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Relationship norms, rewards and consumer-brand bonds: when cultural context and attachment anxiety matter

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Abstract

Purpose – The consumer–brand relationship (CBR) literature is grounded in the notion that CBRs mirror interpersonal relationships. Yet little research has examined whether the relational norms that underpin these relationships operate consistently across cultural contexts. This study challenges the assumption that consumers universally value balanced and equitable relationships. It examines two contrasting national settings to explore how the norms guiding relational engagement vary across cultural contexts, focusing on differences in relational norms (communal vs exchange) and relational rewards (intrinsic vs extrinsic). Cultural dimensions such as power distance provide a useful interpretive lens for understanding these differences.

Design/methodology/approach – The study uses the student–university relationship as the empirical context to investigate cultural differences in CBRs. A cross-cultural survey was administered to 511 respondents in the United Kingdom and 263 respondents in Ghana.

Findings – The results reveal distinct relational patterns across the two cultural contexts examined. In the UK, communal and exchange-based CBRs aligned with conventional relationship theories. In Ghana, however, these patterns diverged from expected distinctions between communal and exchange norms. Furthermore, attachment anxiety interacted with cultural context, moderating the effects of relational norms and attenuating contextual differences.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the growing body of CBR research by introducing a cross-cultural perspective. It demonstrates that relational norms are not universally applied but vary across contrasting cultural contexts and are further shaped by individual attachment styles. These findings offer actionable insights for relationship marketing strategists, highlighting the importance of adapting approaches to both cultural and individual differences.

Keywords Communal/exchange relationship norms, Intrinsic/extrinsic relationship rewards, Attachment anxiety, Consumer–brand relationship

Paper type Research article

The dynamics of interpersonal relationships have long fascinated social psychologists (Sternberg and Grajek, 1984). Drawing on these insights, marketing scholars have argued that

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consumers' relationships with brands often mirror interpersonal relationships (Fournier, 1998). Just as interpersonal relationships vary by context, such as family versus coworkers, the norms guiding consumer-brand relationships (CBRs) differ across brands, influencing how consumers react to brand actions (Aggarwal, 2004). Yet, while research has extensively documented how culture shapes interpersonal interactions (Kazim and Rafique, 2021; Sorokowska *et al.*, 2021), international marketing research has paid limited attention to how cultural differences shape consumers' relationships with brands.

This gap is particularly striking in light of evidence from global markets. For instance, a KPMG (2019) report found that consumers in different countries prioritize distinct aspects of brand relationships. Specifically, monetary rewards are favored over personal connections in emerging markets such as India (KPMG, 2019). Similarly, Mando-Connect (2022) revealed significant disparities in loyalty program engagement, with over 80% of consumers participating in Norway and Sweden compared to less than 30% in Romania and Turkey. These differences suggest that cultural context may alter both the expectations consumers place on brands and the relational "currencies" that sustain brand relationships.

Relationship theory is founded on the principle that each partner in a relationship should provide fair and equitable returns for the other party's investment, in other words, adhere to relationship norms (Aggarwal and Larrick, 2012; Montgomery *et al.*, 2018). Although previous studies have investigated relationship norms across individualistic vs collectivist cultures (Hollebeek, 2018), less attention has been paid to other cultural factors that may shape how such norms operate. In particular, differences between cultural contexts characterized by reciprocal versus hierarchical expectations are likely to be highly relevant to consumer–brand relationships because such expectations shape how individuals understand their role in the relationship, the obligations they attribute to the brand, and the types of benefits they value.

The limited existing research exploring these kinds of cultural differences in consumer–brand relationships suggests that in more hierarchical contexts, brand relationships are not necessarily based on fairness or mutual benefit (Xu *et al.*, 2021). Consumers in these cultures often view the brand as the dominant partner in the relationship. As a result, they are more likely to show a deference to the brand and less likely to expect equal treatment or care in return. In more reciprocal contexts, by contrast, consumers tend to expect fair treatment and hold brands accountable for their well-being (Kim and Krishna, 2023; Xu *et al.*, 2021). These patterns point to the potential for variation in how relationship norms are understood and enacted across cultural settings, challenging the assumption within traditional relationship theories that all consumers value balanced and equitable exchanges.

This study explores how cultural differences, specifically those differing in reciprocal versus hierarchical relational expectations, shape the norms that underlie CBRs. Accordingly, we ask: how does culture influence the mechanisms through which consumers relate to brands? To address this question, we focus on two types of relationship norms: *exchange norms*, which involve expectations of fair, transactional reciprocity, and *communal norms*, which involve expectations of care and emotional connection regardless of return (Aggarwal, 2004). We argue that these norms influence the types of relational rewards consumers perceive from brand relationships. These rewards can be either *intrinsic*, such as enjoyment, emotional satisfaction, or personal interest derived directly from the relationship, or *extrinsic*, such as discounts, social recognition, or other tangible benefits tied to consumer investment. While current theory typically links communal norms to intrinsic rewards and exchange norms to extrinsic rewards (Clark *et al.*, 2010), we explore whether these patterns vary across cultural contexts characterized by different relational expectations. Furthermore, drawing on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), we suggest that attachment anxiety, the desire for emotional closeness and reassurance, reduces the influence of cultural context, such that anxious individuals respond similarly across cultures. We test these arguments using primary data from student–university relationships in the United Kingdom and Ghana, two contrasting national settings that represent differing relational expectations.

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Our findings contribute to international marketing and consumer–brand relationship theory in three ways. First, we offer one of the first empirical examinations of communal and exchange relationship norms across cultures, showing how these relational models function differently outside Western contexts. Second, we question the assumption that existing CBR theories, largely developed in reciprocal, low-hierarchy contexts, can be universally applied, by demonstrating their limitations in explaining brand relationships in more hierarchical settings. Third, we contribute a more nuanced account of how cultural contexts and individual traits interact in shaping consumer–brand relationships globally. By examining two contrasting national settings through the lens of cultural dimensions, we uncover how contextual and personal factors jointly structure relational dynamics.

Our findings offer implications for international marketing practice by indicating that (1) in hierarchical relational contexts (e.g. Ghana), a wider range of relationship-building tools may be effective compared to more reciprocal relational contexts (e.g. UK), (2) customers' attachment anxiety can neutralize brands' ability to develop relationships using both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards in hierarchical relational contexts, and (3) alleviating attachment anxieties among the customer base (for example, by making customers feel valued and offering opportunities for participation in the brand community) appears particularly important for effective relationship management in such settings. These findings can be interpreted through cultural dimensions such as power distance, which help to explain why different strategies may be effective across contexts.

