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## Article

# Modern love: Exploring loyalty in a time of evolving brand-consumer relationships

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# Marketing Review St.Gallen

## Brand Loyalty



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# Modern Love

Exploring Loyalty in a Time of Evolving  
Brand-Consumer Relationships

Traditional views of brand loyalty overlook its evolving nature in today's digital landscape. Through a systematic theoretical analysis of brand-consumer relationships, we reveal how loyalty manifests through different relationship depths and propose a conceptual framework for building meaningful connections in an era of constant change.

Snigdha Pandey, Lisa Krick

Traditional loyalty frameworks portrayed brand-consumer relationships as straightforward love stories: make your customer fall in love and live happily ever after. But today's market reality challenges this simplistic view. Some industry observers point to declining emotional connections and increased price sensitivity as evidence of the death of loyalty (Villa, 2023). However, a deeper analysis suggests that brand loyalty isn't disappearing but rather evolving into more nuanced forms (Swaminathan et al., 2020).

This evolution demands a fresh examination of how brand loyalty manifests in today's context. Drawing on current research in branding and psychology, analyzing industry trends, and examining recent brand cases, we uncover the mechanisms driving meaningful connections in the digital age.

## Misconceptions About Brand Loyalty

To understand how brand loyalty manifests today, we must first address two persistent misconceptions that shape current thinking:

- **Repeat purchase does not equal brand loyalty**

Traditional metrics like repeat purchase behavior often overstate loyalty, as convenience and availability also influence repurchase decisions (Dick & Basu, 1994). Research reveals that emotional attachment and trust are stronger drivers of enduring loyalty (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995).

- **Satisfaction alone doesn't build loyalty**

Customer satisfaction alone rarely guarantees loyalty. Post-purchase brand communications that can transform positive experiences into deeper emotional connections play a critical role (Mittal & Kamakura,

2001; Yoo et al., 2000). Studies show that these engagements foster attitudinal loyalty, which supports premium pricing and advocacy (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

## The Changing Face of Brand Loyalty

Why do some brands achieve unprecedented customer devotion while others see loyalty programs fail despite generous rewards? The answer lies in understanding how digital transformation, evolving consumer psychology, and new forms of value creation intersect to reshape brand relationships. Our multi-faceted analysis reveals three interconnected shifts that are leading to a new model of brand loyalty.

### Shift 1: Towards Active Brand Co-Creation

Today's consumers don't just participate in brand narratives – they initiate, transform, and reimagine them. Digital platforms have fundamentally altered the power dynamic, transforming con-



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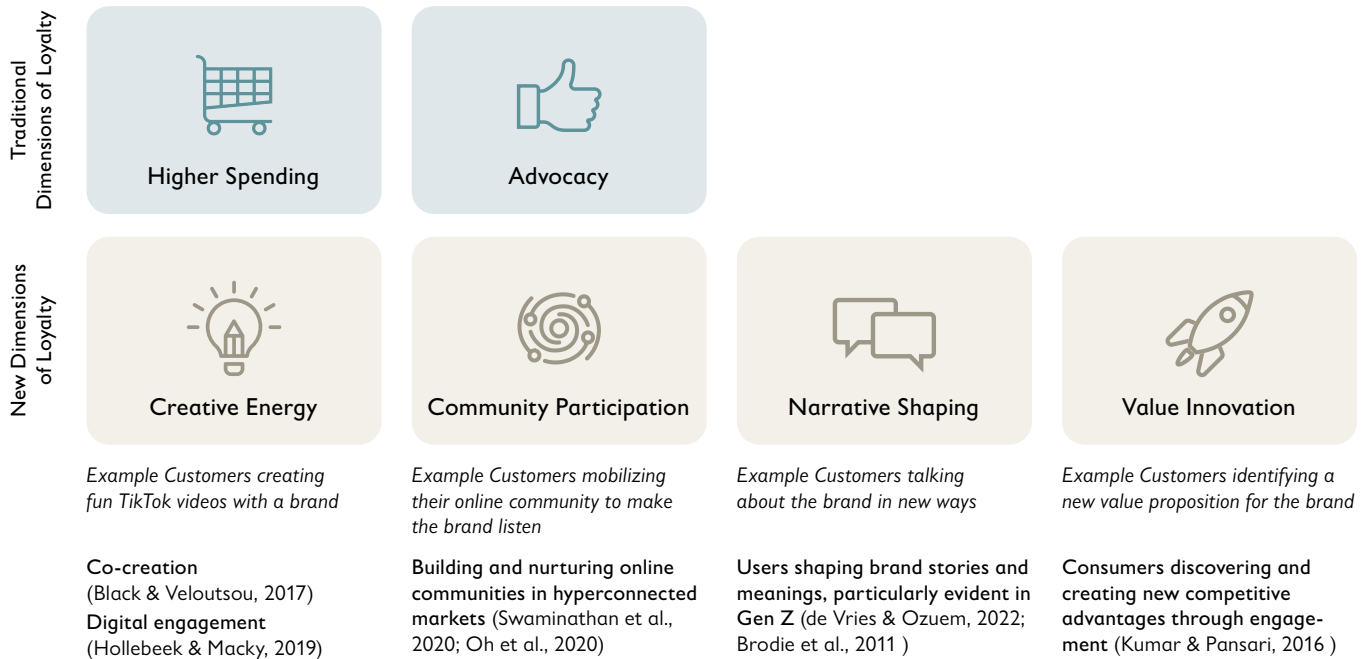
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sumers from passive recipients of brand messages into powerful catalysts for brand evolution (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). These creatively empowered customers bring their own audience communities and social influence, often sparking brand transformations.

