Introduction
Over the past decade there have been a number of calls within the branding literature for a consideration of brand–consumer relationships (BCRs) and, certainly, it appears that the term relationship is fast infiltrating the branding vernacular. Such calls are not without foundation and there are a number of factors which provide a strong rationale for them. First, relational approaches to marketing thought remain fashionable and, thus, the relationship concept is being applied in all manner of situations. This fashionability is derived in part from the intuitive appeal of the relationship concept to us as human beings and in part from the perceived utility of the relational approach in answering some particularly vexing marketing questions. Second, some commentators (for example, Blackston, 1993) have underlined the supposed failure of brand image research to provide concrete assistance to brand management programmes in terms of predicting consumer behaviour. These commentators suggest that a focus on BCRs offers a solution in this regard. Third, the brand personality concept and the attendant anthropomorphisation of brands facilitate the notion of BCRs through the utilisation of social exchange theory (SET). This is a logical extension of the idea of a brand personality: if brands have personalities we can treat them as people; if they are people then we can have relationships with them. Fourth, the branding literature has been concerned with the issue of loyalty for over forty years (see Cunningham, 1966; Guest, 1964 for early examples), an issue which is also of central importance to relationship marketers. Finally, brand management has long been at the forefront of marketing practice and it is not unusual, therefore, for brand managers to be concerned about the means by which they might protect their assets from the effects of a turbulent commercial environment. Relationship marketing (RM) views long-term relationships with customers as a stabilising element that supports the mastering of such challenges (Juttner and Wehrli, 1994).

Meanwhile, at the same time as relational approaches are colonising the branding literature, a number of commentators are suggesting that their uncritical acceptance within marketing thought is dangerous and in need of remedy (for example, Hibbard and Iacobucci, 1999; O’Malley and Tynan, 1999). Particular attention has been paid to the problems posed by the various domain extensions which RM has undergone; to the suitability (or lack thereof) of SET in explaining commercial ‘relationships’; and to the difficulties posed by the process of metaphoric transfer.

First, in terms of domain extensions, relational approaches to marketing had their genesis in interaction-intensive contexts such as business-to-business and high-contact service markets. The observed value of relationships here drove attempts to implement similar ideas in mass consumer markets (for example Dwyer et al., 1987), where they had once been deemed inappropriate.
due to the limited nature of interpersonal contact in this context (see Grönroos, 1994; Barnes, 1995). Because relationships essentially develop between people, the importance of this point cannot be overestimated (O’Malley et al., 1997; Fournier et al., 1998). The application of relational approaches in mass markets has continued to gather momentum despite routine calls to reassess their validity.

Second, although numerous theories of interpersonal relationships exist (see Sheaves and Barnes, 1996), SET became the prime resource for marketing researchers. The focus on SET becomes self-explanatory when we consider that, in making sense of social interaction, sociologists looked to theories of the market for suitable concepts and began to treat interpersonal exchanges as if they were market exchanges. Interpersonal exchanges, like market exchanges, were thought to be dependent upon the successful exchange of rewards (Homans, 1950; Blau, 1964) and interaction occurred when the rewards of exchange outweighed the costs (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). SET is therefore entirely consistent with the notion of the market (Hartsock, 1983; Fischer and Bristor, 1994) and its fundamental axioms are consistent with self-interest seeking and a calculative approach to interaction and exchange. As a result, it is no surprise that SET language and concepts (trust, commitment, mutual benefit, etc.) resonated strongly with marketing researchers, or that the models of relationship development that employ SET have gained strong empirical support (for example Anderson and Narus, 1984). Nonetheless, SET has its limitations in describing commercial relationships, particularly where those relationships involve little interpersonal contact (O’Malley and Patterson, 2005).

