

Exploring the post-termination stage of consumer–brand relationships: An empirical investigation of the premium car market

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Abstract

This research extends customer lifecycle models to include a post-termination stage that bridges the dissolution stage of a consumer–brand relationship with a potential recovery stage. Drawing from 43 depth interviews with former customers of a car brand, this study relies on grounded theory and triangulation to explore consumer responses in the post-termination stage and finds evidence for both negative and positive customer responses after dissolution. The authors combine qualitative techniques with categorical principal component analysis (CATPCA) to explore the dimensionality of post-termination responses and extract relationship-related and termination-related response dimensions. They use these dimensions to identify four distinct post-termination customer clusters, which differ systematically with the customer's termination reasons, as demonstrated through a series of exact logistic regressions. In addition to providing evidence of a post-termination stage, this study offers implications for customer relationship management.

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The study of patronage behavior is critical to retailing and relationship marketing, yet knowledge about consumers' responses after they terminate a relationship with a company or brand remains rare (e.g., Coulter and Ligas 2000; Grewal et al. 2003; Pan and Zinkhan 2006). Since Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh (1987) included a dissolution stage in their seminal work on buyer–seller relationships, literature on service failure and recovery has pointed at critical behaviors that lead to dissolution (Brady et al. 2008; Keaveney 1995; Mittal, Huppertz, and Khare 2008), and some other studies have investigated relationship managers' "win-back" strategies (e.g., Stauss and Friege 1999; Thomas, Blattberg, and Fox 2004; Tokman, Davis, and Lemon 2007), as well as consumers' perceptions of recovery efforts (Mattilla and Patterson 2004). A systematic analysis of

consumer behavior after relationship dissolution, however, is missing.

A potential reason for that is that no consumer responses are expected to exist after dissolution. Anecdotal evidence indicates that managers believe lost customers are no longer emotionally attached to a former brand; according to the Head of Customer Operations at Hutchinsons 3G, Austria Ltd., "A customer who decides to leave a company has lost his emotional attachment" (Baumgartner 2008, p. 37). However, using social relationships as an analogy, we argue that the dissolution of a brand or company relationship can leave customers with intense emotions and cognitions that they express with overt behaviors toward former relationship partners, just as they might in relationships with ex-friends or ex-lovers. For example, Marion, a long-term loyal customer of Yves Rocher (YR), expressed disappointment on a Web forum, noting that she no longer buys YR products, as well as some positive feelings, even after choosing to terminate the relationship: "I still think a lot of my YR creams. For some I still haven't found alternatives. They are the ones I miss particularly" (cited in Hemetsberger, Kittinger-Rosanelli, and Friedmann 2009, p. 435). On consumeraffairs.com, a consumer

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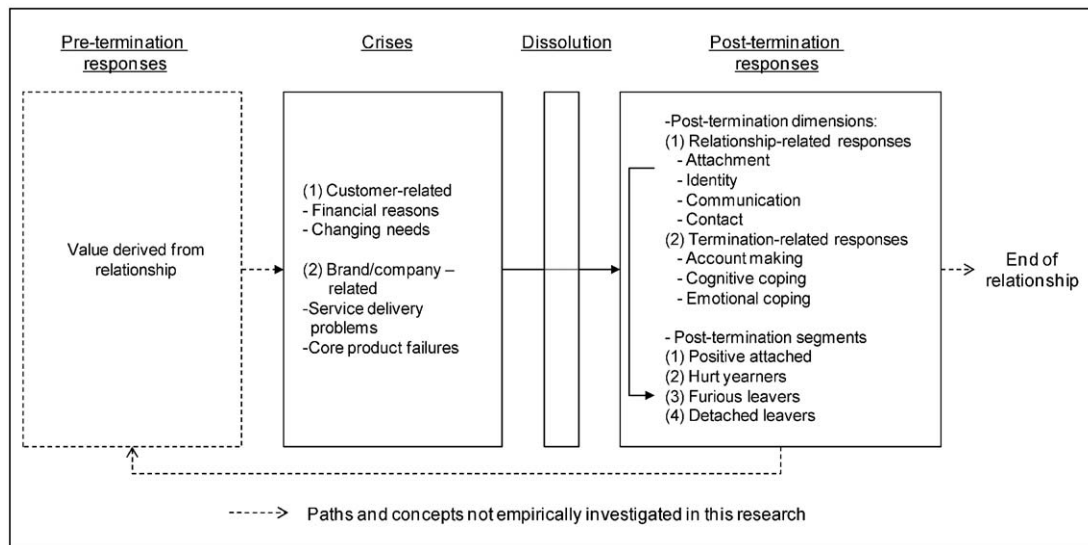