This links brand loyalty with the intensity and scope of customer engagement. Research shows that customer engagement now encompasses multiple dimensions, including cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components (Brodie et al., 2011), with the intensity of engagement directly influencing the depth of brand relationships (Kumar & Pansari, 2016).

The recent transformation of the drinkware brand Stanley illustrates this dynamic. The 110-year-old camping flask brand's revival wasn't initiated by corporate strategy but by three women running the Buy Guide, an influencer platform. They really liked the tumbler for its features and simply reimaged it for their predominantly female audience, creating an entirely new usage context for the brand – turning it into an everyday accessory. Their followers amplified this reimagining, generating content,

Figure 1: New Ways of Customer Engagement That Indicate Brand Loyalty



Source: Own illustration based on Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Oh et al., 2020; de Vries & Ozuem, 2022; Brodie et al., 2011; Kumar & Pansari, 2016.

sharing stories, and essentially rewriting the brand’s narrative. They looked at the brand differently (cognitive), shared their love for it (emotional), and integrated it into their lives in a new way (behavioral). Stanley’s success came simply from recognizing and adapting to this consumer-initiated reinvention (Jansen, 2023).

This marks the emergence of new research-backed behavioral dimensions of customer engagement (figure 1).

*Key Insight #1: Brand loyalty manifests in the intensity of engagement with the brand – not just through higher spending and advocacy but also through creative energy, community*

*participation, narrative shaping, and value innovation.*

## Shift 2: Towards Connected Experience Ecosystems

As consumers take a more active role, brands must evolve beyond managing individual interactions to creating cohesive experience ecosystems. Mostafa and Kasamani (2021) identify three key dimensions that drive modern brand loyalty:

- Brand passion: the emotional intensity that develops through meaningful experiences.
- Brand attachment: the strength of the brand’s connection to consumer identity.
- Brand identification: the degree to which consumers see their values in the brand.

### Management Summary

Today’s brand relationships mirror human relationships – starting as casual ‘situationships,’ potentially growing into meaningful connections, and sometimes evolving into transformative partnerships and allyships. Just like human bonds, these relationships have natural cycles of intensity and quiescence – trying to force constant high engagement often backfires, while thoughtfully nurturing connections builds lasting loyalty. Success comes from understanding where each customer relationship stands, providing the right value at each stage, and having systems flexible enough to adapt as relationships naturally evolve.

The relationship between experiences and loyalty formation operates across distinct but interconnected domains:

- physical experiences (in-store, product usage),
- digital experiences (apps, platforms, content),
- social experiences (community interaction, shared activities),
- service experiences (customer support, personalization).

Each type of experience contributes distinctly to loyalty formation, creating cumulative effects on brand passion, attachment, and identification (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2021; Huangfu et al., 2022).

Success comes from understanding where each customer relationship stands, providing the right value at each stage, and having systems flexible enough to adapt as relationships naturally evolve.

Leading brands are responding by creating integrated ecosystems that nurture all three dimensions.

Lululemon powerfully illustrates this through their integrated community ecosystem (Ludmir, 2023). Their retail stores serve as community hubs for fitness classes and workshops, sparking brand passion through high-energy, shared experiences. Their innovative Mirror device builds brand attachment by integrating the brand into daily home routines, while the Lululemon Studio platform deepens self-identification by connecting members to a broader wellness lifestyle through diverse workout content and partner perks (Song, 2023). Their Lululemon membership program amplifies all three dimensions – local instructors generate passion through personal guidance, foster attachment through consistent relationships, and

reinforce self-identification by embodying aspirational wellness values (Lululemon, 2024).

