 3. To summarise, these results suggest that the relationship fading stage has a significant effect on how customers perceive promotions, offers, and discounts sent via email or post by the brand. Specifically the results suggest that consumers in the crossroads stage perceive promotion offers by post as less favourable than those consumers in the disillusion stage.

2. DV: any form of correspondence recognising the participant as a valued customer and thanking them for being a customer of the brand

There was a statistically significant effect at the  $p < .05$  level of the relationship fading stages on the perception of any form of correspondence recognising the participant as a valued customer and thanking them for being a customer of the brand for the four conditions:  $F(3, 585) = 5.96, p = .001$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Group 1 ( $M = 3.50, SD = 2.18$ ) was significantly different from Group 3 ( $M = 4.84, SD = 1.71$ ) and Group 4 ( $M = 5.18, SD = 1.73$ ). However, Group 3 and 4 did not differ significantly from each other. Furthermore, Group 2 ( $M = 4.51, SD = 2.06$ ) did not differ significantly from either Group 1, 3 or 4. To summarise, these results suggest that the relationship fading stage has a significant effect on how consumers perceive any form of correspondence recognising the participant as a valued customer and thanking them for being a customer of the brand. Specifically the results suggest that consumers in the crossroads stage perceive this restoration effort as less preferred than those consumers in the disillusion and disaffection stages.

3. DV: personal phone call or email from the representative of the brand asking about participant's experience with the brand and how it could be improved

There was a statistically significant effect at the  $p < .05$  level of the relationship fading stages on the personal phone call for the four conditions:  $F(3, 585) = 2.74, p = .043$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Group 3 ( $M = 2.97, SD = 1.93$ ) was significantly different from Group 4 ( $M = 3.42, SD = 1.99$ ). Group 1 ( $M = 2.64, SD = 1.60$ ) and Group 2 ( $M = 3.02, SD = 2.19$ ) did not differ significantly from each other and neither from Group 3 or 4. Taken together, these results suggest that the relationship fading stages have a significant effect on how

customers perceive this type of activity performed by their chosen brands. The results suggest that consumers in the disillusion stage perceive personal phone calls as less favourable than those consumers in the honeymoon-no fading stage.

#### 4. DV: creating an easily accessible method of sharing views and suggestions

There was a statistically significant effect at the  $p < .05$  level of the relationship fading stages on sharing views and/or suggestions for the four conditions:  $F(3, 585) = 3.08$ ,  $p = .027$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Group 1 ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ) was not significantly different from Group 4 ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ). Group 2 ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 2.10$ ) and Group 3 ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ) did not differ significantly from each other and neither from Group 1 or 4. In summary, the results suggest that the relationship fading stage has a significant effect on how customers perceive sharing views and/or suggestions by their chosen brands. Nevertheless, no significant differences between individual groups have been found as a result of the post-hoc test.

#### 5. DV: creating a fair and easy complaint resolution process

The effect of the relationship fading stages on the fair and easy complaint process was non significant,  $F(3, 585) = 1.87$ ,  $p = .134$ . This result suggests that the different relationship fading stages do not have a significant effect on how customers perceive the complaint handling process as offered by the brand.

#### 6. DV: making terms and conditions and/or policies available and easy to understand

The effect of the relationship fading stages on making terms and conditions and/or policies available and easy to understand was non-significant,  $F(3, 585) = 0.37$ ,  $p =$

.779). This result suggests that the different relationship fading stages do not have a significant effect on how customers perceive this technique applied by the brand.

7. DV: providing information on what is available to a consumer (creating better access to information)

There was a statistically significant effect at the  $p < .05$  level of the relationship fading stages on providing information on what is available to a consumer (creating better access to information):  $F(3, 585) = 3.12, p = .026$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that there were no significant differences between groups, which may suggest that those differences are due to chance rather than due to the effect of the independent variable.

8. DV: creating an experience of feeling welcome and comfortable when interacting with the brand

The effect of the relationship fading stage on the brand creating an experience of feeling welcome and comfortable when consumer is interacting with the brand was non-significant,  $F(3, 585) = 2.44, p = .064$ . This result suggests that the different relationship fading stages do not have a significant effect on how consumers perceive this restoration technique.

9. DV: providing support and help with use of product or service

The effect of the relationship fading stages on the brand providing support and help with the use of product or service was non-significant,  $F(3, 585) = 1.78, p = .151$ . This result suggests that the different relationship fading stages do not have a significant

effect on how consumers perceive the brand providing support and help with the use of the product or service as a restoration technique.

10. DV: recognising mistakes, apologising for them and providing compensation

The effect of the relationship fading stages on the brand recognising mistakes, apologising for them and providing compensation was non-significant,  $F(3,585) = 0.75$ ,  $p = .525$ ). This result suggests that the different relationship fading stages do not have a significant effect on how consumers perceive the brand recognising mistakes, apologising for them and providing compensation.

11. DV: keeping promises made to the consumer

The effect of the relationship fading stages on the brand keeping promises made to the customer was non-significant,  $F(3,585) = 0.64$ ,  $p = .589$ ). This result suggests that the different relationship fading stages do not have a significant effect on how consumers perceive the brand keeping its promises made to the customer.

12.DV: meeting and discussing any issues with a representative of the brand in order to resolve it

The effect of the relationship fading stages on the customer meeting and discussing a problem with a representative of the brand in order to solve the problem was non-significant,  $F(3,585) = 1.11$ ,  $p = .344$ ). This result suggests that the different relationship fading stages do not have a significant effect on how the consumer perceives meeting and discussing a problem with a representative of the brand in order to solve the problem as less favourable or not dependent on the relationship fading stages.

The table below presents a summary of the results, in terms of consumers preference towards a particular restoration technique, conditional upon relationship fading stage.

