

Consumer Disclosure and Disclosure Avoidance: A Motivational Framework

Tiffany Barnett White

*Department of Business Administration
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

In this research, we investigate consumers' motivations for disclosing personal information to relationship-seeking marketers. We explore the impact of consumers' relationship perceptions, the nature of benefits offered by marketers in exchange for requested information, and the type of information requested on consumers' disclosure willingness, focusing on consumers' forecasts of 2 types of potential disclosure-related loss (i.e., loss of privacy and loss of face), which are shown to mediate this decision. The results of an experiment revealed that although participants with relatively deep relationship perceptions were more likely to reveal "privacy-related" personal information, they were more reluctant to reveal embarrassing information. The findings also suggest that although loyal customers found the exchange of privacy-related personal information for customized benefit offerings (relative to noncustomized offerings) attractive, the reverse was true for embarrassing information; these participants seemed to find the exchange of customized offerings for this latter type of information unattractive. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the findings for consumer researchers and relationship-seeking marketing practitioners.

Growing interest in mass customization has increased marketers' attempts to deepen relationships by collecting information about the consumers with whom they do business. In these information-driven relationships, marketers acquire and update knowledge about consumers' preferences to better meet their needs, to enhance customer service, and to explore opportunities for new product or service introductions. From a marketer's perspective, the decision to pursue information-based relationships is fairly straightforward. These attempts, if successful, are likely to result in more efficient targeting of valuable customers, more tailored offerings, more cost-effective advertising, and greater customer retention (Deighton, 1996). However, it is far less certain what consumers' motivations are for cooperating with these loyalty-building attempts by disclosing personal information. Few studies have examined the factors underlying consumers' willingness to self-disclose to the marketers with whom they do business, yet emerging evidence of active disclosure avoidance on consumers' part highlights the need for

a theoretical framework that addresses this issue (Hoffman & Novak, 1997; Moon, 2000).

Potential loss of privacy is a commonly studied deterrent to consumer disclosure, one that has been fairly widely studied in recent years (e.g., Culnan, 2000; Culnan & Milberg, 1998; Hoffman & Novak, 1997; Milne, 2000; Milne & Boza, 1999; Phelps, Nowak, & Ferrell, 2000). However, despite the insights revealed by this research, an increasing number of marketing managers who have built strategies based on capturing information about their customers, including those marketers who assure privacy (e.g., via privacy statements), continue to be stymied by consumers' unwillingness to provide information that would allow them to execute these information-driven programs (Hoffman & Novak, 1997).

Why might consumers' reluctance persist even when privacy has been assured? In addressing this question, consider one group of consumers who avoid disclosing their phone numbers and another who refuse to reveal their income. Insofar as the former group of consumers seeks to avoid unwanted telephone calls, but the latter is simply embarrassed to discuss their income, a common marketer practice such as an effectively worded privacy statement may successfully decrease disclosure reluctance in the former case, but be relatively ineffective in the latter.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Tiffany Barnett White, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Department of Business Administration, 350 Wohlers Hall, 1206 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820. E-mail: tbwhite@uiuc.edu

The previously mentioned scenario foreshadows the benefits of adopting a more contingent-based framework for understanding consumers' decisions to disclose personal information to relationship-seeking marketers. Accordingly, we explore consumer disclosure as a more general phenomenon, contributing to the extant privacy literature by exploring other types of potentially inhibiting factors, and specifically investigating one in particular (i.e., concern for embarrassment). We also contribute to the consumer psychology and marketing literatures at a more practical level by examining two tactics commonly used by relationship-seeking marketers (i.e., relationship building and customization) and the effect of these factors on consumers' disclosure willingness.

Overall, the framework highlights the role that relatively deep relationship perceptions, those in which relatively high levels of satisfaction and trust have been established, may play in mitigating risks associated with disclosing certain types of information (thereby increasing consumers' disclosure likelihood), but in exacerbating others (thereby decreasing disclosure likelihood). In addition to relationship perceptions, we also examine the impact of the nature of benefits offered by the marketer in exchange for disclosure (i.e., customized vs. noncustomized) on consumers' disclosure decisions. In particular, this research examines the manner in which the nature of the benefit offered by marketers in exchange for disclosure might work to offset or compound risk perceptions, thereby increasing (or decreasing) consumers' willingness to disclose personal information.

In the following section, we discuss the theoretical background and framework for this research, reviewing relevant literature on social exchange theory and interpersonal and marketing relationships. Following the framework development section, we propose and test three hypotheses. Finally, we provide a general discussion of the findings and implications of this research, including a more detailed discussion of its theoretical and practical contributions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

At its core, social exchange theory seeks to understand the rules governing the exchange of resources between two or more individuals over the course of one or more transactions (Emerson, 1981). These resources have been generally defined as the (relatively scarce) capacity to provide some benefit to another. The theory assumes that individuals seek to maximize benefits in a given exchange and tend to provide resources only to the extent that a net gain is expected.