Fig. 1. Post-termination responses as part of the relationship lifecycle.

named Michael expressed similar feelings: “the dealer of my beloved BMW blew me off and I decided to quit this dealer and buy a Ford at another dealer. But I am still a bit homesick whenever I see my beloved BMW. . . .”

As our main contribution, we introduce and explore a post-termination stage of customer relationships. This underexplored stage provides a bridge between the relationship dissolution stage and the potential relationship recovery stage. Understanding consumer responses in this post-termination stage can offer companies substantial insights into the potential ways they might revive terminated relationships. In addition, we contribute to prior literature by establishing post-termination customer heterogeneity and providing empirical evidence of different customer clusters in the post-termination stage, which we can identify according to differences in their post-termination responses. Finally, we explore how post-termination clusters differ with regard to the reasons for their relationship termination.

In the remainder of this manuscript, we first outline the post-termination stage of consumer–brand relationships. To derive inductive insights, we then employ a grounded theory approach and content analysis. We extract post-termination dimensions using optimal scaling and categorical principal component analysis. In a subsequent cluster analysis, we use these dimensions to identify four post-termination clusters and investigate the links between reasons for termination and clusters with exact logistic regressions.

Conceptualizing post-termination responses

To introduce the concept of a post-termination stage of consumer relationships that bridges dissolution with potential revival, we investigate the consumer responses that define this stage, namely the emotions, cognitions, and behaviors that consumers exhibit.

Current relationship research generally considers dissolution as the final stage of a consumer relationship (Dwyer et al. 1987). Researchers identify determinants of relationship dissolution, such as changed needs, service failures, or variety seeking (e.g., Hess, Ganesan, and Klein 2007; Keaveney and Parthasarathy 2001; Seetharaman and Che 2009), but usually do not address post-termination responses. The only exceptions are Grégoire and Fisher (2008) who recognize that switched customers might retaliate, and von Wangenheim (2005) who investigates post-switching negative word of mouth. Neither of these studies aims at an in-depth analysis of consumers’ responses in the post-termination stage though.

As we illustrate in Fig. 1, the notion of post-termination responses extends the traditional relationship lifecycle and bridges the gap between relationship dissolution and revival or detachment. We explore post-termination dimensions, use these dimensions to identify post-termination consumer segments, and distinguish these segments based on the termination reasons

Empirical context and procedure

This research focuses on premium car brands for two reasons: consumers typically maintain strong relationships with premium cars (Kressmann et al. 2006; Parment 2008), and relationship dissolution is usually a discrete event (i.e., the car buyer substitutes a competitor brand).³ To learn how consumers feel, think, and act after they separate from their former relationship partner, and considering the lack of research on post-termination responses, we adopted a qualitative grounded theory approach.

During in-depth interviews with consumers who had been in a strong relationship with their premium car brand but ended

³ Similarly intense relationships may appear in a wide range of other products and industries (see Fournier 1998 for fast-moving consumer goods examples; see Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner 1998 for service examples).

that relationship and switched to a different brand, interviewers attempted to uncover subconscious motives and underlying psychological processes during the critical relationship termination situations while still remaining distant. The interviews were conducted by telephone. For the data analysis, we applied a method triangulation approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques.