**Table 17 Restoration efforts vs. relationship fading stage**

Restoration technique	Fading stage			
	Honeymoon (4) (no fading)	Disillusion (3)	Disaffection (2)	Crossroads (1)
promotions, offers, discounts sent via email or post by the brand	M = 5.01 <sup>a, b</sup> SD = 2.07	M = 5.24 <sup>a</sup> SD = 1.76	M = 4.93 <sup>a, b</sup> SD = 1.99	M = 3.79 <sup>b</sup> SD = 1.89
any form of correspondence recognising and thanking the consumer	M = 5.18 <sup>a</sup> SD = 1.73	M = 4.84 <sup>a</sup> SD = 1.71	M = 4.51 <sup>a, b</sup> SD = 2.06	M = 3.50 <sup>b</sup> SD = 2.18
personal phone call or email from the representative of the brand	M = 3.42 <sup>a</sup> SD = 1.99	M = 2.97 <sup>b</sup> SD = 1.93	M = 3.02 <sup>a, b</sup> SD = 2.19	M = 2.64 <sup>a, b</sup> SD = 1.60
creating an easily accessible method of sharing views and suggestions	M = 4.18 <sup>a</sup> SD = 1.80	M = 3.87 <sup>a, b</sup> SD = 1.75	M = 3.88 <sup>a, b</sup> SD = 2.10	M = 2.93 <sup>b</sup> SD = 2.02
creating better access to information (the effect is significant but there are no significant between groups differences)	M = 5.08 SD = 1.59	M = 4.79 SD = 1.63	M = 4.49 SD = 1.78	M = 4.29 SD = 1.69

Notes:

*Means with the same superscripts are not significantly different*

*Means with different superscripts are significantly different*

\* $p \leq .10$

## 6.6 Substudy 1

In addition to the main study, which aims to explore whether consumers have different preferences towards restoration techniques contingent upon the relationship stage, an additional substudy has been conducted. The goal of this study is to test if consumers in different industry sectors will have different preferences towards various restoration techniques applied by the brand. In this study the independent variable is the industry sector for the participants' chosen brands. This independent variable consists of four

different levels: the fashion sector, the banking sector, the supermarket sector and the groceries sector. In total, as in the previous substudy, there are 12 dependent variables, namely the different restoration efforts a brand could undertake to improve or maintain an existing relationship with a current customer. The dependent variables remain the same as in the main study. For each dependent variable, which were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, a separate ANOVA has been conducted.

Data has been divided into groups, representing different industry sectors. For the purpose of this substudy, a selection of four groups has been included. In total 345 people participated in this study. The groups (IVs) consisted of 84 participants in fashion industry, 25 in banking, 193 in supermarket, and 43 in groceries industry.

Multiple one-way between-groups ANOVAs were conducted to explore the impact of the relationship fading stage on the different restoration efforts as outlined in the previous subchapter. The different brands were grouped into sectors by the researcher: Group 1: fashion, Group 2: banking, Group 3: supermarket, Group 4: groceries.

1. DV: promotions, offers, discounts sent via email or post by the brand

There was a statistically significant effect at the  $p < .05$  level of the different sectors on promotion offers by post for the four conditions:  $F(3, 341) = 6.56, p = .000$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Group 1 ( $M = 5.76, SD = 1.47$ ) was significantly different from Group 2 ( $M = 4.20, SD = 1.96$ ). Furthermore, Group 2 was significantly different from Group 3 ( $M = 5.60, SD = 1.54$ ) and Group 4 ( $M = 5.42, SD = 1.82$ ). Group 3 and Group 4 did not differ significantly from each other. Taken together, these results suggest that the different sectors have a significant effect on how customers perceive promotion offers by post as offered by

their chosen brands. Specifically the results suggest that consumers in the fashion sector perceive promotion offers by post as more favourable than those consumers in the banking sector. Additionally, consumers in the banking sector perceive promotion offers by post as less appealing than those consumers in the supermarket sector.

2. DV: any form of correspondence recognising the participant as a valued customer and thanking them for being a customer of the brand

The effect of the different sectors on recognition/correspondence was non-significant,  $F(3, 341) = 1.45, p = .228$ . This result suggests that the different sector groups do not have a significant effect on how customers perceive the complaint handling process as offered by the firm.

3. DV: personal phone call or email from the representative of the brand asking about participant's experience with the brand and how it could be improved

There was a statistically significant effect at the  $p < .05$  level of the different sectors on the personal phone call for the four conditions:  $F(3, 341) = 5.26, p = .001$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Group 1 ( $M = 4.24, SD = 1.92$ ) was significantly different from Group 3 ( $M = 2.99, SD = 1.86$ ) and Group 4 ( $M = 2.53, SD = 1.89$ ). Group 3 ( $M = 2.99, SD = 1.86$ ) and Group 4 ( $M = 2.53, SD = 1.89$ ) did not differ significantly from each other and neither from Group 1 ( $M = 3.40, SD = 1.94$ ). In summary, these results suggest that the sector groups have a significant effect on how customers perceive personal phone calls by their chosen brand. In particular, the results suggest that consumers in the banking sector perceive personal phone calls as more favourable than those consumers in the supermarket and groceries sector.

4. DV: creating an easily accessible method of sharing views and suggestions

The effect of the relationship fading stages on the (easy) complaint process was non significant,  $F(3, 341) = 1.56, p = .198$ . This result suggests that the different sector groups do not have a significant effect on how customers perceive sharing views and/or suggestions as offered by the brand.

5. DV: creating a fair and easy complaint resolution process

The effect of the relationship fading stages on the (easy) complaint process was non-significant,  $F(3, 341) = 0.96, p = .412$ . This result suggests that the different sector groups do not have a significant effect on how consumers perceive the complaint handling process as offered by the brand.

6. DV: making terms and conditions and/or policies available and easy to understand

There was a statistically significant effect at the  $p < .05$  level of the different sectors on the availability and comprehensiveness of brand's terms and conditions/processes for the four conditions:  $F(3, 341) = 4.05, p = .008$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Group 2 ( $M = 5.00, SD = 1.63$ ) was significantly different from Group 4 ( $M = 3.35, SD = 2.19$ ). Group 3 ( $M = 4.02, SD = 1.85$ ) and Group 4 did not differ significantly from each other and neither from Group 2 ( $M = 4.08, SD = 1.92$ ). Taken together, these results suggest that the sector groups have a significant effect on how customers perceive the availability and comprehensiveness of their chosen brand's terms and conditions/processes. Specifically, the results suggest that consumers in the banking sector perceive the availability and comprehensiveness of the brand's terms and conditions and/or policies as more favourable than those consumers in the groceries sector.

