ABSTRACT - This paper adapts Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love to the study of consumer-object relations. We argue that the protean character of CORs has not been captured by prior conceptualizations in consumer research. Our conceptual scheme, pursuant to Sternberg's theory, is based on the view that three common psychological processes motivation, emotion, and cognition—interact in various combinations to determine the nature of consumers' relations with consumption objects. We conceptualize eight types of CORs by considering every combination of the three underlying psychological components.

INTRODUCTION

This paper develops the notion of consumer-object relations. We argue that consumers form relations with consumption objects (products, brands, stores, etc.), which range from feelings of antipathy, to slight fondness, all the way up to what would, in person-person relations, amount to love. The consumer-object counterpart to love is similar to the notion of extreme product enthusiasm (Bloch 1986). Various concepts have appeared in the consumer behavior literature, which, though heretofore not viewed as such, involve consumer-object relations (cf. Howard 1977, p. 42). Relational concepts at the brand level include familiar terms such as brand attitude and brand loyalty.

What we intend to argue is that these various concepts have lacked a common linkage and unifying framework. We propose such a framework by adapting Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love. By drawing analogies between Sternberg's person-person relations and consumer-object relations, we have derived a set of concepts which hopefully will lead to a better understanding of the rich diversity of relations that consumers experience with consumption objects. It should be clear from the start that love merely provides us with a useful metaphor (cf. Arndt 1985) for characterizing consumer-object relations. We fully recognize that love relations between people are probably much more complex and certainly more bidirectional than are relations consumers have with inanimate consumption objects.

PERSON-PERSON VS. CONSUMER-OBJECT RELATIONS

The term, relations, is used here in the standard dictionary sense to capture the idea of a connection or association between or among things. Howard (1977) has talked about consumer-brand relations, but consumer researchers more typically have used terms borrowed from psychology such as attitude, feeling, and involvement to characterize consumers' interactions with products, brands, and other consumption objects. We prefer the term relations over these more conventional terms because it enables us to present a set of concepts which are not constrained by past biases associated with terms such as attitude.

Consumer-object relations, or CORs for short, are qualitatively different from person-person relations, or PPRs. Love by its very nature involves a relationship between two people and not the two people individually (cf. Rubin 1970). As stated poetically by Buber (1970), "Love does not cling to an I, as if the Thou were merely its 'content' or 'object'; it is between I and Thou." Comparatively, the relationship between
FUNDAMENTALS OF STERNBERG'S TRIANGULAR THEORY OF LOVE

Sternberg's (1986) theory of love employs a triangle metaphor for conceptualizing the interrelations among three fundamental components of love: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. Various instantiations of these three components lead to eight different types of love and provide answers to the research questions which motivated Sternberg's conceptual efforts: "What does it mean to love someone? Does it always mean the same thing, and if not, in what ways do lovers differ from each other? Why do certain loves seem to last, whereas others disappear almost as quickly as they are formed?" (Sternberg 1986, p. 119).

Slight alterations to Sternberg's queries suggest the relevance of similar issues to understanding consumer behavior. For example, what does it mean to love a product or particular brand? Why does brand loyalty sometimes last for prolonged periods, whereas in other cases brand switching takes over quickly?

Intimacy

Intimacy, the emotional basis of love relations, refers to "feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness" (Sternberg 1986, p. 119) and also includes sharing, feelings of emotional support, holding another in high regard, and having intimate communication. These feelings are the basis for the "warmth" in loving relations.

Liking--The COR Counterpart to Intimacy: Intimacy is also present in consumer-object relations. Consumers often have feelings of closeness and connectedness with consumption objects. Proof positive are the personal accounts provided by individuals interviewed by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) in describing the meaning and significance which various household objects hold for them.

Intimacy in CORs probably is more aptly labeled "liking." The liking component refers to feelings such as attachment to and fondness for as well as the properties Sternberg ascribes to intimacy--i.e., closeness, connectedness, and bondedness. Clearly, consumers develop strong feelings of closeness and connectedness with consumption objects throughout their lives. For example, a child is inseparable from a cherished blanket or doll. An adult considers a treasured furniture item, sculpture, or painting as something which provides tactile pleasure as well as, perhaps, a link to past positive associations (cf. Solomon's 1986 discussion of Levi 501 jeans). A boat, a shotgun, jewelry, a beloved athletic team, and innumerable other items develop symbolic significance to their owners and become part of the owner's personal identity, self image, and self esteem (cf. Schenk and Holman 1980).