Consumers' personal information can be considered a resource insofar as it is unknown to marketers (that is, not readily or easily obtained from external sources), yet valued by them. Similarly, the provision of consumers' personal information for marketers' goods, services, or information rep-

resents a resource exchange (Foa & Foa, 1974). Accordingly, we use social exchange theory as a basis for our basic tenet: Consumers will disclose to marketers to the extent that the perceived benefits of doing so outweigh the perceived losses. This loss–benefit ratio is summarized in a construct we label *perceived disclosure consequences* (PDCs). We discuss factors that might influence consumers' PDCs and, consequently, their willingness to disclose personal information in the section that follows.

PERCEIVED DISCLOSURE CONSEQUENCES (PDCs)

PDCs are defined here as consumers' active considerations of the ramifications of disclosing personal information. The perceived consequences of a given disclosure are closely related to the type of information to be disclosed. Although consumers might consider many categories of consequences (e.g., potential loss or gain of economic resources) when making decisions about whether and how much personal information to disclose to a marketer, we focus on social disclosure risk considerations in this research.

Social Perceived Disclosure Consequences

As a broad category, socially risky disclosure consequences can be conceptualized as those associated with concern about the loss of interpersonal status or control within a given exchange relationship. Although numerous disclosures fit this description, relevant research in the marketing and interpersonal relationships literatures (e.g., Dahl, Manchanda, & Argo, 2001) motivates a specific focus on two types of social disclosure consequences: loss of privacy and loss of face (i.e., embarrassment).

Consumers' concerns for privacy can be broadly conceptualized as their concerns over who has (e.g., is information likely to be accessed by—or sold to—parties external to the consumer–seller dyad?) and what is done with (e.g., is information being used for unwanted telephone or mail intrusions?) their personal information (Goodwin, 1992; Phelps et al., 2000). In this research, we focus on the latter dimension, consumers' desires for “control over unwanted telephone, mail, or personal intrusions in the consumer's home” (Phelps et al., 2000, p. 29).¹ To the extent that consumers possess the ability to control such interactions and relationship-seeking marketers value them, we conceptualize the capacity to invite access as a particular type of social resource. We also consider active concern for the [ac-

¹Research by White and Lloyd (2000) suggests that, unlike concerns about unwanted intrusions, consumers' concerns about voluntary and involuntary third party intervention are more readily addressed via the use of effectively worded privacy and/or security statements.

tual or potential] *loss* of control over this ability, which we will refer to here as consumers' concerns for a potential "loss of privacy," as a key perceived disclosure consequence. Some examples of personal information associated with the potential loss of privacy may include demographic characteristics, lifestyle characteristics, and shopping and purchase habit information.

As noted earlier, privacy concerns account for some, but not all, of consumers' reluctance to provide personal information (Hoffman & Novak, 1997). Although privacy statements may aid significantly in decreasing consumers' concerns over loss of privacy, research on disclosure in interpersonal relationships suggests that consumers may also avoid disclosure because they are concerned with losing face (Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Woodyard & Hines, 1973). A concept widely studied by cross-cultural and communications researchers (Edelmann, 1994; Goffman, 1959; Metts, 2000), face is a style of interpersonal communication calculated to maintain the self-respect of others, and to avoid a loss of poise, shame, or personal embarrassment (Ogawa, 1999). We examine such reluctance in the consumer context by exploring those disclosures that could be associated with a potential "loss of face," which we conceptualize here as the possibility that revealing a certain item of information could lead to a loss of esteem or comfort or to the threat of embarrassment to the discloser (e.g., preference for X-rated movies, dependence on incontinence aids).² Consumers' reluctance to reveal potentially embarrassing information can be explained by Miller (1996), who describes embarrassment as a state of chagrin or abashment resulting from public events that communicate unwanted impressions of ourselves to others (Miller, 1996).

Thus, consumers' decisions to disclose personal information to relationship-seeking marketers may vary depending on the perceived level of vulnerability associated with disclosing the various types of information. How might marketers offset such risk perceptions? Two practices are commonly used by relationship-seeking marketers to positively influence consumer disclosure. Within the framework developed, these practices can be conceptualized as attempts to positively influence consumers' net benefit perceptions (i.e., their PDCs). In this research, we consider one strategy that we conceptualize as marketers' attempts to decrease perceived disclosure-related losses (i.e., relationship-building) and one that can be considered an attempt by marketers to increase perceived benefits (i.e., customization), and the influence of these two factors on consumers' PDCs and, consequently, their willingness to disclose personal information.

²For ease of discussion, we use the terms "loss of face" and "embarrassment" interchangeably. It should be noted, however, that the concept of face has been more broadly conceptualized in other research domains (e.g., Goffman, 1959).