7. DV: providing information on what is available to a consumer (creating better access to information)

There was a statistically significant effect at the  $p < .05$  level of the different sectors on the brand's provision of information on what is available to the customers for the four conditions:  $F(3, 341) = 4.83, p = .003$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Group 1 ( $M = 5.11, SD = 1.64$ ) was significantly different from Group 4 ( $M = 4.16, SD = 1.75$ ). Furthermore, Group 2 ( $M = 5.32, SD = 1.38$ ) was significantly different from Group 4. Additionally, Group 4 and Group 3 ( $M = 5.03, SD = 1.42$ ) did also differ significantly from each other. Taken together, these results suggest that the sector groups have a significant effect on how customers perceive their brand's provision of information on what is available to the consumers. In particular, the results suggest that consumers in the groceries sector perceive the brand's provision of information on what is available to them as consumers less favourably than those consumers in the fashion, banking and supermarket sector.

8. DV: creating an experience of feeling welcome and comfortable when interacting with the brand

The effect of the sector groups on the brand creating an experience for the customer of feeling welcome and comfortable when interacting with each other was non-significant,  $F(3,341) = 0.33, p = .802$ . This result suggests that the different sectors do not have a significant effect on how consumers perceive the creating an experience for the customer of feeling welcome and comfortable when interacting with each other.

9. DV: providing support and help with use of product or service

There was a statistically significant effect at the  $p < .05$  level of the different sectors on the brand providing support and help with the use of product or service for the four

conditions:  $F(3, 341) = 4.17, p = .006$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Group 2 ( $M = 5.28, SD = 1.28$ ) was significantly different from Group 4 ( $M = 3.93, SD = 1.96$ ). Group 3 ( $M = 4.79, SD = 1.65$ ) was also significantly different from Group 4. Group 4 and Group 1 ( $M = 4.73, SD = 1.72$ ) did not differ significantly from each other. Taken together, these results suggest that the sector groups have a significant effect on how customers perceive the brand providing support and help with use of product or service. In particular, the results suggest that consumers in the groceries sector perceive providing support and help with use of product or service as less favourable than those consumers in the banking and supermarket sector.

#### 10. DV: recognising mistakes, apologising for them and providing compensation

The effect of the sector groups on the brand recognising mistakes, apologising for them and providing compensation was non-significant,  $F(3,341) = 1.55, p = .202$ . This result suggests that the different sectors do not have a significant effect on how consumers perceive the recognising mistakes, apologising for them and providing compensation by the brand.

#### 11. DV: keeping promises made to the consumer

The effect of the sector groups on the brand keeping promises made to the customer was non-significant,  $F(3,341) = 0.63, p = .599$ . This result suggests that the different sectors do not have a significant effect on how consumers perceive the keeping promises made to the customer restoration effort applied by the brand.

12.DV: meeting and discussing any issues with a representative of the brand in order to resolve it

There was a statistically significant effect at the  $p < .05$  level of the different sectors on the customer meeting and discussing a problem with a representative of the brand in order to resolve the problem for the four conditions:  $F(3, 341) = 6.82, p = .000$ . Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Group 2 ( $M = 5.56, SD = 1.36$ ) was significantly different from Group 1 ( $M = 4.44, SD = 1.75$ ), Group 3 ( $M = 4.04, SD = 1.84$ ) and Group 4 ( $M = 3.67, SD = 2.09$ ). Group 1, 3 and 4 did not differ significantly from each other. Taken together, these results suggest that the sector groups have a significant effect on how customers perceive meeting and discussing a problem with a representative of the brand in order to resolve the problem. Specifically the results suggest that consumers in the banking sector perceive meeting and discussing a problem with a representative of the brand in order to resolve the problem as more favourable than those consumers in the fashion, groceries and supermarket sector.

The table below presents a summary of the results, in terms of consumers preference towards a particular restoration technique, conditional upon the industry sector

**Table 18 Restoration efforts vs. industry sector**

Restoration technique	Industry sector			
	Fashion (1)	Banking (2)	Supermarket (3)	Groceries (4)
promotions, offers, discounts sent via email or post by the brand	M = 4.20 <sup>a</sup> SD = 1.96	M = 5.76 <sup>b</sup> SD = 1.47	M = 5.60 <sup>c</sup> SD = 1.54	M = 5.42 <sup>d</sup> SD = 1.82
personal phone call or email from the representative of the brand	M = 3.40 <sup>a</sup> SD = 1.94	M = 4.24 <sup>c</sup> SD = 1.92	M = 2.99 <sup>d</sup> SD = 1.86	M = 2.53 <sup>b</sup> SD = 1.89
making terms and conditions and/or policies available and easy to understand	M = 4.08 <sup>a, b, c</sup> SD = 1.92	M = 5.00 <sup>a</sup> SD = 1.63	M = 4.02 <sup>b</sup> SD = 1.85	M = 3.35 <sup>c</sup> SD = 2.19
creating better access to information	M = 5.32 <sup>c</sup> SD = 1.38	M = 5.11 <sup>a</sup> SD = 1.64	M = 5.03 <sup>d</sup> SD = 1.42	M = 4.16 <sup>b</sup> SD = 1.75
providing support and help with use of product or service	M = 5.28 <sup>c</sup> SD = 1.28	M = 4.73 <sup>a, b, c</sup> SD = 1.72	M = 4.79 <sup>a</sup> SD = 1.65	M = 3.93 <sup>b</sup> SD = 1.96
meeting and discussing any issues with a representative	M = 5.56 <sup>a</sup> SD = 1.36	M = 4.44 <sup>b</sup> SD = 1.75	M = 4.04 <sup>c</sup> SD = 1.84	M = 3.67 <sup>d</sup> SD = 2.09

Notes:

