

The Flip Side of Commercial Friendships

Marit Oppen

*Inland School of Business and Social Sciences
Department of Business Administration
Granitveien 6, 2743 Harestua, Norway
marit.anti@inn.no*

ABSTRACT

When firms cultivate close relationships with customers, often called commercial friendships, they also introduce expectations of mutual altruism, although lower than when a relationship is perceived as a pure friendship. These strategies, in which the customer relationship only gives a semblance of friendship, but in essence is more a strategy with economic interests, is found to have devastating consequences. Due to the expectation of mutual altruism, self-interest-seeking behavior is considered a violation and a commercial friend now becomes a person who desires to seek revenge, spread negative word of mouth and dissolve the relationship.

JEL Classifications: A1, C, D0, D1, D7, D8

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I. INTRODUCTION

Cultivating close relationships with customers is a popular strategy with companies, and many researchers have made a strong case for this strategy (Wathne et al., 2001; Haytko, 2004). This strategy is seen by both scholars and practitioners as a potential asset that allows firms to reap a variety of benefits, and it is argued that the survival of an organization, as well as its competitive advantage in the market, is determined by these long-lasting and close relationships with consumers (Berry 1983; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Ravald and Grönroos, 1996). As a result, organizations are encouraging their sellers to “make friends, not transactions”, and to “treat your customers as best friends” (Grayson, 2007). However, despite the popularity of these strategies, there have been few in-depth studies about the nature and influences of these relationships from the consumer’s perspective (Haytko, 2004). Instead, the focus has mostly been on the importance of and ways to engage in these relationships from the perspective of the firm.

It is unclear how the combination of both friendship-like relationships and commercial interest within the same relationship is perceived from the customer’s perspective. Strategies that focus on developing friendships with customers, often called commercial friendship relationships, are assumed to be more than a strictly commercial relationship that focuses on parity value, standardization and repetition (Johnson and Selnes, 2004). They are different from the arms-length relationships that accompany discrete transactions, insofar as the latter does not focus on the social aspects (Macneil, 1980) that define friendship ties (Gwinner et al., 1998; Price and Arnould, 1999; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Gremler et al., 2001; Heide and Wathne, 2006; Grayson, 2007). Nevertheless, it might be argued that a commercial friendship is not a friendship because true friends are mutually altruistic and, therefore, they are expected to be unmotivated by benefits that can be used beyond the relationship (e.g. money and status). By contrast, commercial relationships are, by definition, at least partly driven by concerns that are self-interested in nature. Such strategies, in which the customer relationship only gives a semblance of friendship, might be more problematic than assumed.

For example, scholars have argued that when relationships with customers are personalized, norms related to other aspects of life are introduced (Elster, 1989; Price and Arnould, 1999; Grayson, 2007; Ariely, 2008). It is argued that mixing the expectations of commercial relationships with friendships could be a problematic amalgamation of norms that govern very different aspects of life (Price and Arnould, 1999; Grayson, 2007; Ariely, 2008). However, the consequences of such an amalgamation are unclear. While the literature has pointed to the potential for conflicting interests to arise out from the blending of norms that govern commercial relationships and norms that govern friendships, (Ariely, 2008; Grayson, 2007; Elster, 1989; Price and Arnould, 1999b), most of the focus has been on the importance of, and ways to engage in, commercial friendships.

The objective of this article is to examine and understand these relationships and their potential conflict within the context of business by using experiments as an empirical test of whether this can have an effect on business outcomes.

The study finds evidence that the blending is more problematic than previously assumed. The study finds that when developing customer relationships into commercial friendships, the company also develops social norms of mutual altruism that are stronger

than a strictly commercial relationship, but less than a friendship. A disturbing consequence of this is that self-interest-seeking behavior is considered a violation. When commercial friends discover a self-interest-seeking incident, they strike back by desiring to spread negative word of mouth (neg. WOM) and dissolving the relationship, as your commercial friend is now angry and desires revenge. By comparison, a friendship relationship also considers self-interest-seeking behavior to be a violation but chooses to forgive.

As such, this research provides valuable insight into this field in general, and to managers in particular. Thus, by nurturing commercial friendships, the organization not only introduces and establishes norms related to other parts of life, it also cultivates normative structures that constrain future transactions. This knowledge about the social norms activated in the specific circumstance is essential if one is to avoid the sanctions that come from norm violations, even if those violations are unintentional (Hendrick and Hendrick, 2000). Therefore, relationship management and optimal interaction are predicated on marketers having knowledge of issues related to commercial friendships. The study argues that both commercial friendship and friendship consider self-interest behavior as a violation, but due to the nature of commercial friendships' lower degree of altruism they are less willing to forgive a transgression.