Conceptual background

Relationship norms

Not all relationships are equal. Research into CBRs shows that relationship type determines how consumers react to a brand's actions (Grégoire *et al*., 2009, 2011). A key mechanism explaining these responses is relational expectations. Relationships are built on implicit expectations about behavior, and reactions depend on whether these are met or violated (Oliver and Bearden, 1985). Although semantically distinct, several literature streams share this idea, including relational contracts (Montgomery *et al*., 2018), relationship norms (Aggarwal, 2004, 2014; Aggarwal and Larrick, 2012), and the disconfirmation/expectation paradigm (Harmeling *et al*., 2015; Oliver and Bearden, 1985). Among these, one prominent categorization of relationship norms is the communal and exchange norms (Clark and Mills, 2012).

A communal relationship norm describes a relationship governed by care for one another, provided on a non-contingent basis and founded on emotional bonding (Clark and Mills, 2012). These relationships resemble those between close friends or family members, where one helps the other without expecting something in return. In contrast, an exchange relationship norm is governed by self-interest, with benefits provided on a transactional, quid pro quo basis (Clark and Mills, 2012). These relationships lack emotional attachment, such as those with strangers or business partners. The communal and exchange categorization explains behavior based on adherence to underlying norms. For communal relationships, non-contingent care is expected, and *quid pro quo* giving violates the norm, harming the relationship (Clark and Mills, 1979). Partners in communal relationships are expected to act in the other's best interests and invest in their welfare. Conversely, in exchange relationships, benefits are contingent (e.g. a service provided is met with equitable compensation). Here, partners act out of self-interest, not genuine care.

Relationship norms and relationship rewards

Literature on motivation categorizes an individual's motivation to engage in social behavior as intrinsic or extrinsic (Bénabou and Tirole, 2003). Intrinsic motivations involve engaging in behavior for internal belonging, enjoyment, or satisfaction, while extrinsic motivations

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involve behavior driven by external rewards (Vallerand, 1997). In relationships, intrinsic rewards come from the relationship itself, whereas extrinsic rewards result from being in the relationship but are not inherent to it (Rempel *et al.*, 1985). Examples of intrinsic motivations include feelings of closeness, belonging, and the warmth of satisfying a partner (Rempel *et al.*, 1985). Research shows these motivations extend to the consumer–brand domain, where social-relatedness motivations affect trust and commitment toward a brand (Kim and Drumwright, 2016). Conversely, extrinsic motivations relate to economic value and functional rewards in a CBR (Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000; Sung and Choi, 2010).

When consumers perceive their relationship with a brand as communal, they expect mutual care motivated by a desire to see each other succeed. These relationships are more emotionally involved, relating to love (Clark and Finkel, 2005) and satisfaction (Clark *et al.*, 2010). Consumers with a communal orientation are motivated by intrinsic rewards such as belonging, closeness, and enjoyment. Conversely, consumers with an exchange orientation expect the brand to act in its self-interest and respond in kind, seeking prompt and equitable transactional rewards. Thus, exchange-oriented consumers are motivated by extrinsic rewards such as functional and transactional value. Seligman *et al.* (1980) support this, finding that extrinsic motivations diminish love compared to intrinsic ones. In such contexts, partners are valued for themselves, making extrinsic motivations incompatible with communal relationships. For instance, a customer in a communal relationship with a local bakery might feel joy simply from supporting a familiar business, while another customer with an exchange mindset might prioritize discounts or product quality over emotional ties.

On this basis, we expect that consumers who perceive their relationship to be communally oriented will only seek (and therefore relate positively to) intrinsic relationship rewards rather than extrinsic rewards. Conversely, consumers who perceive their relationship to be exchange oriented will value (and therefore relate positively to) extrinsic, and not intrinsic, relationship rewards. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1. Communal relationship norms relate positively to intrinsic relationship rewards.

H2. Exchange relationship norms relate positively to extrinsic relationship rewards.

Relationship rewards and the consumer–brand relationship

The successful development of a CBR is contingent on each partner feeling they benefit in some way from that relationship (Harmeling *et al.*, 2015). CBRs relate to a multidimensional construct that reflects relationship quality and strength (Fritz *et al.*, 2014). According to Fournier (1998), CBRs are built from affective attachment and supportive cognitive beliefs. Affective attachment describes the passionate, emotional, loving element of the relationship, which is captured by constructs such as passion and self-connection (Aaker *et al.*, 2004; Fritz *et al.*, 2014). Passion reflects the intensity and emotional connection with the brand (Albert and Merunka, 2013), while self-connection reflects how deeply the brand is integrated into the consumer's self-identity (Aaker *et al.*, 2004). Supportive cognitive beliefs, on the other hand, relate to partner quality and value inferences, which are reflected in constructs like commitment and trust (Aaker *et al.*, 2004). Commitment reflects the intention to maintain the relationship (Rusbult *et al.*, 1998), while trust captures confidence in the brand's ability to meet expectations (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001).

These two distinctive elements map closely to the intrinsic and extrinsic relationship rewards. Intrinsic rewards, such as sense of belonging, relate to feelings of attachment and increased brand commitment (Tuškej *et al.*, 2013). Yet, extrinsic rewards are also important in strengthening certain elements of the CBR. For example, Musa *et al.* (2005) found that perceived value is a driver of relational commitment. Likewise, Sung and Choi (2010) found that utilitarian based satisfaction, monetary investment, and favorable comparison with brand alternatives lead to a stronger CBR. Additionally, the positive effects of intrinsic and extrinsic relationship rewards are reportedly consistent across culturally heterogeneous samples (Musa

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et al., 2005; Sung and Choi, 2010; Tuškej *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, given that both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards map onto elements of the CBR, we argue that both rewards may explain variation in CBRs. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H3a. Intrinsic relationship rewards relate positively to consumer–brand relationship dimensions.

H3b. Extrinsic relationship rewards relate positively to consumer–brand relationship dimensions.

Exploration of potential cultural effects

CBRs are shaped by cultural contexts that influence how individuals understand, evaluate, and behave within relationships (De Mooij, 2017; Niros *et al.*, 2023; Wang *et al.*, 2018). The United Kingdom and Ghana offer two contrasting contexts in this regard.

In the UK, interactional norms typically reflect egalitarian expectations and individual agency. People are socialized to engage in bilateral, negotiated relationships, to evaluate partners based on reciprocity and fairness, and to treat interpersonal exchanges as symmetrical (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2018). These expectations are evident across a range of social settings. For example, in educational contexts, students are encouraged to question teachers, participate in discussions, and see themselves as active agents to the learning process (Manyukhina, 2022). In workplaces, decision making often involves consultation and participation rather than top-down directives. Applied to the branding context, these interactional norms suggest that consumers are likely to expect to be treated as active agents rather than passive recipients in their relationships with brands.