*Key insight #2: Brand loyalty is nurtured through the cumulative impact of consistently meaningful interactions experienced across multiple channels.*

### Shift 3: Towards More Human-like Brand Relationships

Susan Fournier's (1998) influential work established that consumers naturally understand brands through relationship metaphors – from casual friendships to deep commitments. Her

research revealed how these relationships are primarily shaped by consumers' lived experiences rather than brand-controlled interactions. In today's digital landscape, this relationship dynamic has evolved in both complexity and intensity.

On social media, we see an unprecedented convergence between brands and humans that is transforming how brand passion, attachment, and self-identification manifest.

**Brand passion:** The emotional intensity is fueled by brands becoming more human-like.

- Brands adopt human-like personalities through casual, personified interactions (Jeong et al., 2022).
- Consumers form emotional connections with brands through

parasocial interactions that resemble interpersonal relationships (Labrecque, 2014).

- Personified brand interactions, such as using a human tone of voice, enhance consumer engagement by increasing social presence (Jeong et al., 2022).

**Brand attachment:** Consumers integrate brands into daily life through social media rituals.

- Digital platforms create a “collapsed context” where personal and commercial relationships blur (Auriemma et al., 2024).
- Brand attachment now develops primarily through digital touchpoints (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019)

**Self-identification:** The boundaries between personal and brand identity are blurring as consumers adopt branding practices.

- Consumers approach personal identity as a brand (Cassano Rizzuti, 2020).
- 67% of Gen Z believe it's very (25%) or somewhat (42%) important to have a strong personal brand (Carter, 2024).

This convergence heightens the relevance of social exchange theory for modern brand relationships, as research shows:

- Strong brand relationships are built on balanced value exchange, where reciprocity and fairness drive the connection (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2023).
- Customer lifetime value significantly increases with reciprocal brand investment (Kumar & Pansari, 2016)
- Trust is strengthened by consistent positive exchanges (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021)

The platform Discord exemplifies how reciprocal value exchange transforms

Figure 2: Understanding Brand Relationship Depth

Understanding Brand Relationship Depth					
	Self Identification "Situationships"	↔	Meaningful "Besties"	↔	Transformative "Allies"
Brand Passion	Sporadic		Consistent Engagement		Sustained Commitment
Brand Attachment	Ambiguous		Emotional Bond		Deep Trust
Self Identification	Low		Strong Resonance		Core Values Alignment

Based on empirically validated dimensions (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2021)

Source: Own illustration based on Mostafa & Kasamani, 2021.

brand relationships. What began as a utilitarian gaming chat platform evolved into a deeply embedded social presence through three key shifts: developing a distinct personality in its communications, adapting features based on community feedback, and ultimately allowing users to reshape its very identity around "creating space for everyone to find belonging" (Discord, 2024). This bidirectional evolution – Discord providing connection tools while users create vibrant communities – demonstrates how brands and consumers can co-create meaningful relationships.

*Key insight #3: Digital platforms have intensified the human-like quality of brand relationships, with brands and consumers converging in how they express themselves, build connections, and create value through reciprocal exchange.*

### A Conceptual Framework for Modern Brand Loyalty

Building on these three fundamental shifts in brand loyalty – active co-creation, connected experience ecosystems,

and human-like relationships – we propose a dynamic framework, grounded in social exchange theory, that captures how modern brand relationships evolve and transform over time.

## Understanding Brand Relationship Depth

Today, modern brand relationships often begin with social media encounters

– a TikTok video or an Instagram post. Research shows that these platforms play a crucial role in initiating and shaping brand relationships, especially among younger generations (We Are Social et al., 2024; Measure Protocol, 2024). Building on Fournier's (1998) foundational relationship framework, recent digital engagement research (Swaminathan et al., 2020), and market evidence, three main distinct relationship depths can be identified that

### Main Propositions

- 1 Brand loyalty manifests through multidimensional engagement, with consumers investing creativity, influence, and emotional capital in relationships.
- 2 Loyalty is shaped by authentic, innovative, and connected experiences, evolving from situationships to transformative partnerships.
- 3 Brand relationships mirror human relationships in their development patterns, creating value through reciprocal exchange and emotional connection.
- 4 Brand relationship strength follows an inverted U-curve, thriving on balanced, authentic, and optimal levels of engagement.

characterize modern brand–consumer connections (figure 2).