*Means with the same superscripts are not significantly different*

*Means with different superscripts are significantly different*

\* $p \leq .10$

## 6.7 Discussion

Based on the results from the main study it can be concluded that the restoration techniques “brand keeping promises made to the customer” and “brand recognising mistakes, apologising for them and providing compensation” are always favoured highly by consumers, regardless of the relationship fading stage. This is an interesting finding as companies could employ these two restoration techniques without having to be aware of their individual customer’s relationship stage. Another set of overall highly rated restoration techniques is: brand keeps its promises made to the customer,

recognises mistakes made and furthermore apologises for them and provides compensation to the customer. The second key finding from this study is that promotion efforts by post are more preferred by consumers in the disillusion stage than by customers in the crossroads stage. Furthermore, the results indicate that recognition/correspondence is seen as less favourable by consumers in the crossroads stage than by customers in the disillusion and disaffection stage. For the personal phone call restoration effort it was found that this is preferred less by customers in the disillusion stage compared to consumers in the honeymoon-no fading stage. For sharing views and/or suggestions the results show that people in the crossroads stage view the restoration effort as less favourable than consumers in the honeymoon-no fading stage. Even though there were no differences found between the other groups for all other restoration efforts the results give an indication of that restoration effort techniques are perceived differently by customers dependent on the relationship fading stages they are in with their brands.

Based on the results from the substudy it can be concluded that the restoration techniques “brand keeping promises made to the customer”, “promotion efforts by post” and “brand recognising mistakes, apologising for them and providing compensation” are consistently favoured highly by consumers, regardless of the specific sectors the firms are operating in. However, the results also indicate that “promotion offers by post” are perceived as more favourable by consumers in the fashion and supermarket sector compared to customers in the banking sector. This indicates that even though the restoration technique “promotion efforts by post” is highly rated by customers across sectors, customers in the banking sector seem to view this restoration technique as slightly less favourable than customers in the fashion and supermarket sector.

Interestingly, consumers in the banking sector perceive personal phone calls more favourable than the supermarket and groceries sector customers. Compared to the

groceries sector customers in the banking sector also perceive the availability and comprehensiveness of the brand's terms and conditions/processes as more persuasive. Furthermore, customers in the banking sector also seem to favour meeting with a representative and discussing a problem with in order to resolve the problem to customers in the fashion, supermarket and groceries sector.

The results also indicate that consumers in the groceries sector perceive the restoration efforts "the brand providing support and help with use of the product or service" as less favourable than customers in the banking and supermarket sector. Additionally it was found that the restoration effort "the brand's provision of information on what is available to the consumers" is regarded as less positive by customers in the groceries sector compared to the consumers in the other three sectors, namely fashion, supermarket and banking. For the other restoration efforts there were no significant differences found among the different sectors. Based on the above results it can also be concluded that restoration efforts as used by a brand seem to be more effective in the banking industry as compared to the supermarket, fashion and groceries sector.

## **6.8 Limitations and future research**

This study has limitations. Due to the fact that the data was collected by means of a questionnaire and by asking consumers about their perceptions about various restoration efforts at different stages of their relationships, the causal effect cannot be observed. The purpose of this study was only to draw attention to the phenomenon of relationship restoration techniques and their potential effects. In order to truly test the effects of the restoration effects on the strength of the relationship, contingent upon relationship stage, an experiment should be designed and implemented. Therefore, it is

recommended that the follow-up research will consider experimental design in order to evaluate those relationships explored in this study.

## **7. Chapter 7: General Discussion and Conclusions**

### **7.1 Introduction**

In this chapter a synthesis of the three studies presented in chapters four, five and six is presented. The discussion reflects the overall context and research objective of the thesis. In the first part of this chapter each individual objective will be discussed in the context of the study conducted. Secondly, a summary of the findings will be discussed in the context of the overarching thesis aim. In the third section managerial and theoretical implications are discussed. The chapter concludes by discussion of future research directions and providing a general conclusion.

### **7.2 Objective 1: Study 1**

The objective of the first study conducted in this thesis was *to identify the boundary conditions of relationship fading in the business-to-consumer context*. Based on the findings from the study a number of boundary conditions have been identified. Those boundary conditions increase or decrease the likelihood of fading. As a result, this study makes a contribution not only to developing the understanding of the phenomenon of relationship fading in business-to-consumer context, but also in the area of consumer-brand relationships. Knowledge about the type of consumer and what circumstances lead to increased chances of fading in a relationship is useful also in the area of relationship marketing. In practice, the findings give managers useful insights as to how current consumer relationship practices could be improved. As a result this investigation, the objective set in this study has been achieved.

### **7.3 Objective 2: Study 2**

The objective of the second study conducted in this thesis was *to investigate the trajectory of relationship fading and to uncover the main predictors of the relationship stage*. The results of the study have uncovered a number of important predictors of relationship fading stage. More importantly, they have confirmed that the three groups of factors: time related factors, individual factors and situational factors are all individually relevant to predicting relationship fading stage. Two out of three hypotheses were supported, whereby only the claim that consumer's personality, based on an example of neuroticism, will predict the stage has not found support. In the process of building a parsimonious model individual factors have been found to have a significant effect on predicting relationship stage. Therefore, it is concluded that the objective of this study has been achieved and the results do contribute to the main overall objective of the thesis, namely to gaining a better understanding of the relationship fading phenomenon.

### **7.4 Objective 3: Study 3**

The objective of the third study conducted in this thesis was *to explore and describe restoration techniques in the relationship fading process*. Literature in the area of marital relationships recognises the fact that maintenance and restoration techniques are important factors in preserving the stability in a relationship. As a result, this study aimed to explore whether a variety of restoration techniques applied in the context of consumer-brand relationships would also have positive effects. Consumers in various (self-selected) relationship stages evaluated various types or restoration techniques and based on the results it has been concluded that for consumers in some stages of the relationship some specific restoration techniques seem more favoured than others. By the means of conducting a substudy, an answer to the question whether there is a

difference in preferences towards various types of restoration techniques contingent upon the industry sector the brand belonged to, has been sought. It can be concluded that significant differences have been found between industry sectors in terms of consumer preference towards different types of restoration techniques. Based on those findings, it is recommended that further investigation into this topic is applied. As a result, it can be concluded that the objective of this study has been achieved. In addition, the knowledge gained from this study also contributes to achieving the overall objective of the thesis, which is to gain a better understanding of the relationship fading phenomenon.