The Effect of Relationship Perceptions on PDCs and Consumer Disclosure

To the extent that consumers are less likely to disclose when they perceive the consequences of doing so will be negative, marketers' efforts may be wisely directed at attempts to mitigate any perceived "downside risks" associated with disclosure. Not surprisingly, relationship building is one commonly used method of achieving this goal. Indeed, extensive empirical support exists for the idea that, relative to strangers or casual acquaintances, individuals are more likely to disclose, and to reciprocate disclosure, to those with whom a close relationship has been established (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Duck, 1988). What mechanisms underlie the positive effect of relational depth on disclosure? Among other factors, such as increased familiarity, commitment, or dependence, attributions of satisfaction and trust have been widely researched as essential features of close interpersonal (e.g., Bierhoff, 1992) and close marketing relationships (e.g., Doney & Canon, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Moorman, Deshpande, & Zaltman, 1993). Satisfaction and trust have been associated with greater perceived benefits and, more important, reduced perceptions of most types of disclosure risk relative to shallow relationships in which satisfaction and trust have not been established (e.g., Bierhoff, 1982; Larzelere & Huston, 1980).

Despite extensive findings demonstrating that individuals are more likely to engage in intimate or risky self-disclosure with close relationship partners, it has also been observed that individuals sometimes do not readily relinquish information about themselves to close associates (Barrell & Jourard, 1976; Broder, 1982; Cozby, 1973; Doster & Strickland, 1971; Rosenfeld, 1979). Indeed, some results imply that such reluctance may be specific to certain types of information and may have occurred, not in spite of, but because of the perceived depth of the relationship in question (Argyle, Tromboli, & Forgas, 1988; Barrell & Jourard, 1976; Rosenfeld, 1979). For example, Baxter and Wilmot observed respondents' reluctance to discuss what they refer to as "taboo topics" to close relationship partners (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Although the mechanism underlying this effect was neither explored theoretically nor tested empirically, one explanation of these findings is that, whereas relational depth may mitigate the perceived costs of revealing certain types of information, it may exacerbate the perceived costs of providing other types—particularly those in which the potential loss of face to trusted or esteemed others is a salient possibility (e.g., embarrassing disclosures). We test this line of reasoning, predicting that, rather than facilitate the disclosure of embarrassing or sensitive information, relationship quality may indirectly lead to greater disclosure avoidance via its adverse effects on the perceived consequences of disclosure. Specifically, we predict

- H1: Relational depth will be associated with a greater willingness to reveal information associated with a

potential loss of privacy. However, relational depth will be associated with a decreased willingness to reveal information associated with a potential loss of face.

- H2: The interactive effects of relational depth and the type of information requested from consumers (i.e., information associated with a potential loss of privacy vs. loss of face), will be mediated by consumers' perceived disclosure consequences.

The Effect of Marketer Benefit Offerings on PDC and Consumer Disclosure

The previous discussion has focused on the manner in which relationship perceptions might aid (or hinder) disclosure by impacting the perceived consequences of disclosing. In general, relationship-seeking marketers attempt to decrease disclosure avoidance among key customers by emphasizing the decreased costs associated with disclosing. However, it is equally plausible that disclosure reluctance might decrease as the perceived benefits of disclosure increase. Marketing managers are increasingly tailoring their benefit offerings to achieve this goal. For example, a marketer might provide free financial advising in exchange for information related to one's financial status or free X-rated movies in exchange for information that indicates this preference. Insofar as such offerings incorporate consumers' specific preferences, they will be referred to throughout the rest of the article as *customized marketer offerings*. In contrast, the term *noncustomized marketer offerings* will be used to refer to nontargeted marketing offerings of money, goods, or services that do not incorporate consumers' specific preferences.

It is important to conceptually distinguish marketer offerings that are of greater monetary value from those that are more customized in nature. From the consumer's perspective, customized marketer offerings are distinct in that, relative to less-customized or noncustomized offerings, they are based to a larger extent on information marketers receive directly from the consumer (vs. information the marketer has somehow acquired about the consumer). In this sense, a customized and noncustomized offering could be identical, yet the recipient of the former perceives that the offering was specially designed or tailored, whereas in the latter case, consumers may simply perceive they have acquired a product that closely matches their preferences.

To the extent that customized benefit offerings may be of greater personal (although not necessarily economic) value, one might expect that, all else equal, disclosure in exchange for these benefits should be associated with increased benefit perceptions as well as an increased willingness to disclose. However, based on the logic developed here, we explore two factors that may moderate this effect, namely the type of information to be revealed (and its corresponding social risks) and the nature of the relationship between the consumer and the product or service provider.

With respect to information associated with a potential loss of privacy, we expect that marketers' provision of customized benefit offerings will offset the risks associated with providing this type of information, thereby increasing disclosure willingness. Moreover, given the predicted (i.e., positive) effect of relational depth on privacy-related disclosure risk perceptions, we expect that consumers' willingness to provide information associated with a potential loss of privacy will also be greatest when deep rather than shallow relationships have been established. Thus, we predict that consumers' willingness to reveal this type of information will be greater in deeper (vs. shallow) relationships and in exchange for customized (vs. noncustomized) marketer offerings.