- **Surface-level relationships (“situationships”)**

An initial connection often evolves into what is now referred to as “situationships” – a state of ambiguity and emotional instability that can lead to fluctuating behaviors, such as seeking closeness while simultaneously creating distance (DiDonato, 2024).

In the brand context, situationships reflect surface-level relationships where positive and negative associations coexist without resolution and with an imbalance in the reciprocal value exchange. At this level, the brand relationship is typically characterized by sporadic passion, ambiguous attachment, and low self-identification.

Situationships don’t always occur at the initial stages of acquaintance, they can also follow a more intense bond. The Twitter/X rebranding illustrates how radical changes in ownership, features, and brand identity can destabilize even long-standing emotional connections. What was once a platform with strong user identification and culture became a space of polarization after its rebranding, with reactions ranging from celebratory support to vehement protests over the platform’s direction (Andrivet, 2023).

- **Meaningful connections (“besties”)**

As trust and emotional attachment deepen through consistent positive experiences (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021), surface-level relationships can evolve into meaningful connections that mirror close friendships (Södergren, 2021). In these relationships, brands and consumers share authentic experiences, engage in playful dialogue, and develop genuine emotional bonds.

We refer to relationships at this level as besties – the popular internet term for best friends. They are char-

## Lessons Learned

- 1 Rethink relationship-building. Stop chasing pure transaction-based loyalty. Design experiences that enable consumers to shape and co-create brand meaning through creative engagement and community.
- 2 Peak romance fades, and that’s okay. Like human bonds, brand relationships have cycles of intensity. Nurture connections authentically instead of forcing constant engagement or programmatic rewards.
- 3 Recognize different pathways. Not all loyalty journeys look the same. Some start as situationships, others as passionate connections. Design approaches that work for each relationship type.
- 4 Reciprocate mindfully. Build balanced value exchange at every stage. Match brand investment with consumer engagement while staying true to core values and community.

acterized by consistent engagement, emotional bonds and strong personal resonance. The value exchange and reciprocity impact is more balanced. There is a sense of equal effort from both sides.

This is the relationship depth most successful brands achieve with their loyal customers. Through regular interactions, integration into daily

Loyalty is shaped by authentic, innovative, and connected experiences, evolving from situationships to transformative partnerships.

routines, and active community participation, brands become trusted companions in consumers’ lives. This kind of dynamic is often exhibited by loyal customers of leading brands like Nike, Starbucks, Apple, and Sephora, where product usage is

combined with emotional connection and lifestyle integration. These bestie relationships each brand fosters are all authentic to the brand and hence feel distinctive.

- **Transformative partnerships (“allies”)**

As mentioned above, meaningful relationships can potentially recede to the surface level. Yet some brand relationships evolve beyond even these strong emotional bonds. Research indicates that relationships can transform into powerful catalysts for change when shared values are aligned with broader societal impact (Swaminathan et al., 2020).

In allyship, the focus extends beyond individual meaning to broader societal impact. Value exchange and reciprocity are amplified through shared commitment to social causes. Both brands and consumers often make concessions for these greater purposes, as seen in cases such as Patagonia.

Transformative partnerships are characterized by sustained commitment, deep trust, and shared core values. Patagonia exemplifies this evolution:

what began as product affinity based on a shared interest in mountain sports, transformed into collaborative environmental advocacy, with customers becoming active partners in the brand's mission for environmental

of the brand relationship and customer engagement.

Research across multiple domains suggests that this relationship follows an inverted U-shaped pattern (Yu & Wang,

(2) At optimal levels, relationships achieve what Teichmann (2021) terms “productive equilibrium” – where value exchange, engagement levels, and interaction quality are sustainably aligned.

(3) Beyond this optimal point, additional experiential richness can trigger declining returns. Empirical studies show that this manifests as cognitive overload, experience fatigue, and resource strain (Yang et al., 2023).

## Brand loyalty manifests through multidimensional engagement, with consumers investing creativity, influence, and emotional capital in relationships.

change and the brand making concessions such as encouraging repair and reuse of products rather than pushing for new sales (Patagonia, 2024).