The process of metaphoric transfer, where concepts are borrowed from a source domain (interpersonal relationships) and applied to a target domain (commercial interaction), inevitably foregrounds some elements and hides others. Despite the range of potential relationships that could have been used including collegiate relationships: parent/child, prisoner/prison guard (see Iacobucci and Ostrom, 1996) there has been a tendency within marketing to focus almost exclusively on the basic level of marriage or spousal relationships (Hunt and Menon, 1995). This particular mapping has been fraught with contradictions in that the concepts borrowed from the source domain are consistent with market exchange, while the values borrowed are more closely aligned with communal exchange (Sheaves and Barnes, 1996; O’Malley and Tynan, 1999). These contradictions are highlighted when we consider that SET views marriage as a ‘restrictive trade agreement. The two individuals agree to exchange only with one another, at least until such time as the balance of trade becomes unfavorable in terms of broader market considerations’ (McCall, 1966, pp. 197–8). However, in contrast, in communal relationships ‘the assumption is that each individual is concerned about the welfare of the other; the exchange of benefits is based on the needs of the other, not on the anticipation that benefits will be received in return’ (Sheaves and Barnes 1996: 225). Thus, the elements that constitute the frame ‘marketing as relationships’ combine a theory of relationships based on self-interest seeking (SET) and values from an antithetical communal perspective, that is, Judaeo-Christian understandings of marriage (Tynan, 1997). The resulting frame, although apparently insightful, ignores many of the accepted conventions associated with the use of metaphor. The reason for the disjuncture identified here between theory and values is that this particular set of values possesses much rhetorical power. A communal perspective positions marketing as helpful and fair, an approach involving harmonic connections (Smith and Higgins, 2000). Interestingly, despite such problems the relationship-oriented view of contemporary marketing has had a dramatic influence on understandings of branding and brand management.

This paper aims to build upon these understandings in order to provide a review and critique of the extant literature on BCRs. In so doing, the paper traces the emergence of the BCR concept, utilises critiques of relational approaches to problematise our current understanding of BCRs, and identifies some alternative understandings of how brands fit into people’s lives.

**Explicating the Brand–Consumer Relationship**

Although discussions of marketing relationships are now widespread in the literature and, as we have seen, some (apparently ill-conceived) domain extensions are being criticised, a number of authors propose that further extensions of the
concept may yet be appropriate. For example, Fournier (1998, p. 345) suggests: ‘Despite increased acceptance and relevance, it can be argued that the relationship perspective has been vastly underutilised in the marketing literature’. In this way, Fournier (1998) attempts to legitimise the application of relational concepts to the branding literature and, as such, builds upon early discussions of BCRs (for example, Blackston, 1992a, 1992b, 1993), and subsequent examinations of the concept (for example, Hess, 1996; Moriarty et al., 1996; Palmer, 1996).

Aaker (1997) credits Max Blackston with the original development of the BCR concept. Blackston (1993, p. 114) proposes a focus on BCRs as a means of overcoming the limitations of brand image research which has ‘a notoriously limited ability to explain consumers’ historic behaviour let alone provide any predictive power’. For Blackston (1992a, p. 80) ‘a brand relationship is a logical extension of the idea of a brand personality’, and in investigating mass-market brands he compares the BCR to a relationship between a doctor and patient. In extending his analysis to corporate brands, traditional concepts from SET such as trust begin to emerge. Furthermore, Blackston (1992a, 1992b) makes explicit the link between BCRs and RM. This linking of BCRs to SET and to RM has had the effect of opening the conceptual floodgates. Consequently, Palmer (1996), and Dall’Olmo Riley and de Chernatony (2000) both elucidate the complementary nature of research on commercial relationships and research on branding. The crux of Palmer’s (1996, pp. 233–4) position is that ‘it can be argued that individuals have an underlying need for an emotional bond with high-involvement products that they buy. Brand development and relationship development are complementary and substitutable strategies towards this bonding’. Dall’Olmo Riley and de Chernatony (2000, p. 140) propose that ‘the concept of the brand has evolved from a name given to differentiate a firm’s products, to that of a relationship based on trust’. This evolution is predicated on the fact that brands possess meaning for consumers above and beyond their functional characteristics, they have personalities described in much the same way as human personalities, and, thus, we can have relationships with them. Aaker et al. (2004, p. 2) go further by suggesting that brand personality characteristics influence the nature of BCRs. Drawing from SET they infer that sincere brands positively effect relationship strength, engender trustworthiness and dependability, and support relationship growth. Exciting brands, on the other hand, tend to be considered less worthy of long-term relationships though excitement remains an important trait in intimate relations.