In contrast, in sub-Saharan educational systems such as Ghana, interactional norms are more strongly shaped by hierarchical expectations and deference to authority (Akyeampong, 2017). Social hierarchies are more visible and legitimate, and individuals occupying lower-status positions are less likely to question or challenge the actions of those in more powerful roles (Yang *et al.*, 2007). Authority figures are afforded respect, and social interactions tend to emphasize acceptance of unequal treatment and compliance with established roles. For example, in educational contexts, teacher-led instruction predominates, and students are expected to defer to their teachers rather than engage in bilateral negotiation. In organizational and marketplace settings, individuals often place trust in, and defer to, higher-status actors, and do not necessarily expect symmetrical treatment.

The communal/exchange relationship norms framework assumes that individuals are motivated by either self-interest (exchange) or concern for others (communal), and that relationships operate on principles of reciprocity and equity (Clark and Mills, 1979; Aggarwal, 2004). These assumptions are closely aligned with the expectations found in more reciprocal, egalitarian contexts such as the UK. In such contexts, questioning and evaluating the motives behind relational behavior is expected, reciprocity is normative, and fairness plays a central role in evaluating the quality of a relationship. As a result, communal and exchange norms are conceptually and functionally distinct. Communal relationships are grounded in voluntary concern for the partner's welfare and are primarily associated with intrinsic rewards, such as emotional closeness and affirmation. Exchange relationships, by contrast, are governed by instrumental benefit and equity-based calculations, and are therefore more strongly associated with extrinsic rewards, such as material benefits and fairness cues.

However, these assumptions do not hold in contexts characterized by more hierarchical relational expectations. Prior research shows that in such settings, individuals in less powerful positions tend to follow culturally prescribed role expectations rather than acting on self- or other-oriented motivations (Hofstede, 2011; Yang *et al.*, 2007). Questioning authority or evaluating the motives behind relational behavior is less normative, and interactions are not necessarily structured by equity considerations (Brockner *et al.*, 2001; Jiing-Lih *et al.*, 2007). Unequal treatment by those in power is often accepted as legitimate (Yang *et al.*, 2007), and individuals in

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subordinate roles are less likely to anticipate fair treatment or retaliate against perceived injustice in organizational settings (Jiing-Lih *et al.*, 2007; Lian *et al.*, 2012). Reciprocity is also less central in guiding interactions, as hierarchical relationships are maintained through deference and role conformity rather than negotiated exchange (Brockner *et al.*, 2001).

Prior research on hierarchical relationship contexts shows that individuals in subordinate positions depend on signals from the more powerful party to evaluate the value and stability of the relationship. Emotional signals, such as affirmation or expressions of closeness, are interpreted as indications of belonging and relational security, while material signals, such as tangible benefits or fairness cues, demonstrate investment and benevolence (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Yang *et al.*, 2007). In such contexts, both types of signals function as reassurance mechanisms, compensating for limited reciprocity and reduced opportunities to negotiate the relationship on equitable terms (Brockner *et al.*, 2001; Jiing-Lih *et al.*, 2007). Individuals are therefore less likely to differentiate between emotional and material forms of support, valuing both simultaneously as evidence of commitment from the higher-status partner. Because of these dynamics, the distinction between communal and exchange norms may become less meaningful in hierarchical contexts, as both types of rewards are interpreted as parallel indicators of relational value.

These contextual differences can be interpreted through the lens of cultural dimensions, which provide a useful framework for understanding broader cultural tendencies. Two dimensions are particularly relevant: power distance and individualism–collectivism (Hofstede, 2011). Power distance reflects the extent to which inequality is accepted and legitimized within a society, while individualism–collectivism captures the degree to which individuals view themselves as autonomous versus embedded within social groups. Societies characterized by lower power distance and higher individualism typically emphasize bilateral, equity-based relationships, whereas those with higher power distance and collectivism tend to emphasize hierarchical, role-based expectations (Hofstede, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2018). The U.K. generally reflects the former profile, while Ghana reflects the latter. Viewed through this lens, the differences in relational expectations observed across the two contexts align with broader cultural tendencies. Based on these contextual dynamics and cultural patterns, we expect the way consumers link relational norms to rewards to differ across the two contexts:

H4a-b. In a relationally reciprocal cultural context (i.e., U.K.), (a) a perceived communal relationship will only relate to intrinsic relationship rewards and (b) a perceived exchange relationship will relate only to extrinsic relationship rewards.

H5a-b. In a relationally hierarchical cultural context (i.e., Ghana), (b) a perceived communal relationship will relate to both intrinsic and extrinsic relationship rewards, and (b) a perceived exchange relationship will relate to both intrinsic and extrinsic relationship rewards.

Attachment anxiety

While cultural norms shape general relationship behaviors, individuals differ in how they approach and experience relational dynamics. To account for this variation, we draw on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), which explains how early caregiver interactions form internal working models that guide relational motivation and expectations across the lifespan (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). We focus on attachment anxiety as our individual-level moderator for three reasons. First, it directly reflects relational motivation and emotional dependence, core components of how people respond to communal and exchange norms (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007; Clark and Mills, 2012). Second, attachment theory is grounded in vertically structured relationships, making it especially relevant in relationally hierarchical cultures. Third, it has been empirically validated in consumer–brand contexts, where it predicts loyalty, emotional investment, and reactions to brand behavior (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016; Mende *et al.*, 2019; Vlachos *et al.*, 2010).

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In cultures with greater hierarchical relational expectations, authority often suppresses relational motivation and reciprocity. However, individuals with high attachment anxiety may diverge from this pattern. First, individuals with anxious attachment styles initiate brand relationships to compensate for a lack of security and belongingness in interpersonal relationships (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016; Mende *et al.*, 2019). These individuals are thus highly motivated to form strong consumer–brand relationships, fulfilling the relational motivation prerequisite. Second, although followers in high power distance cultures generally have lower reciprocity expectations, those high in attachment anxiety are hypervigilant to their partner's behavior (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2001). They are preoccupied with the brand's role in building self-esteem and therefore hold higher reciprocity expectations (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2009), fulfilling the reciprocity prerequisite.

As such, anxiously attached individuals in cultures with more pronounced hierarchies such as Ghana may respond to relationship norms in ways similar to those with less pronounced hierarchies such as the UK, associating communal norms with intrinsic rewards and exchange norms with extrinsic rewards. In contrast, in the UK, where closeness and reciprocity are already normative, attachment anxiety is unlikely to moderate these relationships.

H6. In a relationally hierarchical cultural context (i.e., Ghana), attachment anxiety will moderate the relationship between communal and exchange relationship norms and intrinsic and extrinsic relationship rewards. Specifically, (a) when attachment anxiety is high (vs low), the communal relationship norm will only relate to intrinsic relationship rewards, and (b) the exchange relationship norm will only relate to extrinsic relationship rewards.

The hypothesized relationships are summarized in Figure 1.