Just like human relationships, brand-consumer relationships evolve, deepen, and change cyclically over time, and their evolution is shaped by the intensity

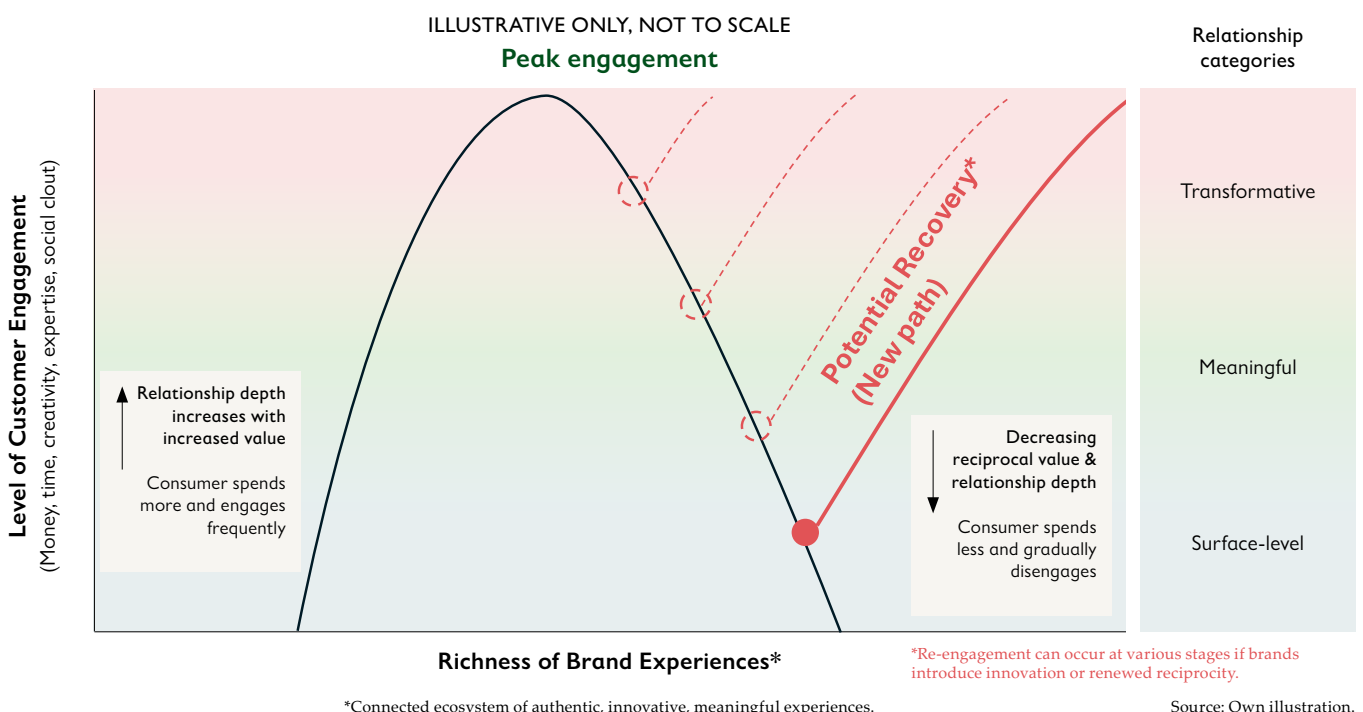
2017; Ma et al., 2017), characterized by three distinct phases:

(1) During initial growth, as brand experiences become richer, engagement increases through enhanced emotional connections, deeper value discovery, and growing trust (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021).

## A Dynamic Brand Loyalty Framework

Based on our analysis of how brand-consumer relationships evolve through different stages of engagement and experience quality, we propose a dynamic framework that captures both the multi-

Figure 3: Proposed Conceptual Framework for Brand Loyalty



dimensional nature of brand loyalty and its fluid character (figure 3). This framework is grounded in social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), which emphasizes how relationship strength depends on the perceived balance of value exchange between brands and customers.

Key aspects of the framework:

- (1) **Relationship evolution:** Movement between states follows the inverted U-curve pattern. Relationships can deepen from situationships to meaningful connections and potentially to transformative partnerships through consistent positive experiences and value alignment.
- (2) **Peak engagement:** The framework identifies an optimal but typically temporary zone of engagement

where brand relationships reach their fullest potential. This peak state represents the strongest relationship state where engagement intensity, experience quality, and value exchange are optimized.