Fournier (1998) recognises that for a BCR to exist the brand must be a living entity because relationships exist between active and interdependent partners. The whole idea of imbuing brands with life (see King, 1973; Cooper, 1979; Lannon and Cooper, 1983) is itself underpinned by metaphorical reasoning (Hanby, 1999). That is, if brands were living entities, they would have personalities, would grow and develop over time and, therefore, it would be possible to have relationships with them. However, personification of the brand is insufficient for the brand to be considered a legitimate relational partner (Fournier, 1998). Rather, brands need to be anthropomorphised, or humanised, in order for people to have relationships with them (Ambler, 1999; Fournier, 1998). While brands can be animated through brand characters or are somehow possessed by the spirit of past or present others, complete anthropomorphisation of the brand involves imbuing it with human qualities such as emotion, thought and volition. Fournier (1998) argues that marketers perform this transmogrification through their everyday activities, particularly those conducted under the rubric of interactive marketing. Such activities ‘can be construed as behaviours performed by the brand acting in its relationship role’ (Fournier, 1998, p. 345), thereby qualifying the brand as a legitimate and reciprocating relational partner.

The conceptual leap made here is that BCRs can be treated as if they were interpersonal relationships, and Fournier (1998, p. 344) takes these ideas to their logical conclusion in attempting to establish ‘a grounded and fully articulated relationship-based framework for the study of consumer–brand interactions’. Fournier’s work goes beyond simple conceptualisations of BCRs as being predominantly close, committed and long-term. Rather she expands extant conceptualisations to incorporate different types and levels at which BCRs might exist. Fournier and Yao (1997) make explicit reference to their use of the interpersonal relationship
metaphor in analysing the bonds between consumers and the brands they use. Furthermore, although they acknowledge their failure to test the relevance of the relationship paradigm against other perspectives, they do call for the abandonment of research on brand loyalty in favour of relational perspectives. Fournier (1998) also elucidates the elements of brand relationship quality in an effort to further highlight the similarities between interpersonal relationships and BCRs. As such, Fournier (1998, pp. 363–5) identifies six key constructs that suggest strong BCRs: love and passion, ‘a rich affective grounding’; self connection, ‘the degree to which the brand delivers on important identity concerns, tasks or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of self’; interdependence, ‘frequent brand interactions … and heightened intensity of individual interaction events’; commitment, ‘the intention to behave in a manner supportive of relationship longevity’; intimacy, ‘elaborate knowledge structures’; and brand partner quality, ‘the consumer’s evaluation of the brand’s performance in its partnership role’. There is no doubt that Fournier’s work is both compelling and insightful. She effectively demonstrates that consumers avail themselves of interconnected webs of brands that contribute to ‘the enactment, exploration, or resolution of [their] centrally held identity issues’ (Fournier, 1998, p. 359).

Critiquing the Brand–Consumer Relationship
That brands have meaning for consumers over and above their physical functional characteristics has been accepted in the marketing literature at least since Gardner and Levy’s (1955) seminal article in Harvard Business Review. Indeed, in a consumer society, brands become part of the non-verbal language of social communication to the extent that their consumption is routinely implicated in and connected with identity and the self (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). With its ‘discourse through and about objects’, advertising enables consumers to portray a sense of who they are through brand preferences, lifestyles and taste cultures (Slater, 1997, p. 152). Thus, the symbolic value of brands may be used by consumers to establish membership of social groups, to signal aspirations of group membership, or to point toward differentiation from other consumers. Many of us even attach sacred meanings to some of the brands we use. Belk et al. (1989, p. 16, citing Cornfeld and Edwards, 1983) refer to quintessential objects, rare and mysterious and unequivocally right such as the Mont Blanc Diplomat pen, the Swiss Army knife and Dom Perignon champagne. Many contemporary brands have achieved iconic status (Holt, 2004). These brands appear to resonate deeply with a culture and tend to come from lifestyle categories such as food and drink (for example, Bisto, Guinness), clothing (for example, Vivienne Westwood) or cars (for example, Lamborghini). When brands come to possess such meaning for consumers it is easy to see how we might describe the connection between consumers and brands as relationships. And relationships is what they are. But, are they the same as interpersonal relationships?