Methodology

Study setting

To test the conceptual model, we used two independent samples from the UK ($n = 511$) and Ghana ($n = 263$). These two national contexts were selected to enable the exploration of how cultural differences might shape consumer–brand relationships. To strengthen the theoretical grounding of this comparison, we first conducted an *a priori* cultural profiling analysis to identify systematic differences between the two countries. For this purpose, we drew on Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions, one of the most widely used frameworks for examining

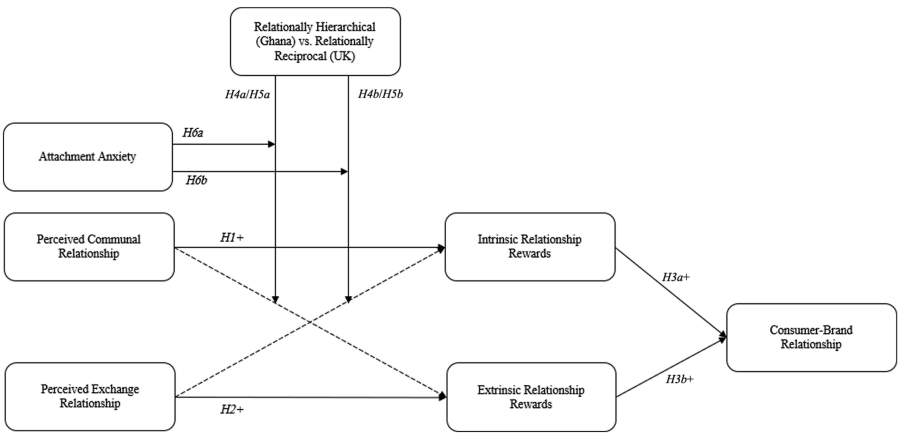

Figure 1. Conceptual model

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national-level cultural variation. While prior research has cautioned against treating two countries as direct proxies for cultural constructs (e.g. Cadogan *et al.*, 2001), our approach follows these recommendations by profiling the cultural characteristics of each context and using these empirically observed differences to inform our theorizing. This exploratory analysis, reported in Web Appendix 1, showed that the most pronounced differences between the two samples were reflected in power distance and collectivism–individualism. These dimensions provide a useful theoretical lens for interpreting cross-cultural differences in relational norms and rewards.

Both sets of respondents were sampled using an identical online survey. Both surveys used the English language due to the English language proficiency of the U.K. and Ghanaian populations, although a screening question was also added to ensure this proficiency. The university–student relationship was used as the context to study the CBR phenomenon. We chose the university context for several reasons. First, the university sector is a significant global industry, valued at over $736.8 billion (GrandviewResearch, 2024), and increasingly competitive, with student satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty viewed as key brand metrics. Second, cross-cultural variation in educational systems offers a compelling way to explore differences in relational expectations. For example, in Ghana, teacher–student interactions are typically more hierarchical and formalized (Akyeampong, 2017), whereas in the UK, relationships are more interactive, reciprocal, and egalitarian (Manyukhina, 2022). Third, and most importantly, the student–university relationship shares key psychological and relational characteristics with consumer–brand relationships. Like commercial brands, universities offer both transactional value (e.g. tuition, credentials) and emotional meaning (e.g. pride, belonging) (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2001), resulting in behaviors such as advocacy, attachment, and brand love (McAlexander *et al.*, 2005; Balaji *et al.*, 2016). A growing body of research in top marketing journals supports the conceptual validity of this context. For example, studies show that university brand personality and prestige predict brand identification (Balaji *et al.*, 2016), brand meaning drives brand attachment and commitment (Dennis *et al.*, 2016), and affective brand image components are more influential than cognitive ones in shaping loyalty behaviors (Alwi and Kitchen, 2014). Students from 16 universities were used within the sample to reduce any potential confounding effect of the specific university. To reduce any confounding effects of program, a range (50+) of undergraduate programs were included in the survey.

For the U.K. sample, the majority of the respondents were in their first year of university (64% 1st year, 22.3% 2nd year, 8.8% 3rd year, 4.1% 4th year, 0.8% 5th year). The majority were also home students, meaning they were studying in the country where they were citizens (84.1% home, 15.9% international). For the Ghanaian sample, most respondents were also in their first year of university (75.3% 1st year, 13.7% 2nd year, 3.4% 3rd year, 6.5% 4th year, 1.1% 5th year). As in the U.K. sample, the majority were also home students (98.5% home, 1.5% international).

Measure development

The construct measurements are drawn from prior research and adapted to the study's context. Each item was measured using a Likert-type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. Specifically, communal norms were defined as "the expectation that relational giving is provided on the basis of the other relational partners' welfare" and exchange norms were defined as "the expectation that relational giving was provided on the basis of the relational partners' own welfare", and both were measured using items adapted from Johnson and Grimm (2010). Attachment anxiety was defined as "a desire to be close to and fear of losing a brand" and was operationalized using Mende and Bolton's (2011) scale. Intrinsic relationship rewards were measured using Carroll and Ahuvia's (2006) "self-expression scale". We define intrinsic relationship rewards as those which are internally beneficial, for example the ability to express oneself, feel included, or feel valued. They are emotional and

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internal in nature (Kim and Drumwright, 2016). Extrinsic relationship rewards are the external benefits sought in a relationship (Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000). For this reason, functional value is used as a proxy of external relationship rewards. Extrinsic relationship rewards were measured using Sweeney and Soutar's (2001) "functional value scale". The CBR was conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct including passion, commitment, self-connection, and trust components, in line with the conceptual and empirical tradition in the field (Fritz *et al.*, 2014; Reimann and Aron, 2014; Sternberg, 1986). Passion was measured as an intense feeling towards an entity using a scale from Albert and Merunka (2013). Commitment was measured as a behavioral intention to remain in the relationship using a scale from Rusbult *et al.* (1998). Self-connection was measured as the integration of the brand into the self-identity using a scale from Aaker *et al.* (2004), Finally, trust was defined as the willingness of the consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001) using a scale from Delgado-Ballester *et al.* (2003) [1].

Attachment anxiety was conceptualized as an individual level trait, rather than a cultural level variable. However, as some studies argue that attachment style can be culturally sensitive (Keller, 2013), we formally compared the mean attachment anxiety across the two country samples. An independent samples *t*-test showed that the mean of attachment anxiety in the UK (M = 3.39, SD = 1.32) and Ghana (M = 3.34, SD = 1.34) were not significantly different ($t(772) = 0.551$, $p > 0.05$), indicating that attachment style was not empirically related to culture in our data.

Control variables. To control for potential confounding effects, year of study and student status were included as control variables. Year of study was included as a proxy of relationship duration to account for the possibility that some students become more communally oriented as the relationship with their university develops (Clark and Mills, 2012). Student status (i.e., whether the student identified as a home or international student) was included to account for cultural differences that may stem from the difference between where the respondent is from and where they are currently residing.