Sample

We conducted the empirical study in cooperation with a major premium car producer (Brand A) that provided us access to a sample frame of 1650 Dutch customers.⁴ We decided to include only customers in our sample who drove their cars for non-business purposes and had terminated their relationship within the previous four years. A longer time frame might limit customers' memory of the relationship and reasons for terminating it.

Considering age, years of car ownership, and gender quotas, we called 1139 customers from the sample frame (three attempts within two weeks) and reached 673 of them, 403 of whom agreed to respond to a screening questionnaire (response rate ~60%). Of the 403 consumers who responded, only 43 (10.7%) actually met the brand relationship conditions; we conducted full interviews with all 43 consumers.

With regard to the sample demographics, 38 respondents were men (88%), which is similar to the brand's customer base. Respondents' ages ranged between 31 and 78 years, with an average of 58. On average, the telephone interviews lasted 65 min; the shortest interview was 40 min and the longest lasted 120 min. All respondents received a €25 gift voucher in appreciation for their cooperation. The interviews were tape-recorded with the respondents' approval and completely transcribed. We list key demographic and usage-related information for each respondent in [Appendix A](#).

Interview structure

We developed a semi-structured interview guide which contained open-ended questions addressing post-termination responses and reasons for ending the brand relationship. We first asked respondents about their post-termination responses; to avoid the activation of unpleasant memories about the termination, which might have influenced respondents' subsequent answers, the interviewers asked about their reasons for terminating only after the respondents discussed their post-termination stage responses. Finally, the questionnaire included closed-ended questions related to the respondents' sociodemographic and household characteristics and the model of their most recent car.

Within this structured interview process, interviewers also could adjust the questionnaire to match the specific response situation. For example, in addition to the interview guide, the

interviewers received a set of questions that would enable them to dig deeper into specific topics (e.g., "What exactly do you mean by . . .?" "Could you please give an example?").

Interviewers

The interviews were conducted by six psychology and/or international business graduate students. All interviewers attended two different training sessions that lasted three hours each, which familiarized the interviewers with the idea of the post-termination stage. A focused lecture summarized existing literature in this research domain (session 1); in the role-playing session, the interviewers practiced working with the interview guide (session 2).

Data analysis

Grounded theory deconstructs and rearranges textual input to identify categories and concepts and thus forms substantive theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). When analyzing the interviews, we focused on the questions, "Which constructs play a role?" and "What processes take place?" to follow the standard data analysis approach to grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In the context of our study, these questions refer to the consumer's cognitions, emotions, and behaviors after the termination of a relationship with the focal brand, as well as the consumer's motivation to terminate the relationship.

We assigned codes to segments of text that represent identifying anchors for key information in the data (e.g., we coded the respondent statement, "Today everyone drives a Brand A. It is no longer special," as "negative communication about the brand"). We then generated concepts (e.g., "downgrading the brand") by grouping codes of similar content. By creating a typology in which we linked broad groups of similar concepts, we defined specific categories (e.g., general typology of coping strategies). Finally, we derived explanations for the research subject (e.g., emotional coping strategy).

Two psychologists with experience analyzing and coding qualitative studies conducted the coding and subsequent qualitative data analysis. The data analysis was supported by the computer-assisted, qualitative data analysis software MAXqda (Weitzmann 2000) for cross-case representations, for which it provided a systematic overview of all text that referred to specific themes or constructs.

Quantitative methods complemented the qualitative results. Method triangulation offers a powerful approach rarely used in retailing and marketing research (Olson 2004). We applied optimal scaling to quantify the constructs (Perreault and Young 1980), which enabled us to conduct a categorical principal component analysis (CATPCA). The CATPCA results provided a basis for identifying post-termination clusters, and clusters were subsequently used for studying the links between termination reasons and segment membership with exact logistic regression. In the following sections, we present the termination reasons and then the main post-termination responses we obtained from our qualitative analysis of the interviews with previous car owners. We focus on the meaning of the identified post-termination

⁴ We substitute the actual brand name with "Brand A" to maintain the company's anonymity.

responses constructs and explicate them with illustrative customer quotes.