## **7.5 Integration of findings**

Definition of the phenomenon of relationship fading in the business-to-consumer context describes fading as a process which leads a consumer through a gradual loss of intention to continue a relationship (Evanschitzky et al. 2012). Negative feelings experienced by the consumer and reduced frequency of interactions are the most prominent manifestations of the fading process. Fading process is divided into three stages: disillusion, disaffection and crossroads. Those stages reflect closely the relationship disaffection process from the marital literature (Kersten 1990). Due to the fact that not only is the relationship fading a complex construct, but also because of the fact that its characteristics point out that the process of fading forms almost a 'natural' part of the relationship dynamics, fading may help to elucidate the 'unexplained' occurrences of relationship dissolutions and consumer defections. However, in order to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon of relationship fading, in addition to what is already known about fading, this thesis offers three new areas in which fading has been further explored.

Based on the findings from the first study the type of consumer and circumstances in which fading is more likely to occur has been identified. Secondly, an initial step towards uncovering the predictors of the relationship fading stage has been made. Lastly, building on the importance of applying appropriate maintenance and restoration techniques at different relationship stages, restoration efforts have been explored. Findings suggest that there are differences between the preferences towards restoration techniques at various stages of fading, which should be taken into consideration in further research. Overall, the findings support the importance of the phenomenon of relationship fading by looking at these three different contexts in which fading was further explored. The marketing literature and the marital disaffection literature have both helped to explain how the relationship fading develops. Especially the marital disaffection process has been demonstrated to be analogous to the fading process, through its three-stage development over time. Additionally, the triggers although in different contexts, also do seem to occur in both situations, which can be explained by the fact that fading applies to some strong consumer-brand relationships.

## **7.6 Implications for Theory**

According to the service profit chain, satisfied customers remain loyal to a company (Heskett et al. 1994) and satisfaction should guarantee a long-term successful relationship between the two parties (Bolton 1998; Churchill and Surprenant 1982). It has been observed, however, that satisfied customers still defect from organizations (Bolton 1998). Some obstacles to loyalty creation are reported as consumer's variety seeking, multiband loyalty or withdrawal from the product category – they all result in 'disloyalty', however they do not equal customer dissatisfaction (Oliver 1999). One of the prevailing views in literature indicates that direct responsibility to the defection rates should be assigned to service failures. Service failures, however, are also not entirely responsible for defections. Those streams in marketing literature focus on a variety of

aspects leading to switching behaviour, however they do have their limitation and do not provide full explanations of the undergoing processes. The past literature does introduce the concept of fading relationships (e.g. Akerlund 2005, Evanschitzky et al. 2011, Renstrom 2014) whereby an attempt is made to define a fading relationship and explain what happens throughout such a process. This thesis extends those findings by providing a wider spectrum of insights, focusing on identifying conditions affecting the process dynamics at the individual, dyadic and contextual level. Secondly it provides insights into differences between fading stages and how those stages can be predicted, which potentially could be a useful finding especially for managers of consumer-brand relationships. Thirdly it also differentiates from the service failure and recovery literature that suggest relationship management once the failure has occurred. The finding of this thesis offer a different focus, recommending application of suitable restoration efforts, before a failure occurs.

Very often the literature focuses on the actual switching moment but rarely on what happens before switching. Not all relationships end abruptly but some do dissolve gradually, which supports the claim that not all defections are a result of service failure or a negative incident. Customer retention is clearly of value to companies (Reicheld et al. 2000), and since satisfaction alone does not ensure happy and ongoing relationships, customer retention strategies should be obtained via other avenues.

The thesis also provides an idea on how customer churn can be managed and adds insights into this literature stream. The literature suggests that one way to manage consumer churn is to predict what customers are most likely to defect and apply incentives in order to persuade them to stay (Neslin et al. 2006). The findings from the thesis, however, suggest that at some point in the relationship, specifically crossroads, consumers do not perceive restoration techniques positively and it may be that they have already been lost. Further enforcement of a variety of incentives may either be a short-term solution or may even more annoy those consumers, making recapturing those lost consumers extremely difficult in the future. Relationship maintenance should

be indeed carried out in order to repair it (Jones et al. 2011) but should be done continuously rather than on a one-off basis, often when it may already be too late.

By providing a better understanding of the phenomenon of relationship fading, this thesis adds a contribution to the understanding of the unexplained defections and relationship terminations. Based on the analogies drawn from the interpersonal literature (Booth and Johnson 1988, Cramer 1993, Eysenck 1980, Hill and Peplau 1998; Huston and Houts 1998; Kelly and Conley 1987; Kurdek 1993), by theorizing individual, relational, and contextual factors explored in the form the third study it is established that different types of consumers or situational factors can have an influence on how a relationship evolves. Based on those findings it is possible to identify those consumers who are more or less likely to stay in a long-term relationship. It can also be confirmed that by analogy to the marital literature, there are differences in how consumers in different stages of a relationship perceive various restoration techniques applied by a brand (Kersten 1990). Additionally, it is suggested that maintenance efforts should not only be applied in situations of service failure but throughout the duration of the relationship.