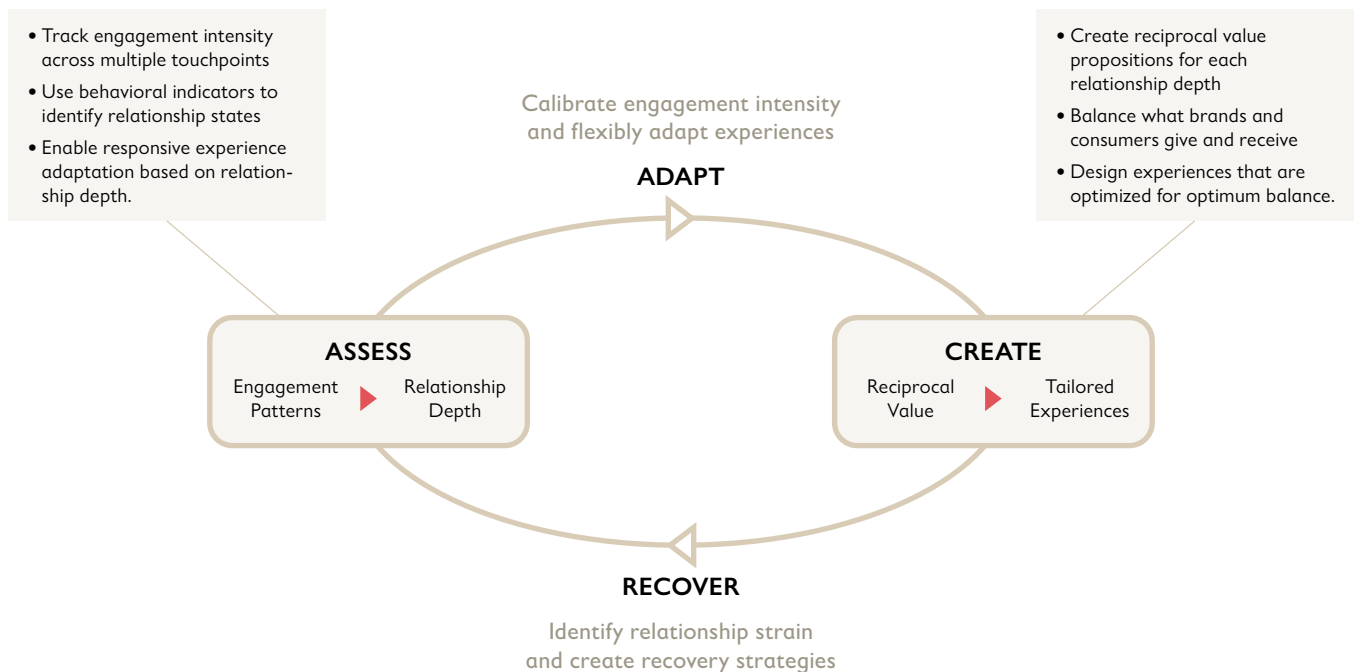
- (3) **Pathways to recovery:** Importantly, declining relationships don't follow a one-way path. Brands can redirect weakening relationships by recalibrating their engagement approach, as seen in the Stanley case (Jansen, 2023). This may involve:

- adjusting interaction frequency (like Lululemon),
- realigning value propositions (like Stanley),
- rebuilding trust through transparency (like Discord).

The framework emphasizes that modern brand loyalty requires constant attention to relationship dynamics. Success lies not in maximizing engagement, but in finding and maintaining optimal levels of connection while being prepared to adapt when relationships show signs of strain.

Peak romance fades, and that's okay. Like human bonds, brand relationships have cycles of intensity. Nurture connections authentically instead of forcing constant engagement or programmatic rewards.

Figure 4: A Practitioner-Oriented Interpretation of the Theoretical Framework



Source: Own illustration.

## Limitations and Future Research


Our proposed theoretical framework has some important limitations that need to be addressed. While it is based on existing research and market examples, we still need to test the different relationship types through empirical studies that measure how brand passion, attachment, and self-identification actually work at each level. We also need longer-term studies to better understand how long peak engagement lasts and what makes relationships move between different states. Future research should focus on:

- testing and measuring the characteristics of each relationship type,
- understanding how long peak engagement can last and what affects it,
- looking at how these patterns might differ across different industries.

This research would help make our framework more practical and deepen our understanding.

## Strategic Implications for Brands

Building on our understanding of brand relationship dynamics, we propose how brands can strategically assess, create, adapt and restore relationships to build meaningful connections with their customers (figure 4).

This perspective suggests rethinking the way we approach brand loyalty. What if we stopped trying to “maximize” loyalty and started “nurturing” it instead? In human relationships, we know that intensity ebbs and flows, that trust takes time, and that genuine connections can’t be forced. Perhaps it’s time for brands to embrace this wisdom. The brands that thrive tomorrow may not be those with the biggest loyalty programs, but those that best understand and navigate the natural rhythms of human connection. 

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