Reasons for relationship termination

Among respondents in our sample, relationships with the car company ended for either customer-related or brand/company-related reasons. Customer-related reasons comprised changing needs and the customer's financial reasons, generally unrelated to brand performance. As Joseph (67 years) mourned: "After my heart attack I could no longer drive a car with gearshift," and Barbara (75 years) noted: "Driving a Brand A car is fantastic. Reliable, but the entrance and the seats are hopeless. We talked a lot about it, but it is simply the case. Otherwise we would have never switched."

If financial reasons led to the relationship termination, consumers indicated mainly that they could no longer afford the high-priced brand. According to Michael (42 years), "It was not an easy decision, but there was a price difference of 10,000 Euro between the other brand and the latest Brand A model." The effect of changing customer needs even might coincide financial reasons, as exemplified by Helen (51 years): "We now spend lots of time in our Spanish house and hardly drive a car in the Netherlands. I thought that having a smaller car in the Netherlands would suffice."

The brand/company-related reasons for termination referred to service delivery problems (Keaveney 1995) and core product failures. Customer relationships typically follow implicit codes of conduct, according to which customers expect to be treated positively and with respect (Miller 2001). Yet several respondents indicated that they felt they had been treated in a disrespectful or anonymous way, despite their long personal loyalty history with the brand. Carl (72 years), a customer for more than 40 years, described a recent experience: "Last time I was at the dealer, no one approached me. No one asked whether s/he could help me. Then I decided that this was my last time. I'll never go there again." Respondents who cited core product failures as reasons indicated that they had to expend additional investments of time and money, sometimes without even receiving an apology or understanding from the dealer: "I at least expected something like 'I am so sorry that you have so many problems with your car, this is very inconvenient'" (Harold, 54 years).

Post-termination responses

Consistent with our expectations, we receive ample evidence of intense and strong processing of the brand relationship in post-termination stages. The interviews demonstrate that a substantial share of consumers continue to display varied, strong cognitions, emotions, and behaviors in relation to the brand, even after they voluntarily dissolve their relationship. As we describe next, these consumer responses can be both negative and positive.

Identifying post-relationship dimensions using CATPCA

Our discussion of the concepts that emerged from our standard coding procedure follows the structure of a post hoc categorical principal component analysis (CATPCA), which we conducted by transforming the identified constructs into categorical variables and assigning numerical values to the qualitative data categories.⁵ As an exploratory nonlinear variation of standard principal component analysis (PCA), CATPCA uses optimal scaling and can effectively deal with variables of mixed measurement levels that are not necessarily linearly related (e.g., Gifi 1990; Perreault and Young 1980). It assigns optimal scale values to a variable's categories to generate numeric-valued transformed variables (Linting et al. 2007), such that it can discover category values that are optimal with a maximal overall variance accounted for in the transformed variables, given the number of components. Moreover, CATPCA can deal with categorical data and small samples, so it is well suited to our data.

We report the CATPCA results in Table 1. We extracted two post-termination dimensions with eigenvalues larger than 1, both of which have sufficient reliability for exploratory research (total Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$). This two-dimensional model of post-termination responses accounts for approximately 78% of the total variance. In Table 2, we list the various constructs we identified in the qualitative interviews, along with their categories according to the optimal scaling and their corresponding frequencies.

Relationship-related responses

The first CATPCA dimension integrates four constructs with high positive loadings: *attachment*, *identity*, *communication*, and *contact*. These constructs constitute consumer responses that express how consumers think about, what they feel, or how they behave toward the former brand, so we refer to this dimension as "relationship-related responses."