## **7.7 Managerial Implications**

High rates of defection and unexplained relationship termination may cause issues for companies, as it has been acknowledged that relationships between a company and their customers is pivotal for existence and success of businesses (Bendapudi and Berry 1997). Companies usually find out about an issue only once the consumer has made their decision and brought it to life. Moreover, it may seem that consumers sometimes defect without a clear reason. It appears therefore that customers somewhat naturally fade from organisations. The relationship marketing literature highlights the importance of maintaining relationships with consumers, points out a

number of strategies and resources that when used, should ensure consumers are retained. Nevertheless, consumers do defect. As a result, relationship fading as a new way of looking at relationship dynamics, at the process of how relationships evolve over time, triggering the potential switch, may be of great interest to the managers. Based on the **first study**, a number of aspects has been identified and categorised, highlighting what type of consumer is more prone to fading in a relationship. Managers could identify which consumers are, for example, neurotic, which seems to be one of the main aspects of them fading in a relationship. Neuroticism and impulsiveness make a consumer less emotionally stable and similarly to other interpersonal relationship, may have an influence on how events are interpreted and acted upon. Managers by getting to know the personality traits of their consumers may be able to determine whether they are more prone to develop in the fading process sooner and apply suitable strategies as a result of this examination. Furthermore, relational characteristics could also shed light on the groups of consumers more likely to fade. Especially, if dissimilarities in values, beliefs and attitudes are discovered, managers could also expect a more likely gradual decline in the relationship to occur. Equally important appear to be the numerous contextual characteristics, which again could potentially be decisive for a long lasting relationship. Specifically, it has been found that different types of pressures (personal circumstances, peer pressure), as well as rushed decisions may lead to consumers being more prone to experiencing the fading. It seems appropriate to ask the consumer how they chose a brand or where they have heard about it, as it is a common practice nowadays. It seems, however, that this kind of information may shed more light on the relationship than only confirm the positive word-of-mouth. If a negative disconfirmation occurs, consumers may realise that they have made a choice not suited for their needs but motivated by someone else, and as a result fade in the relationship sooner.

Findings from the **study two** could also be used by managers. The fading process is characterised by three distinct stages. Each of those stages is described by specific

feelings, thoughts and behaviours a consumer experiences. Based on objectively measuring those, the fading stage could be determined. Alternatively, consumers could be asked to “self-select” a stage they feel best represented the current state of their relationship. It would help managers keep track of how they are doing and what they could potentially expect as a next step. Although those are only early stages of looking at relationship trajectory, the switching matrix presented in study two clearly indicates that almost 40% of all relationships have moved at least one stage which supports the idea of fading being a dynamic relationship. Additionally, it appears that fading is not only limited to movement towards dissolution but can also occur backward, which is a positive finding, suggesting that if some “positive” things happen, the relationship can actually be revived. It has also been found that the recent past stage will also influence how consumers will see their relationship. This should not be ignored and it may be that consumers in some stages will have other needs than in others. To some extent this has been confirmed by study three when discussing the restoration efforts and their suitability dependent on the fading stage. The overall experience evaluation over time has also been found to have an impact on what stage consumers find themselves in. It may be an indicator for managers that positive reinforcements and experiences are necessary in order to provide an overall positive evaluation of the relationship.

**Study three** may be of particular interest to managers, as the results suggest that different restoration efforts may be seen more favourably depending on what stage a consumer find themselves in. It seems, for example, that if a consumer is in crossroads stage they do not consider promotions, offers, or discounts to be helping and strengthening their relationship. A lot of resources are utilised by companies to encourage consumers to repurchase but it appears that in some instances the money spent can simply be lost as it does not seem to create the desired effect. Similarly, recognition correspondence seems to be well received by consumers in honeymoon stage (no fading), but much less favourably by those in crossroads stage, which again can point out how the resources should be allocated.

Exploring further and providing new insights into the understanding of the relationship fading process gives companies a chance to understand what causes defections. Based on the relationship fading trajectory, companies can understand how relationships with consumers evolve over time and what are the greatest determinants of the stages. Being able to predict a stage might be helpful in terms of planning valuable resources. Additionally, being able to identify a stage can be applied in the context of effective use of restoration techniques, whereby a specific restoration technique could be applied contingent upon the fading stage, as well as the industry sector.

### **7.8 Future research**

It is suggested that future research should address the following issues. In the context of the **first study**, boundary conditions, the future research could look into interactions between the various conditions in order to test how the effect changes. Additionally, the study could be extended by investigating the more positive elements in terms of individual, relational and contextual characteristics, and providing insights on their effect on the fading likelihood.

Based on the results from the **second study**, further analysis should be conducted in order to uncover other predictors of the fading stage. Building on that, a useful further research could look into the drivers of the movement between stages as it has been observed that consumers move into both directions (more advanced and also early stages) of the relationship fading process. From a different perspective, a short questionnaire could be designed in order to help managers determine the relationship fading stage. Based on the objective (rather than self-selected) knowledge of relationship fading stage, suitable maintenance techniques could be applied, as well as future stage potentially determined.

To follow on the **third study**, the future research suggestion is to run an experimental study in order to investigate whether restoration efforts could be applied effectively at various stages of the fading process. The limitation of this research is that the study is designed as exploratory descriptive and in order for it to present the real effects of each of the restoration efforts and ensure that enough participants are present in each of the stages and per restoration technique, an experimental design should be applied.

## **7.9 Conclusion**

The findings from the three studies support the claim that relationship fading is an important phenomenon present in the relationship marketing literature whose significance should not be underestimated. The aim of this thesis was to better understand the phenomenon of fading and that was realised by conducting the three studies. The new aspects that have been investigated add to the existing knowledge about this approach towards defection and switching. However, more research is needed in order to further examine the process and more precisely help to envisage the relationship trajectory.

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## **Appendix 1: Email invitation and study description**

### **Information letter and invitation to be interviewed**

Dear

This letter is an invitation to participate in a research study I am conducting as part of my doctoral degree in the Marketing Department at Aston University under the supervision of Dr A. Farrell, Prof H. Evanschitzky and Dr K. Pillai.

The project's title is "Relationship Fading in Business-to-Consumer Context. I would like to provide you with more information about it and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.

The objective of this research is to explain the phenomenon of relationship fading in a business-to-consumer (B2C) context and to identify the circumstances under which this process occurs. Fading relates to a gradual decline in consumers' willingness to continue a relationship with a brand or a company/service provider. Therefore, understanding the phenomenon of relationship fading may help to explain the relationship dissolution and customer defection many firms are nowadays experiencing.

Participation in the study involves an interview. If you decide to participate, you will be asked before the interview to identify at least one brand (company, service provider) with which you used to have a strong relationship in the past. At present you may still be using this brand(s) or you may have ended the relationship with them.

Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately 30 minutes and will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences by advising the researcher. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. After the interview has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points. All information you provide is considered completely confidential.

Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study. However, with your permission anonymous quotations may be used. Data collected during this study will be retained until the conclusion of this research. Only the researcher and her supervisors will have access to the data. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at 077 2551 2299 or by e-mail at pokorja1@aston.ac.uk.

Thank you very much in advance for your interest and assistance with this research. I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,  
Joanna Pokorska

The following consent form will be presented to you before the interview.

---

**Personal Interview**  
**PARTICIPATING PARTIES CONSENT FORM**

---

*On behalf of the interviewed party:*

I agree to be interviewed by Joanna Pokorska for the purposes of her research study and consent to the collection and use of my opinions and information in the thesis and research paper. I am also aware that the findings derived from this study will be published in the Aston University library.

I have been informed of the purposes of the research and the confidentiality conditions. **I understand that none of the opinions or statements that I make during the interview will be attributed to me personally**, and that I may withdraw from the research at any stage.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

- Yes, I would like a copy of the final research paper sent to me  
(*please tick*)

*On behalf of the interviewer:*

I agree that the information collected during the interview will only be available to the researcher, Joanna Pokorska, and her supervisors, Dr A. Farrell, Prof H. Evanschitzky and Dr K. Pillai. At the conclusion of the research project, the interview recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed.

Name: Joanna Pokorska

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2: Participating parties consent form

### Personal Interview PARTICIPATING PARTIES CONSENT FORM

*On behalf of the interviewed party:*

I agree to be interviewed by Joanna Pokorska for the purposes of her research study and consent to the collection and use of my opinions and information in the thesis and research paper. I am also aware that the findings derived from this study will be published in the Aston University library.

I have been informed of the purposes of the research and the confidentiality conditions. **I understand that none of the opinions or statements that I make during the interview will be attributed to me personally**, and that I may withdraw from the research at any stage.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

- Yes, I would like a copy of the final research paper sent to me  
(please tick)

*On behalf of the interviewer:*

I agree that the information collected during the interview will only be available to the researcher, Joanna Pokorska, and her supervisors, Dr A. Farrell, Prof H. Evanschitzky and Dr K. Pillai. At the conclusion of the research project, the interview recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed.

Name: Joanna Pokorska

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### What is your age?

- 18 to 21
- 22 to 25
- 26 to 30
- 31 to 40
- 41 to 50
- 51 to 60
- 61 or older

### What is your gender?

- Female
- Male

### How well do the following statements describe your personality?

I see myself as someone who...

	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Disagree a little	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree a little	Agree	Agree strongly
<b>a.</b> ...is reserved	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>b.</b> ...is generally trusting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>c.</b> ...tends to be lazy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>d.</b> ...is relaxed, handles stress well	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>e.</b> ...has few artistic interests	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>f.</b> ...is outgoing, sociable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>g.</b> ...tends to find fault with others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>h.</b> ...does a thorough job	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>i.</b> ...gets nervous easily	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>j.</b> ...has an active imagination	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### **Appendix 3. Interview question schedule**

1. Can you tell me about a brand you used to interact with frequently and used to have strong feelings about? Tell me your story – from the beginning till now.
2. How was the relationship at the beginning? Can you elaborate on it?
3. How would you describe the brand back then? What were its characteristics? Traits?
4. How did those characteristics changed over time?
5. Can you describe your own personality?
6. *Do you think there is a fit between the brand and you? How was it over time?*  
Do you think the brand represents similar associations, values to your own?
7. What was the motivation that made you choose the brand in the first place?  
How did you make this choice?
8. And what do you think made you loose interest in the brand?
9. Do you think the relationship with the brand can be improved? What would need to happen? How?
10. Have you taken any actions to improve this relationship? OR: How do you think you could improve the relationship?
11. Has there been an improvement following this?

## Appendix 4: Study 2 web-based consumer diary (questionnaire)

1. Please enter your candidate number in the box below.

All data collected in this diary will be held anonymously and securely. No personal data is asked for or retained. Cookies, personal data stored by your Web browser, are not used in this online diary.

Please enter your email address in the box below. Please note that email addresses will only be used in order to contact the winners. *(Optional)*

2. From the list below, please confirm the name of The Brand you have been reporting on in the previous entries of The Individual Consumer Experience Diary.

Select an answer ▾

If you selected Other, please specify:

3. In the below box, please describe your interaction(s) with The Brand (interaction means any form of contact with The Brand) that took place since the last diary entry in April 2013. Provide details on the interaction(s), for example what precisely it involved, what were the reasons for it, how did you feel following the interaction, how many times did you use The Brand etc. In order to best reflect on your experience with The Brand, provide as many details as possible. *(Optional)*

**4.** How frequently do you currently interact with The Brand?

- a few times a day
- once a day
- a few times a week
- once a week
- once every two weeks
- once a month

**5.** On a scale from 1 to 7, to what extent has The Brand met your expectations? A ranking of 1 indicates that it has not met at all your expectations. A ranking of 7 indicates that it completely exceeded your expectations.

- 1 - not met at all my expectations
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 - completely exceeded my expectations

**6.** On a scale from 1 to 7, if you could, how likely would you now be to switch to another brand? A ranking of 1 indicates that you would be extremely unlikely to switch to another brand. A ranking of 7 indicates that you would be extremely likely.

- 1 - Extremely unlikely
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 - Extremely likely

**7.** Please choose from the options below, the description that most closely reflects the current state of your relationship with The Brand.

- A: I am fascinated by and excited with the experience I've had with The Brand. I am highly satisfied with and committed to The Brand and intend to use The Brand continuously in the future.
- B: Although I do not use The Brand as frequently as I used to, I am still in a good relationship with The Brand and intend to use it.
- C: I am disappointed with The Brand because of several minor unfavourable events that occurred over time. I thought The Brand would be better than that. Although I feel I lost my trust for The Brand, I will continue using it for the moment.
- D: My relationship with The Brand is now different from how it used to be. Things have changed over time and because of little incidents that have been occurring I feel a lack of motivation to stay with The Brand and have started looking for alternatives. I feel uncomfortable and frustrated. I use The Brand less and less nowadays.
- E: I am currently considering what to do about my relationship with The Brand because of the negative experience I've had. I feel I need to change something immediately. Either I will end the relationship or approach The Brand and tell them about the problem and my frustration.
- F: I am disappointed with The Brand. I don't feel attached to it any longer. Despite that, I will continue using The Brand without changing anything.