Analysis and results

Measurement validation

To assess the dimensionality, reliability, and validity of our measurement model, we used a confirmatory factor analysis CFA using AMOS. We specifically estimated a three CFA models with the pooled data (i.e., both the U.K. and Ghana data sets combined), U.K. data, and Ghana data (see Web Appendix 2). The model fit indices for each of these data sets indicated acceptable model fit (Pooled: $\chi^2_{(331)} = 1155.850$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.935; IFI = 0.936; RMSEA = 0.057, Ghana.: $\chi^2_{(331)} = 519.651$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.950; IFI = 0.951; RMSEA = 0.047, UK: $\chi^2_{(331)} = 1101.882$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.891; IFI = 0.892; RMSEA = 0.07). All indicators loaded significantly onto their latent variables and were above the common threshold of 0.5 (Luo and Toubia, 2015; Sood and Kumar, 2017). Next, Web Appendix 3 shows the results of the validity and reliability testing for each population. The Cronbach's alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR) scores for each construct were also above the commonly used acceptable thresholds of 0.7 (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011) indicating satisfactory reliability.

Next, we tested measurement invariance across the two country groups by estimating two models. The first model constrained measurement loadings across both groups and the second of which set the measurement loadings equal across groups. In doing so, we tested whether the way in which each construct was measured was consistent across the two samples (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1998). Based on commonly suggested thresholds (e.g. ΔCFI <0.01 and ΔRMSEA <0.015) indicating comparable fit (Chen, 2007; Cheung and Rensvold, 2002)), we tested full metric measurement invariance (i.e., all factor loadings constrained to be equal) and found that the invariant model showed significantly worse fit than the unconstrained model ΔCFI >0.01, ΔRMSEA >0.015. In line with prior research (Byrne, 2004), we tested

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measurement invariance of each construct and then each item to ascertain which items displayed invariance. The results suggest that two of the items (i.e., Exc1 and Com2) were statistically invariant across the two populations. Although it is preferential to display full measurement invariance, it has been argued that it is a condition to be striven for, not one expected to be fully realized (Collins and Horn, 1991). Moreover, previous research holds that partial invariance is acceptable as long as at least one item of each construct is invariant (Byrne *et al.*, 1989). In our case, only one item of each the communal and exchange constructs were invariant. When these items were unconstrained, the model comparisons showed only a marginal decrease in fit (ΔCFI <0.01 and ΔRMSEA <0.015), suggesting measurement invariance among all other items in the dataset.

We also tested for Common Method Variance (CMV) in our data due to the self-report nature of our measurement instrument. In line with previous recommendation (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003), common latent factor analysis was conducted via a comparison of our original CFA and the same CFA with a single latent factor on the pooled sample. The loadings of the item measures and their latent variables in the two models were compared to check that no loading was reduced by greater than 0.2 when the common latent factor was introduced (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Our results confirmed this was the case, supporting the notion of an absence of serious CMV in our data.

Results

Main effects. We tested our model using covariance-based SEM in AMOS environment. The full results, including fit statistics, are presented in Table 1 [2, 3]. The results of the pooled sample show that the communal relationship norm is positively related to intrinsic relationship behaviors ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H1. However, the exchange relationship norm also relates significantly to intrinsic rewards ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$), which goes counter to H1. The results also show that the exchange relationship norm relates significantly and positively to extrinsic rewards ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.05$) in support for H2. However, the communal relationship norm also relates significantly to extrinsic relationship behavior ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$), counter to H2. Next, the results from the pooled sample show that both intrinsic ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.05$) and extrinsic ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$) relationship rewards significantly and positively relate to the CBR, supporting H3a and H3b respectively.

Cross cultural moderating effects. To examine whether the effects differ across the two cultural contexts, we conducted a multigroup structural equation modeling analysis. In line with H4, the results show that, in the U.K. sample, communal relationship norms relate positively to intrinsic rewards ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.05$) but exchange relationship norms do not ($\beta = 0.10$, $p > 0.05$), supporting H4a. Moreover, exchange relationship norms relate positively to extrinsic rewards ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.05$) while communal relationship norms do not ($\beta = -0.03$, $p > 0.05$), supporting H4b.

In the Ghanaian sample, the results show that communal relationship norms relate positively to both intrinsic rewards ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.05$) and extrinsic rewards ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H5a. H5b is also supported, as exchange relationship norms significantly positively relate to both intrinsic ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.05$) and extrinsic ($\beta = 0.57$, $p < 0.05$) relationship rewards.

Attachment anxiety moderating effects. We tested for the moderating effect of attachment anxiety on the association between exchange and communal relationship norms, and extrinsic and intrinsic rewards in both samples. For the interaction terms, we mean-centered the scales before the cross-product calculations and calculated the loading and error of the product terms using Ping's (1995) equations.

The full results of the interaction for both samples can be found in Table 1. First, H6a was not supported by our results as there was no significant interaction between attachment anxiety and communal norms. However, H6b was supported as the results show that attachment anxiety negatively moderates the effect of the exchange relationship norm on intrinsic rewards

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Table 1. Structural equation model results

	Pooled		U.K.		Ghana		Multi group comparisons (U.K. vs Ghana)	
	β	Critical ratio	β	Critical ratio	β	Critical ratio	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf
Hypothesized paths								
Communal → Intrinsic	0.27	6.00***	0.36	3.81***	0.37	5.28***	1.43	1
Exchange → Intrinsic	0.38	7.90***	0.10	1.16	0.45	6.48***	4.29*	1
Communal → Extrinsic	0.12	2.61**	−0.03	−0.26	0.25	3.58***	3.75*	1
Exchange → Extrinsic	0.59	10.47***	0.54	5.11***	0.57	6.65***	0.21	1
Intrinsic → CBR	0.54	13.40***	0.56	10.54***	0.40	4.63***	12.22***	1
Extrinsic → CBR	0.22	5.58***	0.15	3.14**	0.26	3.11**	0.00	1
Exchange × Anxious → Intrinsic	−0.02	−0.41	0.18	1.23	−0.26	−2.42*	4.59*	1
Communal × Anxious → Extrinsic	−0.00	0.27	−0.23	−1.43	−0.03	−0.62	1.67	1
Control paths								
Anxious → Intrinsic	0.00	0.12	0.01	0.08	0.23	1.89	2.41	1
Anxious → Extrinsic	0.02	0.41	0.00	0.04	0.22	2.00*	3.10	1
Exchange × Anxious → Extrinsic	−0.04	−0.85	0.20	1.27	−0.26	−2.46*	5.63*	1
Communal × Anxious → Intrinsic	0.01	0.27	−0.16	−1.07	−0.02	−0.26	0.99	1
Communal → CBR	0.06	1.80	0.14	2.05*	0.08	1.39	1.68	1
Exchange → CBR	0.21	4.50***	0.17	2.29*	0.26	3.19*	0.11	1
Year → CBR	−0.04	−1.53	−0.02	−0.69	−0.03	−0.60	0.03	1
Student Status → CBR	−0.04	−1.79	−0.02	−0.53	0.02	0.32	0.24	1
	$\chi^2_{(DF)}$	$1412.87_{(438)}$	$\chi^2_{(DF)}$	$1352.57_{(438)}$	$\chi^2_{(DF)}$	$662.61_{(438)}$		
	CFI	0.93	CFI	0.88	CFI	0.94		
	TLI	0.92	TLI	0.85	TLI	0.94		
	RMSEA	0.05	RMSEA	0.06	RMSEA	0.04		

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in the Ghanaian population ($\beta = -0.26$, $p < 0.05$). Figures 2 and 3 provide a visual representation of the two significant interactions.