II. EXPERIMENTS

A. Experiment 1: Altruism and Self-Interest-Seeking Behavior

As argued by most, social norms are cultural codes born out of shared learning experiences. They operate to—consciously or unconsciously—regulate or prescribe certain types of behavior in relation to specific circumstances. In such a view, social norms are shared expectations and mechanisms by which people may gauge what is normal, acceptable and appropriate in a specific context or situation (Elster, 1989; Cialdini et al., 1991; Bicchieri, 2005). For instance, people would typically expect children to behave differently than their parents, or friends to behave differently than their colleagues. Most would expect altruistic social norms, defined as expectations that behavior will be guided by concerns for the needs of others (Piliavin and Charng, 1990), to consciously or unconsciously operate in parent-child relationships. The lack of altruism in this relationship would be seen as completely inappropriate. In addition, social norms of self-interest, defined as behavior that is driven by the concern for one's own self or one's organization, implies an economic goal in which the benefits of others are not taken into consideration. Such self-interest would be considered inappropriate in parent-child relationships for most people, but are more acceptable in commercial relationships.

Within literature on altruism and self-interested behavior, individuals are assumed to perceive their relationships as governed by either altruism or by self-interest, but never a combination of the two. Likewise, the literature on marketing and interpersonal relationships generally treats altruism and self-interest as mutually exclusive (Clark and Mills, 1993). Even so, some argue that individuals might be involved in altruistic relationships of different strengths. The rationale for this argument is that the strength will depend on the relationship, in which most people are expected to behave in more altruistic ways towards their children in comparison to their behavior towards their

friends (Mills et al., 2004). Buyer-seller relationships are thought to have even weaker expectations of altruism. Consequently, all buyer-seller relationships are fundamentally based on exchanges simply by the nature of what it means to be a consumer (Bagozzi, 1975).

H1: Relationships perceived as commercial friendships will contain lower expectations of altruistic (mutual assistance, mutual caring) norms when compared to those seen as friendships, but higher expectations of altruism when compared to ones seen as strictly commercial.

An important part of the theory concerning social norms is that a person who violates social norms in any relationship runs the risk of being subjected to social sanctions, such as anger, indignation, ridicule, distrust or ostracism, guilt and shame (Elster, 1989). Customers might react by having a desire to spread a negative word of mouth (negative WOM) or a desire to dissolve the relationship. As the definitions above suggest, this is because social norms create expectations, and when norms are violated, so too are the corresponding expectations (Elster, 1989; Levine et al., 2000; Metts and Cupach, 2007).

The study argues that different norms govern these relationships, and that these differences will correspond with differences in the desire to dissolve the relationship when violated. If the relationship is perceived as a friendship, the consumer will care more strongly about the other party and will therefore be less inclined to dissolve the relationship in the face of norm violations arising from self-interested behavior. Since strictly commercial relationships do not contain norms of altruism, self-interested behavior is not seen as a norm violation, and hence does not result in a desire to dissolve the relationship. A friendship and commercial friendship both react to a self-interest-seeking incident by considering the behavior to be unexpected and becoming angry. However, someone in a relationship developed into a friendship will be more forgiving toward the violation, and not react by desiring to dissolve the relationship.

H2: The propensity to dissolve a relationship upon the discovery of self-interest-seeking behavior is higher in relationships seen as commercial friendships versus those seen as strictly commercial relationships, or those seen as friendships.

Customers who desire to dissolve a relationship are a serious matter for most organizations, but even more serious is a desire to spread negative word of mouth. While the dissolution hurts the organization through the lost sales from a particular customer, spreading negative WOM may result in a damaged reputation and lost sales from other customers or potential customers.

A norm violation might result in the desire to punish and sanction the other party. Nonetheless, this study argues that the probability of these consequences depends on the nature of the relationship. Friendships make it less likely that norm violations will culminate in negative WOM, as a friend will react by forgiving the incident. By contrast, commercial friendships are more likely to result in negative word of mouth. Strictly commercial relationships do not come with the expectation of altruism, so self-interested behavior does not violate expectations and does not result in negative word of mouth.

H3: In commercial friendships, the discovery of self-interest-seeking behavior will more likely result in the desire to spread negative word of mouth when compared to results from its discovery in strictly commercial relationships or friendships.

B. Method

1. Design, procedure, stimuli and measures

Due to the lack of sufficient knowledge of the study at hand, a qualitative investigation was done as a first approach. An important part of these qualitative interviews was to define the concept of commercial friendships, identify their dimensions and how commercial friendship relates to social norms of altruism and self-interest seeking. The interviews indicated that altruism exists in commercial friendship relationships but is not as strong as in a friendship. Other dimensions were closeness instead of distance, social orientations versus commercial orientation, difficult versus easy to break contact with, importance compared to non-importance, and an expectation to spend leisure time together compared to not doing so. All these dimensions seemed to vary in strength, with strictly commercial as the lowest, commercial friendship as stronger and friendship as the strongest. After identifying several dimensions differentiating these relationships, a hypothesis was formulated, and experiments were designed.

The participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions. Twenty-four undergraduate students were recruited at a university college and 62 were recruited at a central train station in Europe. The participant demographics were 56% males and 44% females, with a mean age of 36. Both the undergraduates and people at the train station were randomly assigned to one of the conditions by having the printed-out documents mixed by a colleague in the same manner as when a deck of cards is mixed. The first page was similar in all three conditions and neither participants nor the researcher had knowledge of which condition they were assigned to. The actual experiment with the undergraduate students began by scattering the participants throughout the classroom to avoid having people looking at each other's answers. Both undergraduates and people at the train station were instructed in the first page to read the scenarios before answering the questions, and that there were no right or wrong answers, but that their immediate and honest answer is what the study was looking for. They were also instructed not to answer those questions they did not understand. They were told not to read through all the pages and then answer, but to read the first page, then the second, then the third, and so on. Lastly, they were also encouraged to use the final page for writing comments about the study. There were 86 participants, although eight were taken out of the analysis because the questionnaire was unfinished or not readable.

All three randomly assigned groups received a similar instruction text: Imagine the following: You have been wanting to buy a new TV for a long time. You have now decided to buy one, and you contact the store you normally use to buy electronic products. The contact with this store has been through one of the employees. The strictly commercial condition received the text: You have been a customer there for years, but do not know this person. The relationship can be described as distant and impersonal, but satisfactory. Commercial friendship: The relationship with this particular staff member is good and you think the person is nice. The relationship can be described as a mutually informal and friendly, but professional. Friendship: The contact with this store has been

through one of the employees who is a friend of yours. This friendship has lasted for years and you often get together in your spare time. You often go to visit each other and have shared both joys and sorrows. The relationship can be described as a mutually close friendship. On the next page after the scenarios there were six manipulation checks and control measures on a 1–12 point bipolar scale (work versus socially oriented, formal versus informal, distant versus close, expecting to spend a free afternoon together versus not, unimportant versus important and difficult to break contact with versus easy), and five items measuring mutual altruism (I don't believe this person cares about me versus I believe this person cares about me; If I need help outside the business, this person would not help me versus If I need help outside the business, this person would help me; If I ever needed help, I don't believe this person would give me unconditional help versus If I needed help, I believe this person would give me unconditional help; I don't care if this person's career is going well or not versus I care if this person's career is going well; I don't care about this person versus I care about this person), which are also measured on a 1–12 point bipolar scale.

Immediately after answering the scenarios and measures describing the relationships, they were randomly divided into two groups: no violation groups and violation groups. The three groups who received a no violation scenario read the following scenario; imagine the following event in this relationship: You have always received discounted prices for the products you have purchased from this person. But the shop recently faced increased costs and can therefore no longer give discounts. You get no rebate this time and must pay full price. Three other groups received a violation scenario: You have always received discounted prices for the products you have purchased from this person. Now other similar shops have closed down and there is little competition. The person, therefore, sees an opportunity to earn more money. You get no rebate this time and must pay full price. After this, all the participants answered a manipulation check measure (I think this is selfish); thereafter, they answered three process measures (I am disappointed in this person, this is unexpected, and this makes me angry). After this, they answered the two dependent measures (I will tell others about this, I will not shop there next time), with all these questions measured on a 1–7 point Likert scale (1 = I don't agree and 7 = I agree).

2. Results

Results from Study 1 indicate that Hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported. To analyze the experiments, a planned contrast analysis was used to provide information about which group is different from the other groups (Braver et al., 2003).

Manipulation check measures: The results from the manipulation check measures indicate that the manipulation is effective for all three conditions, and all three groups are significantly different in all dimensions found in the qualitative interviews.

Table 1

Category Dimension	SC (N=25)		CF (N=29)		F (N= 25)		Planned contrast			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	SC/CF Df (2,78)		CF/F Df (2,78)	
Work/social	1.92	1.83	5.83	1.57	10.46	1.62	22.19	.000	58.57	.000
Informal/ formal	1.92	1.86	5.65	1.93	10.12	1.74	54.54	.000	77.92	.000
Distant/close	2.72	2.90	6.24	2.60	10.48	1.61	27.83	.000	40.33	.000
Unimportant/ important	2.16	2.21	5.31	1.58	10.40	1.73	39.01	.000	101.83	.000
Free afternoon	2.04	2.33	5.35	3.80	10.36	1.75	18.29	.000	42.12	.000
Break contact with	2.36	2.69	4.34	1.78	10.20	1.63	12.39	.000	107.86	.000

Note: SC=strictly commercial group, CF=commercial friendship group, F=Friendship group

Dependent variables of altruism: The results support Hypothesis 1, stating that commercial friends expect social norms of mutual altruism higher than those of strictly commercial relationships do and lower than those of a friendship (Do not believe the other cares vs. believe the other cares).