Described above are objects falling toward the "strong positive" end of the liking continuum. Most products (as well as brands and other consumption objects) cluster, of course, around the midpoint of this theoretical continuum. That is, they are not particularly liked nor disliked; they perform a function and are valued for that function, absent of any particular bonding to, attachment with, or special fondness to their owners. At the same time, there are products which have "strong negative" affect for their owners. "I despise that painting," and "I hate this damn car" illustrate this polar end of the liking qua intimacy component.

Passion

Passion, the motivational component of Sternberg's theory, refers to "the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena in loving relationships" (1986, p. 119). These notions are decidedly restricted to PPRs. However, Sternberg's theory includes other needs within the passion component that appear applicable also to CORs. These include "self-esteem, succorance, nurturance, affiliation, dominance, submission, and self-actualization" (p. 122). For example, people turn to cherished consumption objects for succor during periods of sadness, anxiety, fear, and depression (e.g., a child's teddy bear; an adult's rocking chair or photograph). Furthermore, products and brands often serve as symbols for consumers' affiliation, dominance, and self-actualization needs.

Yearning--The COR Counterpart to Passion: "The passion component of love will almost certainly be highly and reciprocally interactive with intimacy" (Sternberg, p. 122). As such, consumers sometimes have passion-like feelings for products, brands, etc. These feelings, as in love relations, are relatively ephemeral compared to the other two components. For example, consumers go through periods where they just can't consume enough of certain products/brands. Holbrook's (1986) "I'm Hip" autobiographical sketch provides anecdotal evidence of one person's passionate relationship with jazz music.

"Yearning" is an apt substitute for passion when applied to CORs. Yearning is used here in the dictionary sense to mean having an earnest or strong desire for something. As with the other components of the COR triad, yearning is intended to represent a continuum of possibilities. At the "strong positive" end, yearning is represented by "wish lists" constantly occupying the consumer's thoughts. The deep desire to learn to play the piano, the fantasy to own a special sports car, and the intense excitement over the prospects of getting a new toy for Christmas or of building one's dream home represent extreme forms of yearning. The desire to purchase a new suit, to try a new restaurant, to attend an upcoming ballgame, or to go to a new play all illustrate more moderate levels of yearning. "Strong negative" yearning also applies in various aversive types of consumption contexts. For example, one may tremble at the thought of going to the dentist or revolt at the idea of having to sit through, say, a spectator sport or operatic performance with a spouse friend who holds an opposite yearning toward that event.

Decision/Commitment

This encompasses the cognitive aspect of Sternberg's theory. "Decision is the short term recognition that one loves someone else, whereas commitment is the long term intention to maintain that love" (1986, p. 119).

The decision/commitment component is probably the easiest to draw analogs between PPRs and CORs. For example, in the short term consumers decide they like a particular product/brand because its attributes/benefits are compatible with what the consumer is seeking. In the long term, consumers become committed to brands as a matter of loyalty, inertia, or other factors leading to repeat purchase behavior. Illustrations of commitment are found anecdotally in statements such as: "I'm a New York Mets fan"; "I'm a Bud drinker."

Sternberg's terms, decision and commitment, are appropriate terms for also characterizing consumer-object relations. In the short term, a consumer decides he loves Lean Cuisine; another consumer is fully cognizant that she loves Dove Bars; yet another consumer decides he would love to take piano lessons because he is captivated by the thought of being able to impress his friends.
In the long term, consumers develop varying degrees of commitment to consumption objects. At the "strong positive" pole, consumers are firmly committed to certain products, brands, and stores because they have developed strong preferences for them, have found them to be the best in the category, or because they truly "love" them, i.e., feel some deep sense of affection for a product (e.g., the car buff; cf. Bloch 1981) or a store (e.g., the "Bloomingdale's customer"); and so on. At the "strong negative" end, consumers often express committed opposition to certain brands or categories of products. For example, anecdotally, "I would never buy an American-made car" or "I wouldn't wear polyester clothing for anything in the world" typify this type of negative long-term commitment to avoid a particular consumption object.

In Sum

The discussion to this point has presented the three components of Sternberg's theory of love and has shown how these components have analogs in consumer-object relations. The comparisons are summarized in Figure 1, which shows that Sternberg's components and the corresponding consumer-object components are connected by common psychological processes, namely a "cold" component (cognition), a "warm" component (emotion), and a "hot" component (motivation) (cf. Sternberg 1986, p. 119).

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**FIGURE 1**

**COMPONENTS OF PPRS AND CORS**

Eight Kinds of Love

Sternberg's three components give rise to eight kinds of love, each derived by considering the presence or absence of the three components. For example, "nonlove" (see Figure 2) is the absence of any intimacy, passion, or commitment toward another individual, whereas "consummate love" at the polar extreme describes the situation where all three components are present. The intervening forms of love, as can be seen in Figure 2, reflect either the presence (+) or absence (-) of the three underlying components. For example, "romantic love" represents a relationship between two individuals in which intimacy and passion are present but no commitment exists to maintain the relationship over an extended period.