When Blackston (1992a, 1992b, 1993) argues for the consideration of BCRs he is essentially championing the employment of one metaphor (the interpersonal relationship metaphor) based on the existing employment of another metaphor (the brand as personality metaphor). On one level this stretching of the metaphor makes perfect sense, revolving as it does around the anthropomorphisation of brands. However, on another level we must question the extent to which brand personalities are the same as human personalities. The brand personality construct has much face validity, with researchers and consumers equally comfortable with the idea that brands possess such qualities. Patterson (1999, p. 419) defines brand personality as ‘the consumer’s emotional response to a brand through which brand attributes are personified and used to differentiate between competing offerings’. Given the fact that consumers infuse brands with personalities, it is largely held that as a result, consumer personalities and brand personalities should reflect one another. This is not necessarily the case, but there may be some degree of fit between the two if, as Lannon (1992, p. 12) states, ‘brand choice is the direct manifestation of a set of personal values’. Brand personalities, therefore, are emotional projections used to simplify brand choice decisions across a range of product categories. Compiled by the consumer through direct experience of the brand, through exposure to marketing communications, through packaging, and even through observation of what kind of people use the brand and the occasions and situations in which it is used, brand personality essentially represents a shorthand for the brand’s attributes and
associations. As such, brand personality, although described in similar terms, is unlikely to be the same as human personality. As Bengtsson (2003, p. 154) stridently indicates: ‘although consumers may attribute anthropomorphic characteristics to brands, this does not necessarily imply that sociopsychological theories of interpersonal relationships [such as SET] are adequate to represent consumers’ relation to their brands’. Moreover, the brand as living entity metaphor (Hanby, 1999), the root metaphor to which brand personality belongs, is only one of two dominant metaphors in the branding literature. The other, brand as lifeless manipulable artefact, does not fit well within the BCR schema. Furthermore, according to Hanby (1999) the choice of which branding metaphor an organisation should subscribe to depends on the organisational metaphor with which the organisation identifies; mechanistic or organic. For mechanistic organisations the brand as living entity metaphor is untenable and, as such, a focus on BCRs is misguided.

Blackston (1992a, 1992b) interprets the interpersonal metaphor at the level of a doctor–patient relationship. Although Blackston may not himself recognise this, a doctor–patient relationship is a particular type of interpersonal relationship; namely, a ‘formal’ or ‘role’ relationship (Hinde, 1979). As such, Blackston’s conceptualisation is very different from the close personal relationships such as marriage implicitly relied upon by the majority of relationship researchers. Role relationships are task-specific, and in the example employed by Blackston (1992a) the doctor–patient relationship centers on attempts by one to cure the other (Hinde, 1979). Thus, Blackston (1992a, 1992b) may have hit upon an interesting idea, but one that has not received explicit attention. That is, in the conceptualisation of BCRs as doctor–patient relationships the consumer is positioned as unhealthy or lacking in some manner, while the brand is viewed as the means by which the consumer is saved or cured. Furthermore, in choosing a role relationship, the emotional attachment between consumers and brands which other authors (e.g. Fournier, 1998; Gordon, 1996; Restall, and Gordon 1993) hope to capture through the personification of brands is largely inappropriate.