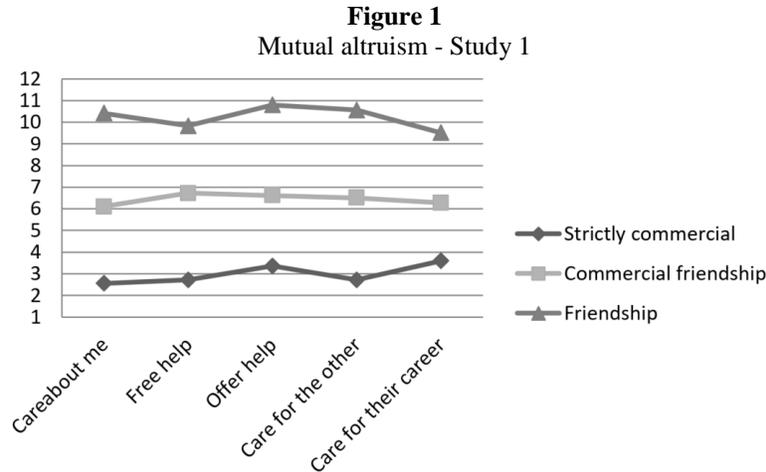
Table 2

Category Dimension	SC (N=25)		CF (N=29)		F (N= 25)		Planned contrast			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	SC/CF Df (2,78)		CF/F Df (2,78)	
Care about me	2.56	2.27	6.10	2.27	10.40	1.65	38.26	.000	56.25	.000
Expect to be helped	3.36	2.73	6.62	2.33	10.80	1.70	26.95	.000	44.27	.000
Expect free help	2.72	2.77	6.72	1.94	9.84	2.09	41.29	.000	25.00	.000
Care about the other's career	3.60	3.25	6.27	2.54	9.52	2.63	12.14	.001	17.84	.000
Care about the other	2.72	2.07	6.51	1.86	10.56	1.63	55.64	.000	63.06	.000
Care about me	2.56	2.27	6.10	2.27	10.40	1.65	38.26	.000	56.25	.000

Note: SC=strictly commercial group, CF=commercial friendship group, F=Friendship group

As shown in Figure 1 below, the strictly commercial relationship is at one end of the bipolar scale, while friendship is at the other end and commercial friendship is in between.

Manipulation checks of violation scenario: The differences are found to be significant and the manipulation is found to be effective when comparing the results from the three groups, in which the price increase is due to demand versus the results from the three groups, in which the price increase is due to increased costs (No violation $M=1.31$, $SD=1.05$, Violation $M= 5.25$, $SD=2.15$; $F(1.79)117.417$, $p=.000$).



Process measures: The process measures capture the emotional effects in the violation groups compared to the control groups. As previously stated, it is assumed that the SC group will have no reaction, since purely commercial relationships are governed by norms consistent with self-interest-seeking behavior. The result from the contrast analysis shows that there is a difference in how the cohorts in the strictly commercial condition react; thus, they consider the incident to be self-interest seeking, though not a violation.

Table 3

Category	Planned contrast									
	SC (N=25)		CF (N=29)		F (N= 25)		SC/CF Df (2,78)		CF/F Df (2,78)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Angry	2.90	.831	5.06	1.62	3.33	1.75	13.55	.001	10.45	.002
Disappointed	2.72	.647	5.44	1.29	4.40	2.53	16.91	.000	2.99	.091
Surprised	2.09	.701	4.77	1.26	4.00	2.03	22.46	.000	2.25	.141

Note: SC=strictly commercial group, CF=commercial friendship group, F=Friendship group

The results from the planned contrast analysis on the angry, disappointed and surprised reaction indicate that cohorts in the commercial friendship condition were angrier than those in the strictly commercial condition (although the cohorts in both groups were disappointed in and surprised by the behavior. The higher rate of anger from the commercial friendship condition could indicate the prevalence of immediate forgiveness in friendships. However, this is not included in Study 1.

Dependent variables: The findings support Hypotheses 2 and 3, which state that commercial friendships will react by desiring to dissolve the relationship and spread negative word of mouth.

Table 4

Category	SC (N=25)		CF (N=29)		F (N= 25)		Planned contrast			
	M	SD	M	SD	Mean	SD	SC/CF Df (2,78)		CF/F Df (2,78)	
							F	Sig.	F	Sig.
Desire to dissolve	3.00	1.48	5.88	2.19	3.00	1.48	47.04	.000	66.70	.000
Spreading negative word of mouth	3.54	1.50	5.82	1.74	3.93	1.71	45.62	.000	90.00	.001

Note: SC=strictly commercial group, CF=commercial friendship group, F=Friendship group