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**FIGURE 2**

**STERNBERG'S EIGHT KINDS OF LOVE**

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF CONSUMER-OBJECT RELATIONS

Having laid out the fundamentals of Sternberg's theory, we now develop the case that these different kinds of love have conceptual counterparts in consumer-object relations. Consumer-object relationships, we argue, are based on the same underlying psychological processes-likeing (emotion), yearning (motivation), and commitment/decision (cognition)-as the love relationships identified by Sternberg. The following concepts identify varying types of consumer relations. In a sense, each of these concepts can be viewed as a special type of attitude. Indeed, just as love itself represents a special type of attitude (Rubin 1970), consumer-object relationships also are attitudes varying in their direction and intensity.

Correspondent to Sternberg's eight kinds of love, the following concepts progress from nonliking, the absence of any liking, yearning, or commitment to a brand, all the way to loyalty, which represents the presence of all three components. Presence or absence of each component is represented with pluses and minuses. Presenting each component in binary terms is a necessary simplification. Each component actually ranges along a continuum from negative to positive, but it is necessary to disregard the continua in order to derive a tractable number of concepts. Figure 3 identifies eight kinds of consumer object relations.

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**FIGURE 3**

**EIGHT KINDS OF CONSUMER-OBJECT RELATIONS**

For clarity of exposition, the following discussion focuses on the brand level of consumer-object relations. This emphasis is appropriate when recognizing that brand loyalty, arguably the most fully conceptualized concept in the field of consumer research (cf. Jacoby and Chestnut 1978), is itself a brand-level concept. Also, the following discussions emphasize the positive aspect of each conceptual component and not the negative. Finally, each relational type is keyed to Figure 3 by indicating for each component (L = Liking; Y = Yearning; and D = Decision/commitment) whether the component is present (X) or absent (-).

Nonliking [L(-) Y(-) D(-)]

Nonliking does not mean disliking; rather, it characterizes those relations in which consumers have no particular feelings for a product or brand. Probably the bulk of consumer-object relations involve nonliking. Nonliking relations are expected to be particularly prevalent in at least two different situations: (1) for product categories which the consumer is not involved with, and (2) product categories in which the consumer already has established strong loyalty(ies) to one or more brands; all other brands involve nonliking relations for the consumer.

Liking [L(+) Y(-) D(-)]

Liking relations are those where consumers feel some degree of affinity for a particular brand but have no particular desire to own nor purchase the brand. In other words, there is no yearning, the motivational force, or decision/commitment to want to acquire a brand which is merely liked. On the other hand, a liking relationship does not preclude the possibility that the consumer may at times purchase a brand which is merely liked. By analogy, each of us likes many individuals, but this liking exists in the absence of any passion for these individuals or any commitment to be in love with them.

Infatuation [L(-) Y(+) D(-)]

Infatuation is characterized by the presence of a strong yearning for a particular product/brand in the absence of any strong liking or even desire to consume that item for any length of time. This form of relationship applies to fad products, especially ones where there exist strong peer pressure to possess the product or engage in a particular behavior. Youthful consumers, it would seem, are particularly likely to have infatuated product relations. (The reader can perhaps recall feeling pressure in grammar school or high school to possess some product which he or she may not even have liked that much; however, the fact that referent others owned the product/brand made it irresistible.) In general, brands which satisfy symbolic needs (i.e., fulfill "internally generated needs for self-enhancement, role position, group membership, or ego-identification) as opposed to functional needs (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis 1986, p. 136) would seem especially prone to infatuated relations.

Functionalism [L(-) Y(+) D(+)]

Functionalistic relations are those where a consumer decides to purchase a particular brand/product in the absence of any strong emotional...
attachment to an item or yearning for it. The mental set for such objects is one of pure functionalism. For example, "I intend to replace the old faucets with the same brand as the house contractor installed because the old ones are worn out and I don't want to try a different brand."

Park et al.'s (1986) notion of functional needs would apply to this brand concept. That is, the purchase is undertaken to "solve a current problem, prevent a potential problem, resolve conflict, [or] to restructure a frustrating situation" (p. 136).

Inhibited Desire \([L(+) Y(+) D(-)]\)

This relationship is termed inhibited desire to capture the belief that the only reason consumers would not decide to want/own a particular product when they like and yearn for that product is because some constraint discourages the behavior. For example, a preteen girl may have a strong desire to start using lipstick but be constrained by her parents not to use the product. Similarly, an adult may not decide to purchase a particular new sports car model, at least in the short term, because limited financial resources, spousal pressure, or other inhibitors prevent him/her from actualizing these desires.