However, with respect to embarrassing disclosures, those associated with a potential loss of face, we predict that marketer offerings that promise to incorporate these disclosed preferences will actually compound self-presentation risk perceptions. Insofar as revealing socially sensitive information for the purpose of customization assures that the information will be dutifully processed, indeed "noticed," by the product or service provider in question, we expect increased, rather than decreased concern for face saving. As a result, we predict that the facilitative effects of customized benefit offerings will be limited to consumers who are relatively less concerned about the loss of face in a given exchange. Based on the arguments developed in Hypothesis 1, we expect these consumers to be those who have relatively shallow (rather than deep) relationship perceptions. This reasoning suggests that individuals who are more concerned about the risk of embarrassment (i.e., those with relatively deep relationship perceptions), will be more willing to exchange embarrassing information in reciprocation for noncustomized versus customized benefit offerings.

- H3a: Customized (vs. noncustomized) marketer benefit offerings will be associated with a greater willingness to reveal information associated with a potential loss of privacy.
- H3b: Customized (vs. noncustomized) marketer benefit offerings will be associated with a greater willingness to reveal embarrassing personal information for those consumers with shallow relationship perceptions; however, customized marketer offerings will be associated with a decreased willingness to reveal embarrassing information for consumers with deeper relationship perceptions.

METHODOLOGY

Design and Procedure

Eighty students from a Midwestern university participated in this experiment in exchange for extra course credit. Respondents were informed that they would be participating in a

study about “consumer services.” All respondents were tested in a single group session.

For ease of discussion, we will interchangeably refer to information likely to be associated with a potential loss of privacy and face as “privacy-related” and “embarrassing,” respectively. Thus, the study employed a 2 (relationship type: deep/shallow) \times 2 (marketer benefit offering: customized/noncustomized) \times 2 (information type: privacy-related/embarrassing) mixed factor design with two examples nested under each of the two types of information. This four-level factor is referred to as “Example” throughout the analysis. Relationship type and marketer benefit offering were between-subject factors and information type was manipulated within-respondents.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. Each respondent received a pen-and-paper survey. In addition to the manipulations of interest (described as follows), each survey contained a description of a hypothetical relationship with QuickRuns, a grocery and drugstore delivery service. The service was described as one in which consumers’ orders for groceries, health, and beauty aids, books and magazines are delivered directly to them at home in exchange for a small delivery fee plus the cost of items purchased. All participants were asked by a QuickRuns associate to complete a customer profile to be kept on hand at the store. Because the assurance of privacy is common among information-seeking marketers and because we were interested in determining the effects of relational depth and marketer benefit offerings on consumers’ disclosure willingness over and above common privacy concerns, all profiles included a privacy statement issued by QuickRuns.³ In the final stage of the experiment, respondents completed ratings of their perceptions of their hypothetical relationship with QuickRuns as a manipulation check as well as two covariate measures (discussed later). Respondents were then thanked and debriefed.

Independent Variables and Manipulation Checks

Relationship type. Relationship was manipulated at two levels, deep and shallow. The deep relationship condition was operationalized by asking participants to imagine that they had been in an ongoing relationship with QuickRuns, that their experiences with QuickRuns to date had been positive, and that they considered the company associates to be knowledgeable, considerate, and concerned about their satisfaction and well-being. The shallow relationship condition was constructed to represent a more transactional and relatively shallow relationship. Respondents reading the no-relationship scenario were asked to imagine that they had re-

cently begun to purchase groceries from QuickRuns. Unlike respondents in the relationship condition, these participants were not provided with any additional information about their experiences or assessment of QuickRuns to date. To assess the effectiveness of this manipulation, respondents were asked to rate perceptions of their relationship with QuickRuns using a previously validated 10-item scale (Appendix A) designed to measure the theorized multidimensional relational depth construct (White, 2000).

Information type manipulation. As mentioned, the type of information requested was manipulated within-respondents. In addition to several filler items (e.g., number of children, marital status), the type of information requested from each respondent was varied to reflect both privacy-related and potentially embarrassing types of disclosure. Four target items were selected on the basis of a pretest administered to 75 individuals; pretest respondents did not participate in this experiment. These respondents were asked to rate a series of items that might be associated with a potential loss of privacy or face. Based on the pretest participants’ responses, two embarrassing items (i.e., purchase history of Playboy/Playgirl magazine and condoms) and two privacy-related items (i.e., address and phone number) were selected and included in the study. The randomized order of these items was held constant across experimental conditions.

Marketer benefit offerings. All respondents were promised a benefit in exchange for providing the information requested within the profile. Specifically, respondents were informed that, if they completed the profile, they would become members of QuickRuns’ VIP Club. The VIP Club was described as a program in which members receive coupons and discounts on QuickRuns products and services. Respondents in the customized benefits conditions were told that the discounted offerings would be specially tailored based on their profile disclosures, to reflect their personal preferences and purchases. In contrast, respondents in the noncustomized conditions were only told that they would receive discounted offerings on various products and services. Participants completed two measures designed to assess the effectiveness of this manipulation (see Appendix B).