Figure 2
Desire to dissolve - Study 1

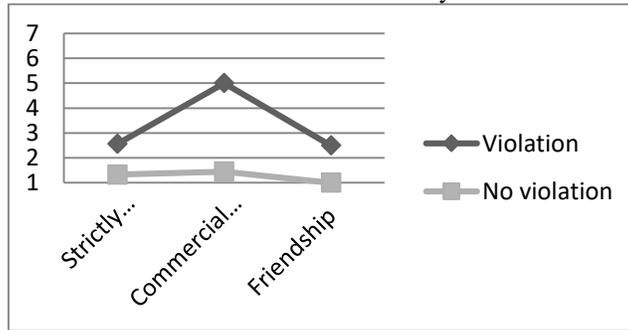
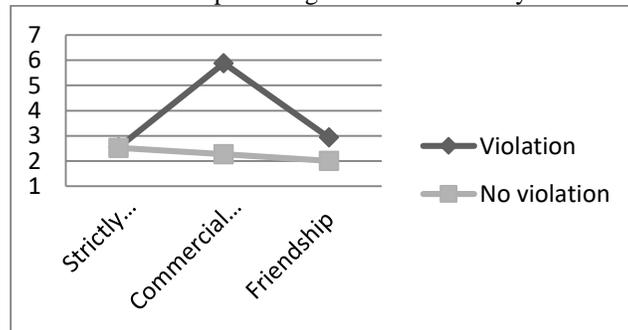


Figure 3
Desire to spread negative WOM - Study 1



The results from Study 1 support Hypotheses 1 and 2. The cohorts in the commercial friendship condition reacted by desiring to dissolve the relationship and spread negative WOM when a self-interest-seeking incident is discovered, a reaction that differs significantly from that found in the strictly commercial and friendship conditions. These findings are interesting, although they do not provide an explanation for why the commercial friendship condition reacts differently than the friendship condition. The strictly commercial condition does not react because self-interest-seeking behavior is

perceived as a violation; nevertheless, self-interest-seeking behavior is to be considered as a violation in the friendship condition. The qualitative interviews and manipulation check measures indicate that a friendship is stronger on all dimensions compared to commercial friendships, which could imply that friendship condition offers more incentives to forgive incidents. Additionally, the process measures of the violation scenario indicate an immediate forgiveness, and the subsequent experiments are designed to measure this.

C. Experiments 2 and 3: I Forgive My Friends, but Not My Commercial Friends

The previous study has investigated the concept of altruism, and the reaction when self-interest-seeking behavior is discovered in the relationship, which indicates that people might be more forgiving with friends than with commercial friends. These next studies are designed to test forgiveness as a possible explanation for why the friendship condition does not show as a strong reaction as the commercial friendship condition.

Forgiveness is a concept considered by most researchers as a conscious decision, while acknowledging the seriousness of the wrong-to-release or foregoing anger and vengeance (e.g., Enright et al., 1989; Enright et al., 1998). Forgiveness is often described as an altruistic gift (Enright et al., 1998; Worthington, Jr., 1998), one given freely in spite of not being deserved by offenders.

Decisional forgiveness occurs when an individual makes a decision about how to act towards another individual. This results in controlling behavior, but may not necessarily involve altering cognition, motivation or emotion. The decision is on how to act, not in how to think. Exline et al. (2003) have argued that decisional forgiveness is deciding to: (a) control one's own behavior in interactions, (b) not seek revenge, (c) not express resentment, (d) and release the offender from any social debt incurred by the transgression (Exline et al., 2000). Based on the previous results from Study 1, which suggests that friends might be more willing to forgive than commercial friends, we propose our last hypothesis.

H3: In commercial friendships, the discovery of self-interest-seeking behavior will more likely result in a lower willingness to forgive compared to results from its discovery in friendships.

D. Study 2

In this study, we wanted to provide evidence that if a relationship is perceived as a friendship, forgiveness is more likely than if a relationship is perceived as a commercial friendship.

Design, procedure, stimuli and measures

In Study 2 the same scenarios were used as in Study 1. The participants first received a text describing their relationship as in the previous studies; secondly, they received manipulation check measures insuring that the manipulation is effective, before they answered questions from the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale – 12-Item Form (TRIM-12). This is a scale developed to measure forgiveness, and has 12 questions, of which the first five measure desire to get even: (1) I'll make him/her pay; (2) I wish that something bad would happen to him/her; (3) I want him/her to get

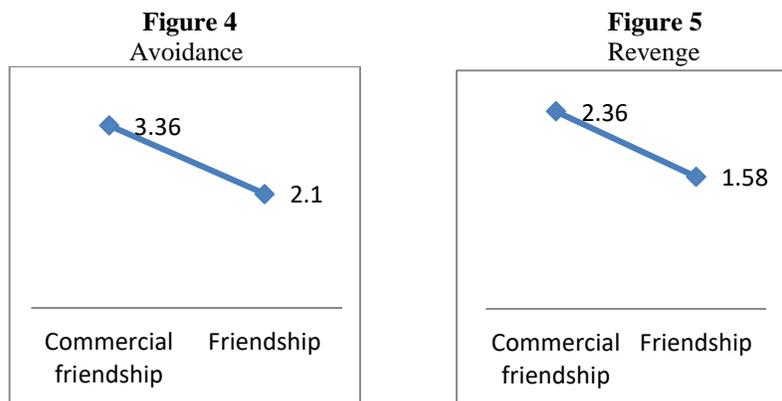
what he/she deserves; (4) I'm going to get even; and (5) I want to see him/her hurt and miserable. The following seven items make up its Avoidance scale: (1) I keep as much distance between us as possible; (2) I live as if he/she doesn't exist, or isn't around; (3) I don't trust him/her; (4) I find it difficult to act warmly toward him/her; (5) I avoid him/her; (6) I cut off the relationship with him/her; and (7) I withdraw from him/her (McCullough et al. 1998). Avoidance motivation was measured by: 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10 and 12, Revenge motivation was measured by 1,3,6,9, and 11. All the questions were asked on a 1–5 Likert scale.