Attachment. Attachment theory from social psychology suggests that relationship partners develop strong bonds that may persist even after separation (Bowlby 1973). Separation evokes diverse, contrasting emotions including love, hate, bitterness, guilt, anger, envy, and concern. People who terminate a (social) relationship tend to miss each other after the termination, even if the split was self-initiated (e.g., Clarke-Stewart and Brentano 2006). Similarly, our interviews revealed both positive and negative attachments to the former car brand, which differed in terms of their intensity.

Among the examples of positive attachment, positive memories about the brand prevail. Peter (54 years) illustrates a state of positive attachment: "I only had positive experiences with Brand A car. Both of us loved driving it." Other respondents expressed an even stronger positive attachment, such that they consider the termination of the relationship a loss and express

⁵ This assignment resulted in dichotomous scaling (e.g., contact versus no contact) for some constructs, whereas for others, the categorical labels were more refined (e.g., positive, negative, ambivalent communication).

Table 1
Categorical principal component analysis results: two-dimensional model.

Construct	Component/dimension		
	Relationship-related	Termination-related	
Attachment to former brand	.968	.041	
Identity related to former brand	.738	–.048	
Communication about former brand	.867	–.210	
Contact with former brand	.795	.031	
Account making /attribution	.119	.960	
Cognitive coping	.374	.847	
Emotional coping	–.434	.761	
Dimension	Cronbach's α	Variance accounted for	
		Total (eigenvalue)	Percent of variance
1	.811	3.283	46.903
2	.634	2.189	31.274
Total	.953	5.472	78.178

Notes: Total Cronbach's α is based on total eigenvalues. Values marked in bold indicate that a construct was assigned to the respective dimension.

Table 2
Categorical constructs in the post-termination stage.

Construct/categories	Frequency ($N=43$)
Relationship-related	
Attachment to former brand	
Very positive	6
Positive	20
Neutral/dissociated attachment	7
Negative	4
Very negative	6
Identity related to former brand	
Initial brand identity	17
New brand identity	10
Brand independent identity	16
Communication about former brand	
Positive	19
Ambivalent	11
Negative	13
Contact with former brand	
Contact	24
No contact	19
Termination-related	
Account making/attribution	
Personal decision	24
Dealer	10
Brand	9
Cognitive coping	
Rational thinking	22
Splitting	7
No cognitive coping	14
Emotional coping	
Emotional coping	16
No emotional coping	27

feelings of homesickness, desire, and yearning for their favored brand. In the context of social relationships, Weiss (1975) labels this phenomenon “divorce pain,” described as a “response to the intolerable inaccessibility of the attachment figure” (p. 131). For example, Carl feels “homesick about my Brand A in general; it always used to be my car,” and Howard (55 years) reports, “My

heart is still with Brand A. My heart cries whenever I see a Brand A car passing by.”

In the socio-psychological context, Masheter (1991) finds that divorced couples exhibit positively skewed post-divorce attachment scores; some former spouses even establish friendships after their divorce (Masheter 1997). Busboom et al. (2002) explain such friendship after divorce according to social exchange theory and argue that higher perceived benefits increase the likelihood of these friendships. Such positive responses after relationship termination may be common to socio-psychological literature, but they represent a totally new phenomenon for retailing and marketing. The limited extant literature on post-termination attitudes has reported only negative responses (Grégoire and Fisher 2008; von Wangenheim 2005).

Consistent with this extant literature, we also found negative post-relationship attachments, again with various levels of intensity. For example, James (41 years) believed, “They could have ensured that I would get a different feeling when hearing the brand name Brand A.” But Harold had a stronger negative reaction: “Brand A used to be a status Brand, but I really don't perceive this anymore. I think it absolutely does no longer have any status.” If customers lack any interest in their former brand relationship partner, they exemplify a neutral attachment (see Howell 2008). For example, Kenneth (57 years) said plainly: “I do not have a feeling toward the brand. It no longer touches me.”