Additional analyses: mediation tests. To explore the possibility that intrinsic and extrinsic relational rewards have a mediating role between perceived communal relationship norm and perceived exchange relationship norm, respectively, and the CBR we conducted a mediation analysis with AMOS 26 using bootstrapping with 5,000 samples, the results of which can be found in Web Appendix 4.

First, in relation to the indirect effect of perceived exchange norms on the CBR through extrinsic relationship rewards, the indirect effect was found to be significant across both samples (pooled: $\text{Effect}_{\text{Indirect_extrinsic}} = 0.07$, 95% confidence interval = 0.05, 0.10, UK: $M_{\text{Indirect_extrinsic}} = 0.05$, 95% confidence interval = 0.02, 0.13, Ghana: $\text{Effect}_{\text{Indirect_extrinsic}} = 0.05$, 95% confidence interval = 0.01, 0.10). Furthermore, the direct link of perceived exchange norms on the CBR (pooled: $\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$, UK: $\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$, Ghana: $\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.05$) in the presence of extrinsic relationship rewards as mediator was found to be significant, implying extrinsic relationship rewards only partially mediates the relationship between perceived exchange norms and the CBR across all samples.

Second, in relation to the indirect effect of perceived communal norms on the CBR through intrinsic relationship rewards, the indirect effect was found to be significant in the pooled and Ghana samples (pooled: $\text{Effect}_{\text{Indirect_intrinsic}} = 0.09$, 95% confidence interval = 0.05, 0.13, Ghana: $M_{\text{Indirect_intrinsic}} = 0.04$, 95% confidence interval = 0.02, 0.08). Whereas, in the U.K. sample, intrinsic relationship rewards were not found to be a significant mediator. In addition, in the pooled and Ghana sample the direct link of perceived communal norms on the CBR (pooled: $\beta = 0.06$, $p > 0.05$, Ghana: $\beta = 0.08$, $p > 0.05$) in the presence of intrinsic relationship rewards as mediator was not found to be significant, implying a full mediation effect on intrinsic relationship rewards.

To examine whether mediation effects varied by dimension of the CBR construct, we also conducted separate mediation analyses using each dimension (passion, commitment, self-connection, and trust) as dependent variables (instead of the formed CBR measure). Overall, the pattern of mediation remained substantively similar across dimensions, with all mediation paths either significant or approaching significance ($p < 0.10$), with one exception: in the Ghanaian sample, extrinsic rewards were not a significant mediator between exchange norms and passion. This slight deviation is theoretically unsurprising, as passion represents the affective component of the CBR, making extrinsic rewards less relevant in this context. The full results of the mediation tests by dimension can also be in Web Appendix 4.

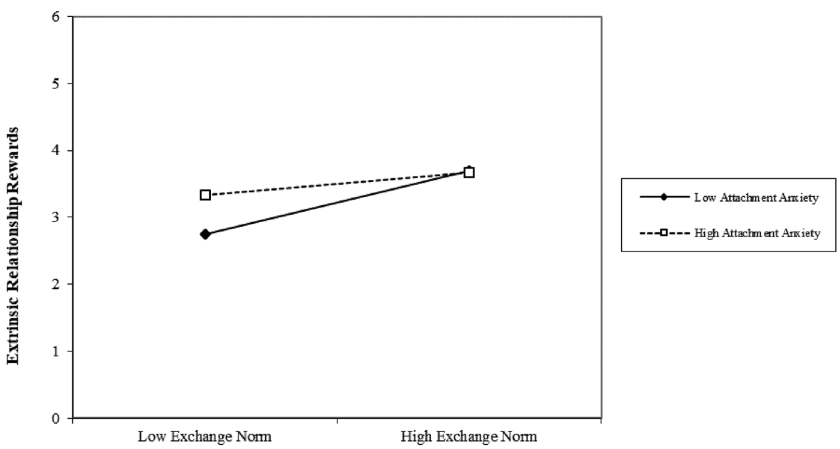

Figure 2. Interaction plot of exchange norm and attachment anxiety on extrinsic relationship reward in the Ghana population

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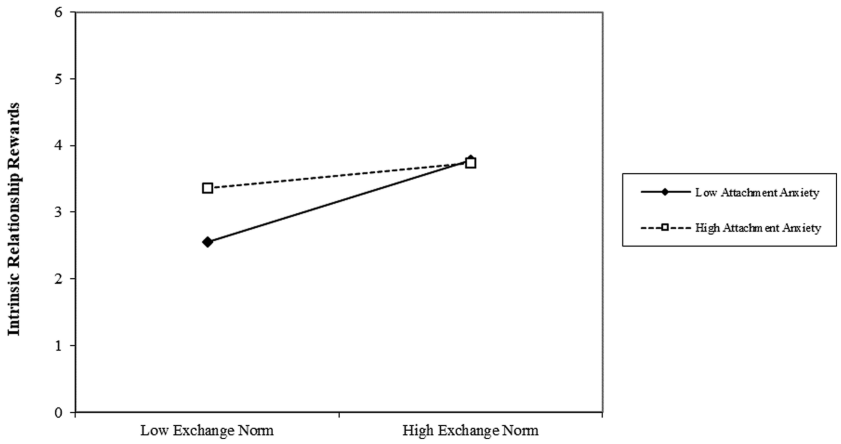

Figure 3. Interaction plot of exchange norm and attachment anxiety on intrinsic relationship reward in the Ghana population

Additional analysis: rival model testing. We estimated a series of rival models to test the robustness of the results (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988) (see Web Appendix 5). The literature on CBRs offers alternative views on the causal position of the CBR construct. In some studies, CBR strength has been modeled as the outcome of the relationship (Chang and Chieng, 2006), while, in others, CBR strength is modeled as the predictor of relationship (Kim *et al.*, 2014). As such, we tested three rival models, Rival Model A swapped the position of the CBR and rewards so that the CBR was modeled as a predictor of relationship rewards, rather than an outcome. Rival Model B modeled CBR as the predictor, relationship norms as the mediator, and relationship rewards as the outcome. Finally, Rival Model C modeled relationship rewards as the predictor, communal and exchange norms as the mediator, and the CBR as the outcome. As these models are non-nested, we compared them using the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and the Browne-Cudeck Criterion (BCC), which account for both model fit and complexity. Web Appendix 5 presents the full results of these comparisons (e.g. CFI, TLI, RMSEA). Notably, the proposed model yielded the lowest AIC and BCC values across all samples (pooled, UK, and Ghana), indicating superior relative fit.