The interpersonal relationship metaphor has been useful in that it has emphasised the positive elements associated with exchange. Depending on the exact relational perspective adopted these could include adaptation, flexibility, sharing, trust, intimacy and protecting the interests of the partner. The metaphor has also been useful in terms of offering a new perspective on the brand–consumer interface and demanding that the focus of research be extended beyond single, isolated exchanges (Houston and Gassenheimer, 1987). This has required the adoption of a more holistic perspective best illustrated in the work of Fournier (1998). However, Aggarwal (2004, p. 89) cautions that ‘given…obvious differences between social relationships and consumer–brand relationships, it is important for researchers to not overextend the relationship metaphor when studying consumer behaviour’. The use of a metaphor is also subject to certain limitations (Arndt, 1985). First and foremost, it ‘always emphasises some aspects, de-emphasises others, and hides still others’ (Van den Bulte, 1994, p. 413). While the interpersonal relationship metaphor has highlighted the long-term nature of exchange and the positive characteristics of ensuing relationships, it has resulted in only a partial truth. In many ways the metaphor is too powerful. That is, many advocates have forgotten that it is a metaphor that is being used. BCRs have been reified and researchers have treated them as though they really were interpersonal relationships (Bengtsson, 2003). The reification of BCRs has led to an almost exclusive emphasis on concepts from SET in their description and explication. However, there are a number of conceptual difficulties associated with transferring concepts from the interpersonal literature into commercial situations. For example, discussions of trust (particularly in marketing) suggest that it is generally relevant only in situations involving vulnerability. However, as Cowles (1997) suggests, the existence of population and organisational level safeguards (that is, legislation, warranties, guarantees, returns policy, etc.) reduces consumers’ vulnerability in commercial situations.

Consideration of BCRs may be further questioned because of their implicit emphasis on the individual and his or her dyadic interactions. While this focus on the dyad has been insightful where both parties to that dyad have agency, it may be less so when one party is a conceptual entity managed by a corporation for its own gain. In other words, while the consumer may act and react, ‘a brand
cannot respond in an individual manner to a request from a consumer and therefore lacks an important attribute that characterises human relationships’ (Bengtsson, 2003, p. 155). Indeed, Bengtsson (2003) argues that the lack of any real reciprocity on the part of the brand has problematic consequences for Fournier’s (1998) facets of brand relationship quality and, in particular, for love and passion, interdependence, commitment, and intimacy. The brand may also be considered an outcome of the efforts of a number of actors: brand owners, brand managers, users, celebrity endorsers and marketplace purveyors. Such an understanding suggests that for brands to possess real value their meanings must be shared. Furthermore, the meanings of brands are works in progress, constantly acted upon by the brand’s various publics. Individual dyads are interesting but not particularly insightful, because, when meaning must be shared, this unit of analysis is too small, too limiting and too parochial. Indeed, this is demonstrated by the majority of brand building activities taking place in mass media environments rather than through direct consumer communications. Moreover, the move from dyad to network signalled a maturing of the emerging relationship literature (Ford, 1990). It recognised that a focus upon individual dyads obscured understanding of the wider notion of networks. Networks are where strategic insights can be truly materialised, and where competitive advantages can be gained and sustained (Thorelli, 1986). Thus, while a focus on BCRs may have intuitive appeal, it detracts from the importance of the wider coalition of production and consumption communities.

**Brands and Communities**

In recent years academic treatments of consumption activities have begun to move away from a focus on the individual to considerations of the communal. Enduring communities have been variously labelled as ‘consumption communities’ (Boorstin, 1973), ‘subcultures of consumption’ (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), ‘cultures of consumption’ (Kozinets, 2001), ‘brand communities’ (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002), and ‘brand cults’ (Belk and Tumbat, 2003). More temporary communities have been referred to as ‘social collectives’ (Greenwood, 1994), ‘neo-tribes’ (Cova, 1997), and ‘life-mode communities’ (Firat and Dholakia, 1998). What is particularly interesting from the perspective of branding is the linking value that brands provide to individuals seeking to become part of these new communities. Recent conceptualisations of these communities within marketing owe a huge debt to Cova’s (1997, p. 307) argument that, in contemporary consumer society, brands should be considered as objects used to facilitate social interaction: ‘The system of consumption is not always perceived as first and using the social link, but often as second, and in service of the social link: the link is more important than the thing’. At the core of this argument is the acceptance that ‘relationships with objects are never two-way (person–thing) but always three-way (person–thing–person)’ (Bengtsson, 2003, p. 157, citing Belk, 1988).