Social identity. According to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986), recently divorced people can no longer refer to an identity based on their spouse, so they strive to build an independent identity. Similarly, respondents in our sample expressed concern about their changing identity after they had terminated their relationship with the car brand. Specifically, we discerned three kinds of social identity effects in the post-termination stage.

Some respondents continued to derive their identity, even after termination, from their former partner brand, a phenomenon we refer to as former brand identity. Fred (70 years) continued to assert that “My Brand A car was a car that matched

with me.” Other respondents instead distinguished themselves to develop an identity related to their new brand (new brand identity). As James mentioned: “My new brand is a bit smaller, a bit sportier, it fits better to me. I feel good in that car. The entire [former] brand was not meant for me.” Finally, a third group of respondents do not rely on car-related relationships for their identity (brand-independent identity), such as Kenneth, who argued: “[The car] is just an object, it does not touch me.”

Communication behavior. Our interviews support von Wangenheim’s (2005) finding of negative post-switching word of mouth. In this spirit, James stated: “My relative considered buying a car of my former brand, but I discouraged him.” However, our interviews also revealed some positive and ambivalent post-termination communication. As an example of the former, David (66 years) told others that Brand A was “a reliable, high quality car, with a touch of luxury. Brand A really realizes sales promises about reliability and high quality.”

When they engaged in ambivalent communication, respondents stressed both positive and negative aspects of the brand in the same conversation, which indicated their conflicting feelings and thoughts about their former relationship. For example, Ralph (58 years), when asked what he tells others about Brand A, explained: “The new model X that I saw yesterday was really beautiful . . . and I still feel a little in love. Then I think, that’s a nice car. . . I think they should not have built model Y. . . I was really fed up with it. . . Way too much noise and then still from Brand A, then I think, this should not be. That’s why I say, they should not have built it.”

Contact behavior. Just as divorced spouses exhibit different contact intensity than do spouses who remain married, customers who have terminated their brand relationship expressed different levels of need to stay in touch with their brand. Consistent with our findings regarding attachment styles and communication behaviors, respondents described different contact behaviors, including searching the Internet, trade publications, and newspapers for information about the former brand partner, such as “I read almost daily about Brand A, as I did today,” (Michael) and visiting car fairs: “Whenever I visit the AutoRAI [Dutch car fair] I will also visit Brand A as I simply consider it interesting” (Alan, 71 years). Other respondents terminated all contact with the brand. When asked whether he still is in contact with Brand A, Henry (55 years) declared: “No. The relationship has been terminated.”

Termination-related responses

The second CATPCA dimension combines the *account making*, *cognitive coping*, and *emotional coping* constructs, all of which load highly and positively on the termination-related component. Because the constructs all relate to perceptions of relationship termination, we refer to this dimension as “termination-related responses.”

Account making. Account making includes explaining, describing, and emotionally responding to stress-inducing experiences, such as relationship termination; it constitutes an extension of attribution (e.g., Weiner 1985). Attribution mainly focuses on cognitive processes, but account making goes beyond

this cognitive perspective to include emotional and social aspects, as well as sharing the story (Orbuch 1997). Accounts can be more effective than assigning blame as a means to process major life events. Weiss (1975) finds that account making helps people achieve closure in terminated social relationships and feel motivated to progress.

Respondents in our sample held either themselves or the company responsible for the end of the relationship. Michael blamed himself: “It was simply a financial decision I made. If I would have had 10,000 Euro, I would have bought the new Brand A.” Ronald (64 years) instead developed a complete narrative and presented the brand as a deceptive partner: “I bought my next [Brand A] as a new car and I have not been happy with it at all. Whenever I buy a brand new car, then I do not expect so many problems from a brand with a strong reputation. . . . When this is the way things go at Brand A, this is no longer for me.”