The participants were 81 undergraduate students (40 male and 37 female, with four participants choosing not to answer this question). The average age was 23 years, and the participants were randomly assigned to either of two conditions.

1. Results

Manipulation check measures and process measures: The manipulations check measures of the relationship condition were all significant, as in the previous studies. The manipulation check measure from the violation scenario and process measures indicated that the manipulation was effective, as in Study 1.

Dependent variables: As predicted, the friendship condition was significantly more forgiving than the commercial friend condition (Avoidance; Friendship $M=2.10$, $SD=.70$, Commercial friendship $M=3.36$, $SD=.90$, $F=(1.79) 46.543$, $p=.000$. Revenge; Friendship $M=1.33$, $SD=.49$, Commercial friendship $M=2.36$ $SD=1.52$ $F=(1.79) 16.581$, $p=.000$).



The figures above show that subjects in the commercial friendship condition are less likely to forgive a self-interest-seeking incident.

E. Study 3

Study 2 found that the commercial friendship condition was much more likely to provoke avoidance and revenge than was a friendship. However, both subjects reported that these

violations made them angry. Because we wanted to investigate whether the friendship condition was more likely to suppress their negative feelings, we designed Study 3.

Most scholars view forgiveness as an intentional and voluntary process driven by a deliberate decision to forgive (North, 1987; Enright et al., 1989; Fincham, 2000). This is a cognitive analytical process that results in a decreased desire to retaliate or maintain estrangement from an offender despite their actions.

Within the cognitive load literature it is suggested that subjects under a larger cognitive load have a tendency to be less analytical. The explanation for this is that those under a larger cognitive load are less capable to allocate cognitive resources to react to their decision (Duffey and Smith, 2012). For instance, Shiv and Fedorikhin (1999) found that people given the option of eating an unhealthy cake or a healthy serving of fruit, were likely to select the cake when they were under a high cognitive load. Also it has been found that subjects in this condition are more impulsive, less analytical (Hinson et al., 2003), more risk-averse, exhibit a higher degree of time impatience (Benjamin et al., 2012), make more mistakes (Rydval, 2011), have less self-control (Shiv and Fedorikhin, 1999; Ward and Mann 2000), fail to process available information (Gilbert et al., 1988), perform worse on gambling tasks (Hinson et al., 2002), are more susceptible to a social label (Cornelissen, Dewitte et al., 2007) and have different evaluations of the fairness of outcomes (Van den Bos et al., 2006; Cornelissen et al., 2011; Schulz et al., 2014).

We therefore assume that the friend in a high load cognition is no longer able to suppress his/her feeling and will not be as forgiving as in a low load cognition. It is expected that a high load friendship condition is similar to a commercial relationship because the subjects are not able to suppress their feelings.

H4: In a low load friendship, the discovery of self-interest-seeking behavior will more likely result in a lower willingness to forgive compared to results from its discovery in a high load friendship.

Due to cognitive load, we hypothesize that the subject in a commercial friendship condition is expected to be even less forgiving in a high load condition.

H5: In a low load commercial friendship condition, the discovery of self-interest-seeking behavior will more likely result in a lower willingness to forgive compared to results from its discovery in high load commercial friendships.

F. Method

1. Design, Procedure, Stimuli and Measures

A total of 180 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. There were more women than men participating; however, gender did not exert any primary or interaction effect and is ignored in the remainder of the study.

The first part of the study was similar to the first part of the previous study. Nevertheless, we measured interpersonal closeness using the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS Scale) (Aron et al., 1992). This is a single-item, pictorial measure of closeness. In the IOS Scale, respondents select the picture that best describes their relationship, with each representing various degrees of overlap of two circles. One circle