**8.** On a scale from 1 to 7, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. A ranking of 1 indicates that you strongly disagree with the statement. A ranking of 7 indicates that you strongly agree.

	1 - Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 - Strongly Agree
<b>a.</b> My relationship with The Brand is close.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>b.</b> When I don't use The Brand, I miss it a great deal.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>c.</b> The Brand and I have a strong connection.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>d.</b> I'm sure of my relationship with The Brand.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>e.</b> The Brand is a priority in my life.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>f.</b> I think about The Brand a lot.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>g.</b> My relationship with The Brand is important in my life.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>h.</b> I consider The Brand when making important decisions.	<input type="radio"/>						

**9.** On a scale from 1 to 7, choose the one alternative that best describes your thoughts about The Brand.

- 1 Poor Value
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 Excellent Value

**10.** On a scale from 1 to 7, choose the one alternative that best describes your thoughts about The Brand.

- 1 I would not purchase/use The Brand
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 I would purchase/use The Brand

**11.** On a scale from 1 to 7, choose the one alternative that best describes your thoughts about The Brand.

- 1 Extremely poorly made
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 Extremely well made

**12.** On a scale from 1 to 7, choose the one alternative that best describes your thoughts about The Brand.

- 1 Boring
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 Exciting

**13.** On a scale from 1 to 7, choose the one alternative that best describes your thoughts about The Brand.

- 1 Not a worthwhile product/service
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7 A worthwhile product/service

**14.** On a scale from 1 to 7, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. A ranking of 1 indicates that you strongly disagree with the statement. A ranking of 7 indicates that you strongly agree.

	1 - Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 - Strongly Agree
<b>a.</b> The Brand delivers what it promises.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>b.</b> The Brand's product/service claims are believable.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>c.</b> Over time, my experiences with The Brand have led me to expect it to keep its promises, no more and no less.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>d.</b> The Brand has a name you can trust.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>e.</b> The Brand doesn't pretend to be something it isn't.	<input type="radio"/>						

**15.** On a scale from 1 to 7, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. A ranking of 1 indicates that you strongly disagree with the statement. A ranking of 7 indicates that you strongly agree.

	1 - Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 - Strongly Agree
<b>a.</b> I am really attached to The Brand.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>b.</b> I stick with The Brand because I know it is best for me.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>c.</b> I am committed to The Brand.	<input type="radio"/>						

**16.** On a scale from 1 to 7, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. A ranking of 1 indicates that you strongly disagree with the statement. A ranking of 7 indicates that you strongly agree.

	1 - Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 - Strongly Agree
<b>a.</b> I intend to use The Brand in the near future.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>b.</b> I would actively search for The Brand in order to buy/use it.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>c.</b> I intend to buy/use other products/services of The Brand.	<input type="radio"/>						

**17.** On a scale from 1 to 7, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. A ranking of 1 indicates that you strongly disagree with the statement. A ranking of 7 indicates that you strongly agree.

	1 - Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 - Strongly Agree
<b>a.</b> The Brand can be relied on to keep its promises.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>b.</b> The Brand puts the customer's interest first.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>c.</b> The Brand usually keeps the promise it makes to me.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>d.</b> I can count on The Brand to provide a good service.	<input type="radio"/>						

**18.** On a scale from 1 to 7, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. A ranking of 1 indicates that you strongly disagree with the statement. A ranking of 7 indicates that you strongly agree.

	1 - Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 - Strongly Agree
<b>a.</b> Changing The Brand would be a bother.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>b.</b> For me, the cost in time, effort, and grief to switch from The Brand is high.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>c.</b> It's just not worth the hassle for me to switch from The Brand.	<input type="radio"/>						

**19.** On a scale from 1 to 7, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. A ranking of 1 indicates that you strongly disagree with the statement. A ranking of 7 indicates that you strongly agree.

	1 - Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 - Strongly Agree
<b>a.</b> I am happy with my decision to use The Brand.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>b.</b> My choice of The Brand was a wise one.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>c.</b> I feel good about my decision to use the Brand.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>d.</b> Taking everything into consideration, how do you feel about the service you received from The Brand?	<input type="radio"/>						

**20.** On a scale from 1 to 7, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. A ranking of 1 indicates that you strongly disagree with the statement. A ranking of 7 indicates that you strongly agree.

	1 - Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 - Strongly Agree
<b>a.</b> The Brand connects with the part of me that really makes me tick.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>b.</b> The Brand fits well with my current stage of life.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>c.</b> The Brand says a lot about the kind of person I would like to be.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>d.</b> Using The Brand lets me be a part of a shared community of like-minded consumers.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>e.</b> I have become very knowledgeable about The Brand.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>f.</b> The Brand makes a statement about what is important to me in my life.	<input type="radio"/>						

**21.** On a scale from 1 to 7, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. A ranking of 1 indicates that you strongly disagree with the statement. A ranking of 7 indicates that you strongly agree.

	1 - Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 - Strongly Agree
<b>a.</b> I like to try different things.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>b.</b> I like a great deal of variety.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>c.</b> I like new and different styles.	<input type="radio"/>						

**22.** On a scale from 1 to 7, please indicate how likely or unlikely are you to act in the way described in the following statements. A ranking of 1 indicates that you are very unlikely to act in a way described in the statement. A ranking of 7 indicates that you are very likely.

	1 - Very Unlikely	2	3	4	5	6	7 - Very Likely
<b>a.</b> To spread positive word of mouth about The Brand?	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>b.</b> To recommend The Brand to your friends.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>c.</b> If your friends were looking to purchase a product from the same category as The Brand or use a service from the same category as The Brand, you would tell them to try The Brand.	<input type="radio"/>						
<b>d.</b> To complain to The Brand about an incident if it occurs while interacting with The Brand.	<input type="radio"/>						