Utilitarianism \([L(+) Y(-) D(+)\]

This form of COR is probably the most frequent next to nonliking relations. Consumers form attachments to and fondness for particular products/brands and also are committed to using/consuming the object but do not have a passionate relation with it. A situation such as this defines repeat purchasing in the absence of loyalty toward the consumption object.

Yearning should subside over time as the consumer acquires an object will covary with time, reaches an asymptote, and then levels off or begins to decline. That is, as the relationship matures, the level of intimacy may be decreasing. That is, as the relationship matures, the level of intimacy appears to decline; however, the latent level may in fact be growing.

THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF CONSUMER-OBJECT RELATIONS

Relationships, either between people or people and objects, are not static. For each of the three components underlying loving relations, Sternberg proposes a nonlinear function over the duration of the relationship. In general, the intensity of each component increases over time, reaches an asymptote, and then levels off or begins its decline. We briefly examine the three courses specified by Sternberg and again draw analogies to consumer-object relations.

The course of the intimacy component is based on Berscheid's (1983) theory of emotion. Intimacy grows gradually because early in the relationship one is unable to predict the emotions, motivations, and cognitions of the other; this lack of interpersonal knowledge creates disruptions in the relation. However, as the actors in the dyad become more familiar, they form increasing numbers of paired action sequences, or scripts, and, as the amount of disruptions decreases so does the emotion in the relationship. Sternberg aptly points out a difference in the manifest and latent levels of intimacy. Successful relationships are those where the latent level is increasing even though the manifest level may be decreasing. That is, as the relationship matures, the level of intimacy appears to decline; however, the latent level may in fact be growing.

The same functional relationship should exist for CORs. The amount of emotional attachment (liking) for a brand grows gradually and eventually reaches a peak. Latent liking may exist in the absence of manifest liking; i.e., the consumer may not continue to repeat purchase a particular brand even though s/he likes the brand. Consumers may not be aware of the liking they have for an object until the object is no longer available. Consider, for example, the outcry that ensued when Coca-Cola replaced traditional Coke with a revised formulation.

Turning to the passion component, Sternberg draws on Solomon's (1980) opponent-process theory of acquired motivation to specify the course of this particular aspect of love. The level of passion, in opponent-process terms, results from both positive and negative drives toward another person. The positive force develops and fades quickly—a surge of initial arousal levels off or habituates with the passage of time. Negative motivation toward the other individual sets in at a later time. The result from these opponent processes is an overall level of motivation/passion which is lower than the habituated level of the positive drive alone.

The corresponding component of passion in CORs is yearning. We propose that yearning, like passion, habituates over the duration of a consumer's relationship with a consumption object as the result of decreasing marginal utility. For example, McAlister and Pensemer (1982), pursuant to Jeuland (1978), note in their review of variety-seeking behavior that preference for a behavior declines as one accumulates experience with it. Moreover, if experience fades then preference for the behavior can recover. Hence we argue that the level of yearning for an object will covary with experience. Consumers can experience great passion (yearning) for an object upon initial experience with it but this yearning should subside over time as the consumer acquires more experience with the object (cf. Richins and Bloch 1986).

Finally, as previously discussed, we expect the decision/commitment component of PPRs and CORs to behave similarly for both types of relationships. In successful relationships the course follows a logistical or S-shape curve; the increase in commitment grows gradually at first then increases rapidly until it finally levels off.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that Sternberg's (1986) provocative theory of love has correspondence in the domain of consumer-object relations. We have attempted to establish a new way of looking at consumer-object relations and provide a set of concepts that expand extant perspectives.
involving CORs. Consumer-object relations arise from various combinations of different psychological processes—motivation, emotion and cognition—but prior conceptualizations in consumer research have not explicitly recognized the combinations of these processes. By adapting Sternberg's application to person-person love relations, we have derived eight concepts which span the gamut from nonliking to loyalty. By conceptualizing each of the concepts in terms of the same psychological processes we are able to offer a unified framework of CORs which captures the prototypical character of consumers' relations with products, brands, stores, and other consumption objects.

A necessary next step is developing psychometric scales to measure each of the components comprising consumer-object relations. Proceeded is provided in the research by Sternberg and Grajek (1984) and the earner work by Rubin (1970). These researchers have constructed and tested valid measures of the components underlying love relationships, which suggests that it also is possible to rigorously measure consumers' liking, yearning, and decision/commitment for consumption objects. Research is needed also to study the dynamic character of the psychological processes underlying consumer-object relations.

REFERENCES