Dependent Measures

Perceived disclosure consequences. In the framework developed, we explore two types of negative PDCs: loss of privacy and loss of face. Accordingly, respondents rated their perceived consequences of disclosing each of the two types of information requested by QuickRuns. Unless otherwise noted, one four-item scale (two items per consequence) was used to analyze hypotheses associated with this construct (see Appendix C).

³This statement was extensively pretested by samples in the population tested ($N = 75$). The statement was considered to be both “quite realistic” and “very effective” by the majority (i.e., 87% and 91%, respectively) of respondents tested.

Willingness to reveal. For each item in the hypothetical profile, respondents rated how willing they would be to reveal the information to QuickRuns.

Covariate Measures

Two covariate measures that could have affected respondents' disclosure decisions were measured in the experiment. First, respondents indicated how often they used grocery delivery services in the past. In addition, because it has been hypothesized to affect self-disclosure (Jourard, 1971), respondents' gender was also assessed. However, because neither of these variables contributed significantly to the variance in respondents' disclosure willingness, they are not discussed here.

RESULTS

Unless otherwise noted, the following effects were tested using a mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA). Table 1A and Table 1B summarize the appropriate adjusted means of the dependent measures across experimental conditions as well as the significance tests for all estimated effects.

Manipulation Checks

Relationship perceptions. The 10-item scale described previously was used to assess respondents' perceived levels of relational depth ($\alpha = .89$). As expected, respondents' relationship quality scores were significantly higher in the deep ($M_{\text{deep}} = 4.6$) versus the shallow relationship ($M_{\text{shallow}} =$

TABLE 1A
Means and Standard Deviations for Willingness to Reveal by Relationship, Marketer Benefit Offering, and Information Type Conditions

Relationship Condition	Information Type					
	"Privacy-Related"			"Embarrassing"		
	Address	Phone	X	Condom	Playboy	X
Shallow relationship ^d						
Customized offering	5.8 (0.4)	5.3 (0.6)	5.6 ^a (0.5)	3.9(0.4)	4.2 (0.7)	4.1 ^a (0.5)
Noncustomized offering	4.3 (1.9)	3.7 (1.6)	4.0 ^b (1.8)	2.4 (0.8)	2.1 (0.8)	2.2 ^b (0.8)
Deep relationship ^e						
Customized offering	6.5 (1.0)	6.1 (1.0)	6.3 ^c (1.1)	1.8 (1.0)	1.4 (1.0)	1.5 ^c (1.0)
Noncustomized offering	5.0 (0.3)	4.8 (0.6)	4.9 ^d (0.5)	2.8 (0.6)	2.4 (0.8)	2.6 ^b (0.7)

Note. Means are answers to "How willing would you be to reveal this information?" measured on a 7-point scale with endpoints labeled (1) not willing and (7) very willing. Standard deviations are in parentheses

^{a,b,c} Means with different subscript within a column are different at the $p < .01$ level of significance. ^d $n = 41$. ^e $n = 39$.

TABLE 1B
ANOVA of Mean Willingness to Reveal by Relationship, Marketer Benefit Offering, and Information Type Conditions

Source	df	MS	F	P(F)
Relationship	1	1.57	1.10	.2978
Marketer offering	1	77.89	54.45	.0001
Relationship by marketer offering	1	44.37	44.37	.0001
Information type (type)	1	538.38	319.01	.0001
Example	2	3.89	16.77	.0001
Relationship by type	1	75.55	44.77	.0001
Relationship by example	2	1.07	4.61	.1014
Marketer offering by type	1	21.86	12.95	.0006
Marketer offering by example	2	.54	2.32	.1017
Relationship by marketer offering by type	1	35.64	21.12	.0001
Relationship by marketer offering by example	2	.62	2.68	.0722
<i>Error</i>				
Between-respondents	76	1.43		
Within-respondents Subject by Type(Relationship)	76	1.68		
Within-respondents Subject by Example(Type)	150	0.23		

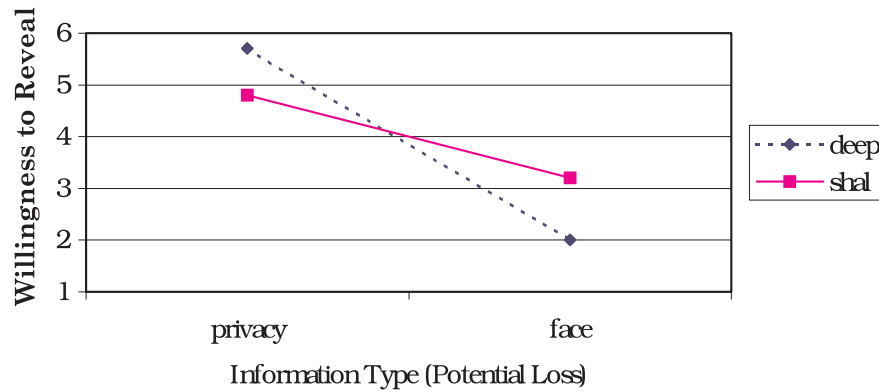


FIGURE 1 Relationship by Information Type Interaction (collapsing across Customization conditions).