Additional analysis: dimensional analysis. To address potential concerns around the use of formative constructs as endogenous variables (Cadogan and Lee, 2013), we conducted follow-up analyses at the level of individual CBR dimensions (see Web Appendix 6). These results show that passion and self-connection are largely intrinsic-driven: intrinsic benefits strongly predicted self-connection ($\beta = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$), while extrinsic benefits were weak or non-significant, particularly for passion in Ghana ($\beta = 0.08$, n.s.). By contrast, trust and commitment displayed a more balanced or extrinsic-driven pattern: extrinsic benefits were comparatively stronger for trust ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$) than intrinsic benefits ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$), and both intrinsic ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$) and extrinsic ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$) benefits contributed to commitment. These findings are consistent with theoretical expectations since intrinsic benefits underpin emotional intensity and identity-based attachment, whereas extrinsic benefits underpin dependability and stability. They also complement the global CBR analysis by revealing systematic dimensional-level variation, illustrating the value of examining relational mechanisms at both aggregate and disaggregate (dimensional) levels.

Discussion

This study advances international marketing and CBR literature by examining how relationship norms (communal vs. exchange) and reward types (intrinsic vs. extrinsic)

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function in different cultural contexts, and how individual attachment styles shape these dynamics. Our findings largely support the proposed conceptual model and offer novel insights into how cultural contexts and individual attachment orientations jointly shape relational expectations and outcomes.

As expected, communal norms were positively associated with intrinsic rewards (H1), and exchange norms with extrinsic rewards (H2), reinforcing the established theoretical linkage between relational motivations and reward types (Clark and Mills, 2012; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards were positively related to CBR dimensions (H3a-b), aligning with past research showing that emotional and instrumental benefits each contribute to brand closeness and commitment (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016; Park *et al.*, 2010).

Notably, we found that the cultural context significantly moderates these effects. In the U.K. sample, consumers clearly differentiated between communal and exchange relationships, with each norm predicting its theoretically associated reward type (H4a-b). This supports the idea that consumers in egalitarian cultures are guided by self- and other-focused motivations and expect equity in their brand relationships (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010). In the Ghanaian sample, both communal and exchange norms were positively associated with both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (H5a-b). This supports our theorization that, in relationally hierarchical contexts, disempowered consumers are less concerned with equity and more motivated by the need for psychological reassurance from powerful relationship partners (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Yang *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, any form of reward, whether emotional or material, can signal relational validation and stability in these contexts.

Our findings also offer partial support for H6. Specifically, we found that in the Ghanaian context, individuals high in attachment anxiety responded to communal norms primarily through intrinsic rewards (H6a), consistent with their heightened emotional needs and desire for relational closeness (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007; Mende *et al.*, 2019). However, contrary to expectations, H6b was not supported: attachment anxiety did not significantly moderate the relationship between exchange norms and extrinsic rewards.

This result warrants closer examination. One possible explanation is that highly anxious individuals in contexts where hierarchical expectations are more pronounced may not view extrinsic rewards, such as benefits or fairness cues, as sufficient signals of relational security. Prior research suggests that anxiously attached consumers prioritize emotional connection and consistency over material benefits (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2001; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2009). In hierarchical contexts where power imbalances are normalized, material rewards may be seen as transactional and impersonal, thus failing to satisfy the deeper psychological needs of anxiously attached individuals. Additionally, it is possible that exchange-based relationships lack the intimacy required to activate attachment-related mechanisms, limiting their relevance for anxiously attached individuals (Mende and Bolton, 2011). This finding challenges the assumption that anxious individuals universally seek all forms of reassurance and underscores the importance of context and perceived authenticity in moderating attachment effects.

Theoretical contributions

Our study provides several theoretical contributions to the international marketing field and CBR literature. First, we advance understanding of relationship norm theory within the international marketing domain by looking at the relevance of cultural differences in the mechanisms that underlie CBRs. Although CBRs have been extensively studied in consumer research and psychology fields, there is limited theorization and empirical validation of CBRs from a cross-cultural perspective. Our results indicate that the traditional communal–exchange categorization, commonly used to distinguish and explain consumers' relationships with brands (Aggarwal, 2014; Aggarwal and Larrick, 2012), may not fully capture how consumers relate to brands in cultural contexts where hierarchical relational expectations are more

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pronounced. These patterns can be interpreted through cultural dimensions such as power distance, which may reflect differences in underlying relational values (Brockner *et al.*, 2001; Jiing-Lih *et al.*, 2007; Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016). In particular, our findings raise questions about the universality of equity principles as the dominant mechanism underpinning communal–exchange distinctions across contexts. This advances knowledge on the predictive capacity of relational equity as a core explanatory principle in both general relationship theory (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) and CBRs specifically (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015).

More generally, our study contributes to the conceptualization of communal and exchange norms in the CBR literature. Foundational work (e.g. Clark and Mills, 1979; Aggarwal, 2004, Aggarwal and Larrick, 2012) treats these norms as largely distinct, leading to opposing relational expectations and behaviors. More recent work, however, such as Johnson and Grimm (2010), suggests that communal and exchange elements can co-exist within the same relationship, functioning along a continuum rather than as mutually exclusive categories. Our findings support elements of both views. We retain the communal–exchange typology for its explanatory value, but we also find evidence of conceptual and empirical overlap in the Ghanaian context, where hierarchical social dynamics may blur the boundaries between these relational forms. Rather than treating them as fixed structures, we conceptualize communal and exchange norms as dominant orientations that can be made salient through brand positioning, while still allowing for hybrid relational expectations.

Second, we contribute to literature on CBRs by introducing the concept of attachment style as a culturally relevant, individual-level construct in relational perceptions, and a potential explanation for why the communal–exchange distinction is less predictive in contexts where hierarchical relational expectations are stronger. Previous research on attachment theory in the cross-cultural domain (Van *et al.*, 2008) has demonstrated individual variability in attachment anxiety within cultures. Our study explores attachment style as a possible factor shaping how relationship norms operate in different cultural contexts, particularly those that may reflect higher power distance. By providing this alternative explanation, we not only uncover important differences between cultural contexts but also show that such differences do not apply universally within a single context. Specifically, we find that attachment anxiety appears to explain the relevance of communal–exchange norms only in the Ghanaian sample. This is a novel and counterintuitive finding, as some previous research has suggested that attachment styles operate uniformly across cultures (Yum and Li, 2007). We offer two potential explanations. First, the robustness of communal–exchange mechanisms in more relationally reciprocal cultural contexts may suppress potential interaction effects of attachment style in pooled samples. Second, in contexts characterized by hierarchical relationships, the inherent inequality between partners may conflict with the relationship equality assumptions typical of lower hierarchy contexts. Taken together, these findings suggest that individual and cultural factors may interact to shape the development of CBRs in ways that reflect, but are not reducible to, standalone cultural dimensions such as power distance.