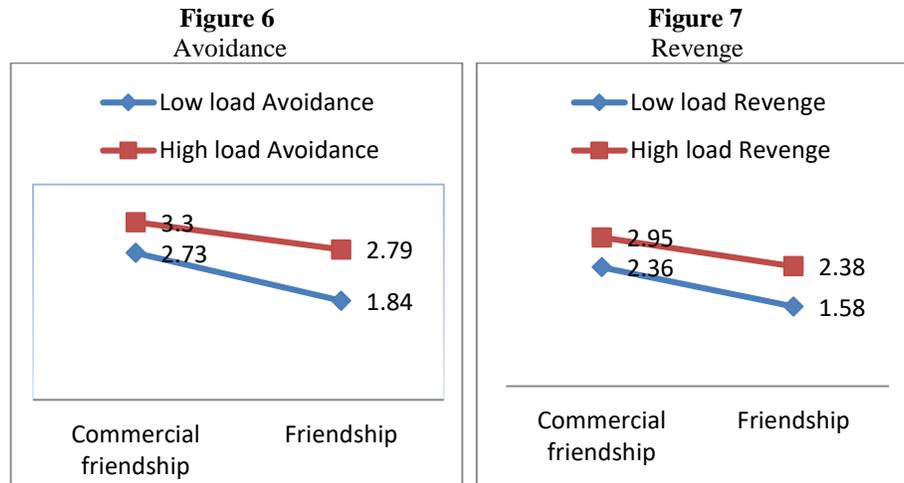
represents the self (S), while the other represents the other person (O). The figures are designed so that the degree of overlap progresses in a linear manner, thus creating a seven-step, interval-level scale. At the one end, the anchors are two circles that touch each other but do not overlap, whereas at the other end, the two circles overlap almost completely.

Immediately after indicating the closeness of the relationships, the participants were instructed to memorize a seven-digit number; the others remembered an easier, structured sequence of seven digits (1234567). The number only remains on the screen for eight seconds, and the participants were informed that they would be asked to reproduce the number they had memorized. The number remained on the screen for eight seconds and the participant was immediately asked to read the violation scenario; lastly, they answered three process measures before answering the TRIM scale, as in Study 3.

2. Results

The manipulation check measure indicated that the scenarios were effective. The results indicated that the scenarios were effective on the IOS scale (Friend + low $M=5.24$, $SD=.830$; Friend + High $M=5.00$, $SD=.956$; Commercial friend + low $M=2.67$, $SD=.853$; Commercial friend + high $M=2.73$, $F(3,173)=134.563$, $p=.000$). The manipulation check measures of self-interest-seeking indicated that all groups found the incident self-interest-seeking as in the previous studies.

As predicted, the friendship + low load was significantly more forgiving than the high load friendship condition in Avoidance ($M_{\text{friendship+low load}}=1.80$, $SD_{\text{friendship+low load}}=.56$, $M_{\text{friendship+high load}}=2.79$, $SD_{\text{friendship+high load}}=.76$, $M_{\text{commercial friendship+low load}}=2.73$, $SD_{\text{commercial friendship+low load}}=.72$, $M_{\text{commercial friendship+high load}}=3.30$, $SD_{\text{commercial friendship+high load}}=.93$, $F(3,176)=31.455$, $p=.000$). To help investigate the interaction effect, a Tukey HSD test was used. The results from this test indicated that friends in a low load condition were significantly more forgiving than friends in a high load condition ($p=.000$). Moreover, the commercial low load friendship was more forgiving than the commercial high load ($p=.000$). As expected, there were no significant differences between friend high load and commercial friend ($p=.982$), though there were significant differences in the commercial low load friend versus commercial high load friend ($p=.002$). Additionally, the friend high load was more forgiving than the commercial friend high load ($p=.005$). The revenge variable also indicated that the friendship low load was significantly more willing to forgive than the friendship high load ($p=.000$). The same pattern was also found in the revenge variable: ($M_{\text{friendship+low load}}=1.58$, $SD_{\text{friendship+low load}}=.37$, $M_{\text{friendship+high load}}=2.38$, $SD_{\text{friendship+high load}}=.76$, $M_{\text{commercial friendship+low load}}=2.39$, $SD_{\text{commercial friendship+low load}}=.72$, $M_{\text{commercial friendship+high load}}=2.95$, $SD_{\text{commercial friendship+high load}}=.93$, $F(3,176)=24.663$, $p=.000$). The Tukey test indicated that friends in a low load condition were significantly more forgiving than friends in a high load condition ($p=.000$), whereas the commercial low load friendship was more forgiving than the commercial high load ($p=.000$). In addition, as expected, there were no significant differences between friend high load and commercial friend low load ($p=1,000$). There were significant differences in the commercial friend low load versus commercial friend high load ($p=.002$), while the friend high load was more forgiving than the commercial friend high load ($p=.002$).



These results indicate that both commercial friends and friends are less capable of suppressing their feelings and making a decision to forgive when given a high load. However, the friends are more likely to make the decision to forgive.

III. GENERAL DISCUSSIONS

Study 1 clearly demonstrated that commercial friendships expect mutual altruism, though to a lower degree than what is expected in friendships. Studies 1, 2 and 3 also show that self-interest-seeking behavior within the context of a commercial friendship and friendship is seen as a violation of norms. Even so, unlike the bonds of affection that cement friendships, commercial relationships are more tenuous, in which norm violations are more likely to result in relationship dissolution and the spread of negative WOM found in Study 2. These findings undoubtedly have substantial managerial implications. In Study 2 we found that friends are more willing to forgive than commercial friends, while in Study 3 we found that this is due to the ability to suppress their feelings and make a decision to forgive.