3.8) condition, $F(1, 76) = 12.69, p < .001$. In addition, in line with expectations, no other significant main or higher order effects were found.

Marketer benefit offerings. As expected, the results indicate that respondents' ratings of the VIP program using the two-item manipulation check index discussed previously ($\alpha = .84$) were significantly higher in the customized ($M_{\text{cust}} = 4.6$) relative to the noncustomized ($M_{\text{noncust}} = 3.9$) conditions, $F(1, 76) = 4.85, p < .05$. As expected, no other significant effects were found.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1 predicts that relational depth and information type interact to influence consumers' disclosure willingness. Our findings reveal that the relationship by information type interaction was indeed significant, $F(1, 78) = 31.70, p < .0001$ (Figure 1). As expected, the simple effect of relationship within the privacy-related information type was significant, $t(78) = 2.97, p < .05$. Specifically, those respondents in the deep relationship conditions were more willing to reveal this type of information than were those in the shallow relationship conditions ($M_{\text{shallow}} = 5.7$ vs. $M_{\text{deep}} = 4.8$). The results also yield a significant simple effect of relationship within the embarrassing level of information, $t(78) = 4.8, p < .0001$ and show that deep relationship respondents were significantly less willing to disclose embarrassing information than those in shallow relationship conditions ($M_{\text{deep}} = 2.0$ vs. $M_{\text{shallow}} = 3.2$). Thus, H1 is supported.

To support Hypothesis 2, the perceived consequences of disclosing should mediate the interactive effects of relational depth and information type on respondents' willingness to disclose, and more negative perceived consequences should be associated with greater disclosure avoidance. Following the method recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986), the mediation analysis involved three stages. In the first stage we established that negative perceived consequences were associated with greater reluctance to disclose to QuickRuns. In support of this prediction, our results show a strong negative

correlation between the perceived consequences of disclosing and actual willingness to disclose ($r = -.39; p < .0001$).

The second stage involved demonstrating that respondents' relationship perceptions and the type of information to be revealed (i.e., embarrassing vs. privacy-related) interact to influence their perceived disclosure consequences. In particular, we expected that, relative to those with shallow relationship perceptions, deep relationship respondents would perceive more negative consequences of disclosing embarrassing information, whereas the opposite would be true for these respondents' perceived consequences for revealing privacy-related information. Our analysis reveals a significant relationship by information type interaction, $F(1, 78) = 31.49; p < .0001$.⁴ As expected, deep relationship respondents perceived more negative consequences of revealing embarrassing information than did those in the shallow relationship conditions, $M_{\text{deep}} = 4.0$ vs. $M_{\text{shallow}} = 3.3; t(78) = 5.76, p < .0001$. The opposite was true for privacy-related information. Deep relationship respondents were less concerned about negative disclosure-related consequences associated with revealing this type of information, $M_{\text{deep}} = 2.3$ vs. $M_{\text{shallow}} = 3.3; t(78) = 7.36, p < .0001$.

According to Baron and Kenney (1986), our results indicate partial mediation, that is, when perceived consequences were included in the model, the effect of the relationship by item type interaction was greatly reduced, $F(1, 78) = 17.95$, reduced from 31.49. We compared the effect size for the relationship by information type interaction in a model that did not include perceived negative consequences versus a model in which the effect of disclosure consequences was included. This difference suggests that respondents' perceived disclosure consequences partially mediated the interactive effect of relationship perceptions and information type on respondents' willingness to purchase items from QuickRuns, and it supports Hypothesis 2.

Considered together, Hypotheses 3a and 3b predict that the effect of customized (vs. noncustomized) marketer offer-

⁴We collapse across customization conditions, presenting the results of a reduced model for this analysis.

ings on consumers' disclosure willingness will be moderated by respondents' relationship perceptions and the type of information requested. The results support this overall three-way interaction, $F(1, 76) = 21.12, p < .0001$ (Figure 2). Hypothesis 3a predicts that both deep and shallow relationship respondents will be more willing to provide privacy-related information in exchange for a customized versus a noncustomized benefit (i.e., a simple main effect for customization and, implicitly, relationship type for privacy-related information), whereas H3b predicts that the effect of customization on consumers' willingness to reveal embarrassing types of information will depend on their relationship perceptions (i.e., a simple relationship by customization interaction within the embarrassing type of information).

The results support both predictions. First, respondents' willingness to reveal privacy-related information was greater in exchange for customized versus noncustomized benefit offerings from QuickRuns, $t(76) = 8.85, p < .0001$; $M_{cust} = 6.0$ versus $M_{noncust} = 4.4$). The simple effect of relationship was also significant for privacy-related information ($M_{deep} = 5.7$; $M_{shal} = 4.8$; $t(76) = 4.84, p < .001$). We also find the expected simple relationship by customization interaction for embarrassing types of information, $t(76) = 11.19, p < .0001$. Shallow relationship respondents were more likely to reveal embarrassing information in exchange for customized (vs. noncustomized) marketer offerings ($M_{cust} = 4.1, M_{noncust} = 2.2$), whereas the opposite was true for deep relationship respondents ($M_{cust} = 1.5, M_{noncust} = 2.6$).