These communities neatly capture the notion that people have relationships with other people and that brands may become a fulcrum around which such relationships are constructed. The Harley Owners Group (HOG) is one of the earliest examples of the brand providing such linking value (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Fournier et al., 2001). Through such conceptualisations there is no longer any need to stretch the interpersonal relationship metaphor and, as Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 427) point out: ‘developing a brand community could be a critical step in truly actualising the concept of RM’. Here, meanings no longer reside so much in the brand as in the social links that people form as a result of using the brand. ‘Sustained interpersonal interactions can lead to relationships that transcend mere common interest in a brand and its applications’ (McAlexander et al., 2002, p. 43). These meanings are likely to be derived from the key elements of communal interaction (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 413): consciousness of kind, ‘the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community’; shared rituals, which ‘contain the drift of meanings … set up visible public definitions … and social solidarity’; and moral responsibility, ‘a felt sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole’.

There are an increasing number of descriptive studies detailing the nature of such communities: Sun’s Java Center community (Williams and Cothrel, 2000); in-line skating (Cova and Cova, 2001); Macintosh user groups (Belk and Tumbat, 2003); Star Wars fans (Brown et al., 2003); and Nutella (Cova and Pace, 2005). Taken as a whole, these
communities are expected to provide a raft of benefits for the organisation: they positively affect brand equity; they create a solid base of loyal, enthusiastic and forgiving consumers; and they provide many opportunities for up-selling and cross-selling (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002). Of course, it may be difficult for every brand to foster the development of community. Rather, brands that perform well in this regard tend to be characterised by an aura of religiosity (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Kozinets, 2001; Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Muñiz and Schau, 2005), utopianism (Kozinets, 2001; Brown et al., 2003), authenticity (Kozinets, 2001; Brown et al., 2003), and a preponderance of narratives (Kozinets, 2001; Brown et al., 2003; Muñiz and Schau, 2005).

Religiosity has been a prominent theme in consumer research ever since Belk et al.’s (1989, p. 13) exposition of the sacred in consumer behaviour: ‘that which is regarded as more significant, powerful and extraordinary than the self. Sacred occurrences may be ecstatic; they are self-transcending.’ While there is little doubt that consumers may imbue consumption objects themselves with sacredness, there is also religiosity to be found in rituals associated with the object (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), in the membership of a community of shared belief (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Kozinets, 2001), and in the martyrdom and sacrifice associated with devoting oneself to a brand that may be stigmatised by the mainstream (Kozinets, 2001; Muñiz and Schau, 2005). More importantly, such devotion underlines ‘the very clear and resilient need humans have to believe in something or someone outside mundane reality’ (Muñiz and Schau, 2005, p. 739). In a consumer culture brands may replace traditional religions as the site of our identity and life-goal investments (Kozinets, 2001).

Brand-centred communities may also be typified by their endeavours to open up a utopian space in the chaos of the contemporary world. Utopianism stitches ‘impossibility and dreaminess together with deep motivational power and desire’ (Kozinets, 2001, p. 73). But utopianism is not merely an escape into fantasy; rather, it enables consumers to engage with reality and to situate themselves within that reality (Geoghegan, 1987, cited in Maclaran and Brown, 2001). That is, the utopian has the ability to both transform and subvert, and its power ‘lies in its challenges to the status quo’, (Maclaran and Brown, 2001, p. 376). Moreover, the subversive power of the utopian helps consumers within these communities to draw contrasts between their sense of communalism and the more individuated world outside (Kozinets, 2001).

The search for authenticity may be a defining characteristic of contemporary consumer culture given the inauthenticity that abounds in that culture (Brown et al., 2003). Authenticity may be indexical and/or iconic but it is never inherent in the consumption object itself (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Rather, authenticity is in the eye of the beholder and its shared perception within a consumption community represents the workings of an idioculture: ‘a system of shared knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and customs shared by members of an interaction group … [which] can be employed to construct a social reality’ (Fine, 1979, cited in Belk and Costa, 1998, p. 232). Linked as they are with self and social identity, powerful brands must carry an aura of authenticity if they are to be used as a marker of differentiation within the mass market. For Holt (2002, p. 83) these ‘brands must be disinterested; they must be perceived as invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value. Postmodern consumers perceive modern branding efforts to be inauthentic because they ooze with the commercial intent of their sponsors.’