A. Managerial Implications

Commercial friendship is an important and popular strategy and employees in a variety of sectors are encouraged to “make friends and not transactions”. Price and Arnould (1999) argue that since there is a strong correlation between friendship and loyalty, the formation of commercial friendships should be encouraged. Consequently, companies across a range of industries frequently attempt to capitalize on social relationships to achieve commercial aims (Grayson, 2008). Swan and colleagues (Swan et al., 2001) stress the need to develop training for salespeople that focuses on relationship management, rather than on closing deals.

An argument against this strategy is that friends and customers want contradictory outcomes. Therefore, it is unlikely that these same expectations would be able to coexist

in a friendship (Bäckström et al., 2009). For example, it is expected that friends want the best for each other, if for no other reason than because they are friends (Grayson, 2007).

Based on previous studies and the result of this study, it seems reasonable to conclude that cultivating commercial friendships is a well-advised strategy, but a strategy that does restrict the organization. The results from this study have clear implications for the practice of personal selling, as well as for those who manage the activity.

This study, through different experiments, shows that the consumer considers the relationship to be more than a series of self-interested transactions. In fact, the consumer sees the relationship as governed by a mutual altruism, although weaker than if the relationship is seen as a pure friendship. Consequently, what is appropriate and acceptable behavior in a commercial friendship is different from other relationships, and organizations and their sales representatives need to manage these relationships differently.

As previously emphasized, this study found that commercial friends react strongly to self-interest-seeking behavior. In light of the fact that self-interests and commercial interests are very tightly connected, avoiding this reaction might be especially challenging for managers. The commercial friendship comes with the expectation of altruism, although the relationship has not developed into a full friendship. Therefore, while altruism is expected, the willingness to break the relationship and spread negative WOM in the face of a norm violation is much higher than what transpires in pure friendships. One possible way to avoid negative reactions is to try to develop these relationships into a purer friendship form. However, as Heide and Wathne (2006) argue, establishing friendships requires a lot of effort and time, and it is difficult to turn a customer into a friend (pp. 97–98).

The findings of this study do not mean that commercial friendship strategies are always ill-advised but add knowledge to how companies and their employees should interact if they become involved in such relationships. The results of this study show some worrying tendencies of negative behaviors from the consumers when violations occur in the relationships. For this reason, companies may want to weigh the costs and benefits of pursuing commercial friendships. The management of these relationships are essential for achieving positive effects and avoiding damaging effects. Managers should be careful not to violate the norms of commercial friendships and need to develop knowledge about the governing mechanisms of the relationship.

B. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This research has several limitations. The study only investigates these relationships from the consumer's perspective and only in a B2C context. Moreover, despite the fact that qualitative interviews indicated the existence of these mechanisms in many contexts (hairdresser, home parties, grocery stores, restaurants, etc.), the hypothesis is only tested in the context of retail sellers. The qualitative interviews also indicated that these relationships and the mechanism found in the study are also applicable to B2B context. However, this context is not sufficiently explored in this study, but B2B contexts might be interesting avenues for future research. There might also be situations that moderate the effects of norm violations. For example, if a commercial friendship is part of a network (e.g. commercial ties with a friend of a close friend, between neighbors, between

people with children in the same school, etc.), the reactions to self-interested behavior could be moderated by tighter bonds between those within the commercial relationship.

Another limitation is related to the categorization of the three groups. The qualitative interviews and the experiments indicate that the relationships in the study are recognizable, but it is still highly likely that relationships exist in between the categories and come in many shades and grades. A commercial friendship that is closer to a friendship might moderate the effects of norm violations, thereby resulting in a situation in which the customer would react in ways similar to those reactions found in the friendship condition. This is also an opportunity for a future follow-up study.

This limitation is also related to the scenarios. The scenarios are very broad and unspecific. This is a strength insofar as the scenarios are less restrictive, but it could also be that the scenarios do not precisely capture other relationships of interest. Furthermore, there might be critical dimensions that are not revealed in the qualitative study, and hence not included in the experiments. Capturing other scenarios and dimensions could be goals for future research.

The desire to dissolve and spread negative WOM is another obvious limitation. The study only measures the desire to act and not the actual act. Due to the exploratory nature of the study and resource limitations, experiments were executed in a laboratory setting, rather than in real life situations. This affects the external validity, so testing the hypothesis outside of the laboratory setting is yet another possible research avenue.

The study also tests only violations of the social norms of altruism. However, it is reasonable to assume that violating other governing norms of the relationship may also have the same effects. Investigating reactions when other norms are violated might be an interesting research avenue. Additionally, it could be worthwhile to investigate the limitations of friendships, and how serious an offence needs to be before reactions set in.

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