DISCUSSION

On one hand, the results of the study provide support for the argument that building perceived relational depth can be effective in increasing consumers' willingness to provide information entailing certain types of perceived risk. For example, despite the fact that respondents in all conditions read a privacy statement that had been rated by an independent sample as "highly effective," those respondents in the shallow relationship conditions were still more reluctant to reveal "privacy-related" information than those who were in the deep relationship conditions. However, the framework also highlights circumstances under which relational depth can increase reluctance to provide other types of personal information. Respondents with deeper relationship perceptions were more reluctant to provide embarrassing information than were those with relatively shallow perceptions. The findings also suggest that although loyal customers found the exchange of privacy-related personal information for customized benefit offerings (relative to noncustomized offerings) attractive, the reverse was true for embarrassing information; these participants seemed to find the exchange of customized offerings for this latter type of information unattractive. Instead, respondents would more willingly provide such information in exchange for a noncustomized marketer offering. Such a finding provides support for the notion that, when preferences are embarrassing, consumers may choose to avoid customization, the

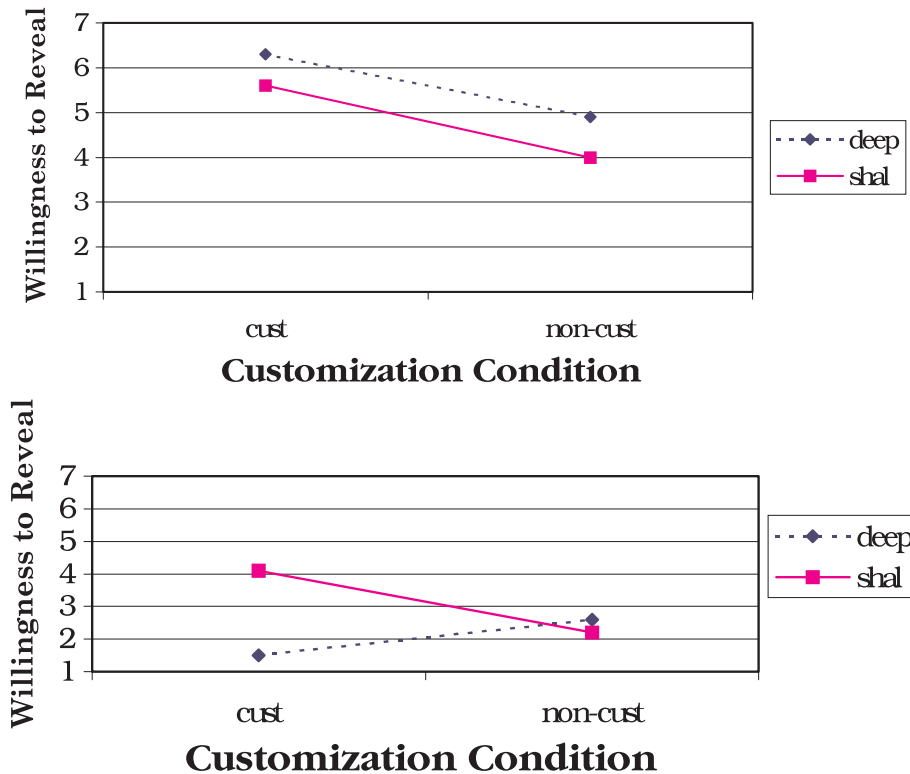


FIGURE 2 Relationship by Marketer Offering by Information Type Interaction (Embarrassing Information Type).

option that makes their embarrassing preferences salient to them.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Taken together, the findings suggest that, rather than behaving as willing participants in the information-driven relationship building process, consumers may engage in “disclosure management,” including reluctance or refusal to disclose information. In the framework developed, we tested the individual and interactive effects of three variables that impact this decision significantly: consumers’ relationship perceptions, the nature of benefits offered by marketers in exchange for requested information, and the type of information requested.

The proposed model of Consumer Disclosure Management informs both the self-disclosure and the interpersonal relationship literatures on which it is based. Overall the framework provides a tool for conceptualizing consumers’ disclosure decisions that integrates the relevant research within the self-disclosure and interpersonal relationship literature, taking into account not only the main, but also the interactive effects of the disparate facilitators of self-disclosure. In addition to demonstrating the interactive effects of relational depth and information type on individuals’ disclosure willingness in a consumer context, we also demonstrate how these two factors interact with a third factor, benefit offerings, to influence disclosure willingness.