Finally, these brands also tend to be characterised by particular narratives. In essence every brand is a story in and of itself (Twitchell, 2004), and these stories are the culmination of interactions between the organisation and consumers; what the brand management literature distinguishes as brand concept (Park et al., 1986) and brand image (Patterson, 1999). From the perspective of the organisation, a brand-centred community provides the ideal audience for origin myths that create a sense of heritage and bolster shared notions of authenticity. ‘Brands like Airwalk and Patagonia rest their laurels on their street credentials among the most discerning skateboarders and mountain climbers. Any product that has a credible historical or subcultural story to tell seems to be telling it’ (Holt, 2002, p. 83). Furthermore, the tales members of these communities tell about the brand serve as ‘morallegories’ (Brown et al., 2003),
cautionary moral anecdotes that help these consumers acquire and manipulate brand meanings through processes of integration (Holt, 1995), and that allow members to differentiate themselves from other consumers of the brand.

**Conclusion**

This paper has suggested that the focus on BCRs as close, emotional and committed relationships is a direct consequence of the employment of the interpersonal relationship metaphor primarily at the basic level of marriage. This results in the implicit acceptance of normative ideals regarding marriage being transferred to consumers’ interaction with brands. Although other interpersonal relationships have been acknowledged, for example Blackston’s (1993) reference to doctor–patient (role relationships) and Fournier’s (1998) recognition that relationships may reflect task or duty rather than emotion, formality rather than informality, imbalance rather than equality, hostility rather than conviviality, and force rather than choice, all have been eschewed in favour of the more beguiling and appealing use of marriage. Rather than advancing understanding of the connections between consumers and brands, most work has served only to legitimise further use of RM terminology and concepts in the branding arena.

The paper acknowledges that brands possess meanings above and beyond those of a functional nature, and accepts the notion that we project personalities onto those brands that are salient to us. However, the paper cautions against using these arguments to propound a focus on BCRs and the attendant use of SET.

More critical appreciation of the roles of brands in our lives points towards a brand community perspective that acknowledges the network of connections between a brand’s various publics. This perspective also avoids the pitfall of stretching the interpersonal relationship metaphor too far and provides a strong foundation upon which brand managers can build. In particular, the paper highlights how brand meanings may derive from the very nature of communal interaction and underlines the tools such communities use to construct personalised brand meanings.

For managers, the major lesson to emerge from this work is that consumers are the ultimate arbiters of brand meaning. As such, managers need to pay close attention to how customers themselves define their various connections with the brand. If consumers truly view these connections as relationships, managers need to be wary of unthinkingly adopting an RM frame to understand them. Rather, they must adequately analyse the nature, characteristics and boundaries of those relationships and act accordingly. If, on the other hand, consumers view these connections in terms of communal interaction with other consumers, then managers need to identify how best to facilitate that interaction without overtly intruding upon it. This work suggests that the fostering of brand narratives, particularly those centring on authenticity, sacredness and utopianism is a useful place to start.

**Authors**

Maurice Patterson is a lecturer in marketing at the Kemmy Business School, University of Limerick. He held previous positions at Nottingham University, Nottingham Trent University and the University of Glamorgan. His output on relationship marketing includes a leading European textbook, a couple of book chapters, and papers in the *European Journal of Marketing, Marketing Theory, Journal of Marketing Management, and Journal of Database Marketing*. His main focus within RM in recent years has been on relationship initiation and the troubled implementation of CRM.

Lisa O’Malley is a lecturer in marketing at the Kemmy Business School. Lisa has held previous positions at Nottingham University, Cardiff University, and the University of Glamorgan. She has published widely in the area of relationship marketing including a textbook and articles in the *Journal of Business Research, Service Industries Journal, European Journal of Marketing, Marketing Theory, Journal of Marketing Management, Journal of Strategic Marketing, Irish Marketing Review* and other scholarly outlets. Lisa’s primary focus within RM has been on the troubled implementation of RM in consumer markets and on the utilisation of the interpersonal relationship metaphor.
References


Brands, Consumers and Relationships: A Review