Third, our findings further contribute to the consumer psychology paradigm which employs interpersonal relationship theories to explain marketplace relationships. We suggest that applying these theories in international contexts requires caution, as cultural differences, potentially linked to dimensions such as power distance, may limit their explanatory power beyond Western settings. Moreover, our pooled model results suggest that exchange norms relate not only to extrinsic relationship rewards but also to intrinsic relationship rewards. This is an interesting and unexpected finding. Given that exchange relationships are low involvement and transactional in nature, consumers high in exchange norm should not be motivated by intrinsic relationship rewards such as identification benefits (Clark and Finkel, 2005). However, this may relate to the underlying transactional nature of a market relationship. Within the stream of literature considered in this research, theory is borrowed from the interpersonal relationships literature and applied to market relationships. Despite the number of studies using this implicit metaphoric transfer, its appropriateness has been challenged by Hunt and Menon (1995) who argue that no matter the level of involvement, the relationship

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between a person and an inanimate entity cannot mirror an interpersonal relationship. Indeed, within the communal–exchange domain, Johnson and Grimm (2010) found evidence that, instead of acting as two distinct norm structures, communal–exchange may in fact be different levels of the same spectrum. Our results appear to support this alternative proposition. Despite the potential for greater levels of emotionality in market relationships, such relationships are fundamentally transactional, even if they can still be a source of a range of relationship rewards. Thus, our findings contribute to the ongoing, wider debate around the validity of the metaphoric transfer of interpersonal relationships onto person–entity relationships and the need to be cautious when drawing such parallels in cross-cultural contexts.

Managerial implications

The first managerial implication of our findings is that international marketers may have a wider range of relationship-building tools available to them in contexts characterized by more hierarchical expectations compared to more reciprocal ones. The extent of this range depends strongly on the type of relationship the brands want (or have already built) with their customers. In relationally reciprocal cultural contexts (such as the UK), managers of brands positioned as exchange partners should employ extrinsic relationship rewards that retain an equitable balance in the relationship with consumers. These could include tactics such as sales promotions that increase the value of the product, functional upgrades for loyal customers, superior convenience, higher delivery speed, effective after-sales service, and immediate complaint resolution. In contrast, brands positioned as communal partners may benefit more from intrinsic rewards such as the development of brand communities, active participation in brand events, or involving customers in new product development (e.g. Cova *et al.*, 2015), along with promotional activities that boost their identification with the brand without necessarily increasing the functional value they receive in return for their commitment. In more hierarchical cultural contexts (such as Ghana), both intrinsic and extrinsic reward practices appear to be valued, as any intervention that decreases the psychological distance between the "brand-leader" and the "consumer-follower" may be appreciated by consumers.

The second implication refers to the need to adapt relationship marketing programs across cultural contexts and consider these differences when designing relationship-building strategies. Our findings suggest that relational mechanisms vary across contexts, and these differences may reflect cultural dimensions such as power distance. Thus, what is acceptable and expected in one context may not be acceptable or expected in another. Previous research suggests that consumers following an exchange relationship norm will not seek intrinsic relationship rewards (Clark and Mills, 2012). Contrary to this expectation, in the Ghanaian context, exchange-oriented consumers did seek intrinsic rewards. We therefore recommend that managers in contexts characterized by more hierarchical expectations vary their relationship-building strategies depending on the type of relationship they already have or the one they wish to create. For instance, if a brand wants to build a more reciprocal-style relationship (e.g. in FMCG markets where repeat purchase is essential), they should emphasize the sincere aspects of their brand personality. In contrast, if they are engaged in a more institutional, power-dynamic relationship with their consumers (e.g. in durable goods categories with less frequent repurchase or cross-selling opportunities), they should emphasize the exciting characteristics of their brand personality. Although communal CBRs are frequently presented as optimal for managerial purposes (e.g. lower threat from extreme brand transgressions (Wan *et al.*, 2011), more positive word of mouth (Liu and Gal, 2011), ability to command higher price premiums (Aggarwal, 2004)), our findings indicate that in relationally reciprocal contexts, satisfying the transactional expectations of consumers can still lead to greater CBR strength without the need to provide costly or unnecessary intrinsic rewards.

The third implication refers to the role of attachment style in contexts where hierarchical expectations are more pronounced. Our results suggest that attachment anxiety can negate the potential of consumers in such contexts to continue their relationship with a brand following a

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wide range of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Thus, beyond matching relational norm type (exchange vs. communal) with relational reward types (extrinsic vs. intrinsic), managers operating in these contexts may benefit by reducing attachment anxiety through initiatives that make customers feel secure in their relationship with the brand. This can be achieved through reminders of the customer's value to the brand, personalized communications, product customization, and acknowledgment of the individual consumer's lifecycle for brand success.

Limitations and future research avenues

Our findings are subject to limitations that offer interesting directions for future research. First, we focus on attachment style as the explanation of why relational norms relate differently with rewards across cultural contexts. However, other relational constructs may also warrant further investigation. Future studies should consider the effects of other individual traits with the potential to shape relational mechanisms across cultures, such as introversion/extraversion, personality types, and emotional contagion.

Second, our research was conducted in two countries, the U.K. and Ghana. These two contrasting contexts provided an opportunity to explore how cultural differences in relational expectations shape consumer–brand relationships. However, only testing one population in each context limits the potential generalizability of the study to other settings. Despite the steps taken to explore and document cultural differences between the samples (see Web Appendix 1), it remains possible that the observed effects reflect other cultural or economic factors in addition to those captured by the relationally hierarchical/reciprocal distinction. Future research could strengthen the generalizability of our findings by including more countries in additional cross-cultural replications.

Third, our conceptual model is tested on a student–university relationship sample. However, given the unique power dynamics within higher education institutional structures, the findings drawn from this relationship context may not generalize to all CBRs. Thus, in considering the contextual factors surrounding the university–student relationship (e.g. the contractual element, the potential "parental" role of the university, and the indirect financial transaction), replications in different marketplace relationship contexts would also be welcome.

Notes

1. In our main analysis, we aggregate the scores of the four dimensions and use a formative composite CBR score as the dependent variable. However, to address concerns about the use of formative composite variables in endogenous positions (Cadogan and Lee, 2013), we repeat all the analyses with separate CBR dimensions (see the section: "Additional Analysis: Dimensional Analysis" and Web Appendices 4 and 6).
2. As a robustness check, we re-estimated the model excluding international students (U.K. = 81, Ghana = 4). Results remained consistent in direction, significance, and effect size.
3. To address sample size imbalance, we re-estimated the model on a randomly drawn U.K. subsample ($n = 263$) matched to the Ghana sample. Results remained consistent, indicating that the larger U.K. sample did not bias the findings.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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