The framework also contributes to the collective findings in the area of self-disclosure and self-disclosure avoidance by providing empirical support for one psychological mechanism that underlies the interactive effects of relational depth and information type (i.e., PDCs). Although the concept of risk and/or cost is implicit in social exchange theory, much of the research in this area focuses on individuals’ perceptions of benefits in a given exchange decision (Rolloff, 1981). However, the framework and results presented here motivate a more in-depth consideration of the perceived costs of disclosure and key factors that influence those costs. More important, because the PDC construct developed here focuses explicitly on negative exchange consequences, we were able to demonstrate important situational influences that reverse the notion that deeper relationships are invariably better in terms of facilitating disclosure.

The preceding discussion highlights circumstances under which the very tactics marketers employ to increase consumer satisfaction and retention can have unintended and adverse effects on consumer disclosure—particularly on the disclosure of embarrassing personal information. The practical implications of these findings are twofold. First, rather than adopt a “more is better” conceptualization of the effectiveness of nurturing deep relationships, the developed framework and findings highlight important contingencies that warrant consideration by relationship-seeking market-

ers. The studies described highlight the need for heightened awareness of consumers’ potential sensitivities to requests for various types of information, as consumers’ disclosure willingness may be significantly impacted by the amount and type of perceived disclosure risk. Although the increasingly common assurances of privacy may not hinder respondents’ willingness to reveal this type of information, our findings imply that, depending on the type of information requested, they may not help.

Second, the findings suggest that the effectiveness of a customized marketer offering may be contingent on the type of information necessary for customization to occur. Generally speaking, our results suggest that consumers may wonder about the implicit bargain associated with a given exchange and wonder “what’s in it for me?” When the provision of embarrassing information is necessary to receive a customized benefit, it appears that the net value of the exchange decreases, along with consumers’ willingness to reveal. Conversely, this same type of benefit (i.e., a customized benefit) appears to be much more successful, once a deep relationship has been established, in encouraging consumers to reveal financially risky information. Among other practical insights, this finding is useful in explaining why the same marketer action or request may be inviting and persuasive to some consumers yet off-putting and ineffective to others for whom the risks of disclosure far outweigh the benefits of disclosure.

Limitations and Future Research Opportunities

Two aspects of the relational depth construct are also relevant here. First, it is important to note that deep relationships need not be positive, but could also characterize negative or involuntary relationships (e.g., monopolistic product/service relationships; Fournier, 1998). Second, as the focus here is on commercial relationships, the concept of relational depth is particularly relative. In this article, we used the term *deep relationship* to refer to generally positive, long-term relationships in which relatively high levels of trust and satisfaction have been established and *shallow relationships* to refer to those characterized by relatively lower levels on these dimensions. However, we acknowledge that even the deepest consumer–seller relationships may not approach the level of intimacy associated with close, interpersonal relationships. We also acknowledge that relationships may vary on other dimensions besides trust and satisfaction, among them the degree to which they are dependence based, long term, or important. Indeed future research that examines additional relationship dimensions would benefit marketing theorists as well as practitioners.

In addition to considering the antecedents of relational depth and consumer disclosure, future research aimed at understanding the consequences of disclosure—from the consumers’ perspective—is also planned. For example, to what extent might the robust finding within the self-disclosure lit-

erature that, in addition to disclosing more to those we like, individuals also tend to be more satisfied with those to whom we have disclosed (i.e., suggesting that disclosure facilitates liking as well as the reverse), generalize to consumer–seller relationships? The results of such a research stream should be particularly interesting to marketers attempting to move beyond casual “courtships” to deeper, more committed relationships with their consumers.

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APPENDIX A

Perceived Relational Depth Scale
(Developed and validated by White, 2000)

- I would consider my relationship with QuickRuns to be short (long) term.
- I would consider my relationship with QuickRuns to be low (high) quality.
- How likely is it that you would find a grocery delivery service you liked better than QuickRuns?*
- Based on what you've read about QuickRuns, how likely is it that you do business with QuickRuns in the future?
- How likely is it that QuickRuns would be discreet with the personal information you provided (i.e., maintain your privacy)?
- Based on what you've read about QuickRuns, how much would you consider switching to another, similar, grocery delivery store?*
- Based on what you've read about QuickRuns, how much would you trust the company?
- How much would you say that QuickRuns is concerned about your best interests?
- Based on what you've read about QuickRuns, what is your perception of how considerate the associates at QuickRuns are?
- Based on what you've read about QuickRuns, what is your perception of how honest the company is?

*Denotes reverse-coded item

APPENDIX B

Manipulation Check Items for Customization
Manipulation Check ($r = .92$)

Using a 7-point scale (1 = *disagree*, 7 = *agree*), participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements:

- As a VIP member, I would receive offerings from QuickRuns that were tailored to meet my personal preferences.
- VIP members receive customized goods and services.

APPENDIX C

Perceived Disclosure Consequences Scale

Using a 7-point scale (1 = *disagree*, 7 = *agree*), participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statements:

Privacy Items:

- Revealing this information could result in a loss of control over who knows this about me.
- Revealing this information could result in an increase in phone or mail solicitations from QuickRuns.

Embarrassing Items:

- Revealing this information could be embarrassing.
- Revealing this information could make others evaluate me negatively.

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