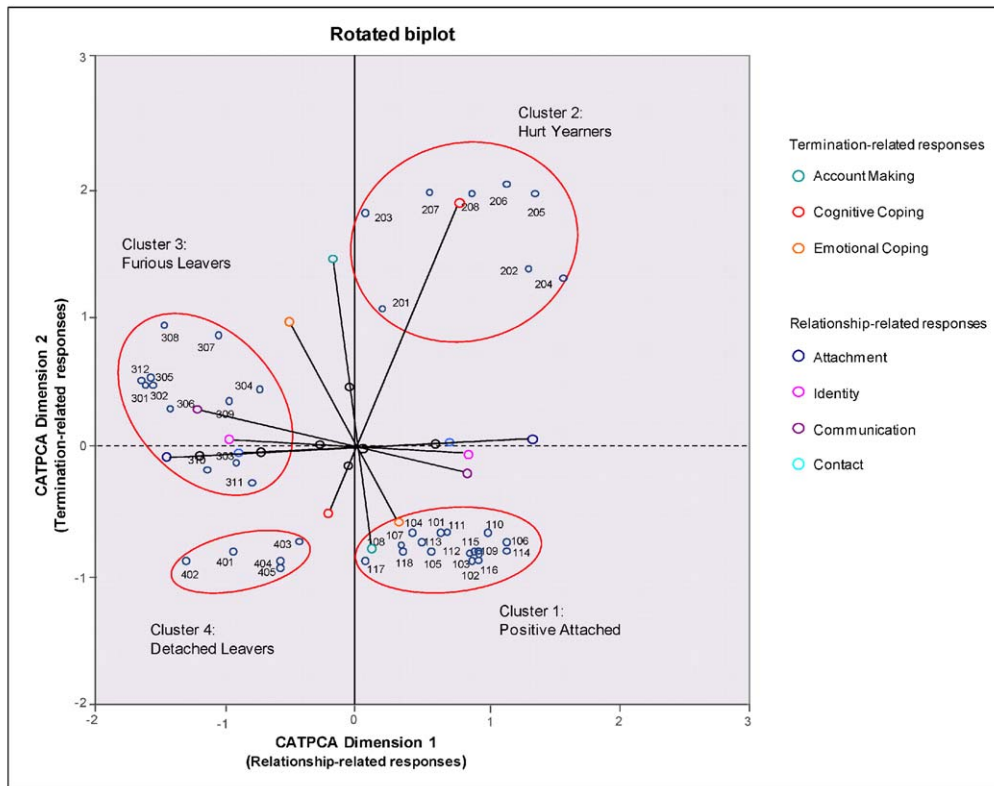
Coping strategies. Coping refers to a person’s effort “to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Folkman and Lazarus 1988, p. 310). Most coping studies in social psychology refer to the stress people experience during divorce; in a brand relationship context, it refers to ways people handle the stress they experience after the relationship with their brand has ended. The interviews also suggested a distinction between cognitive and emotional coping.

When consumers engage in cognitive coping, they emphasize cognitive domains (Duhachek 2005), such as rational thinking and splitting. David, who would have loved to buy another Brand A, could not afford one after retiring and so used rational thinking: “Whenever you know your own situation, you cannot be allowed to say ‘Brand A is the best car and therefore I must buy it.’ This is not the way it works in this world.” Walter (78 years) instead used splitting, such that he separated the brand, the dealer, and the core product: “The dealer said that he contacted the brand and that the brand cannot do anything about it. I hoped that the dealer would have said ‘this is our mistake; please comply with the customer’s requests.’” Furthermore, when the interviewer added, “so this means that you are disappointed in the way the brand treated you?” Walter firmly replied, “No! I am not disappointed by the brand. I always had the feeling this was a mistake by the dealer.”

In contrast, emotional coping emphasizes personal feelings about experiences with the relationship partner (Folkman and Lazarus 1988). Consumers who use an emotional coping strategy expressed contempt and adverse feelings toward the brand, such as when Frank (60 years) called his former dealer “arrogant monkeys” and Harold demoted his former brand partner, such that “Brand A does not have any status at all anymore.”

Post-termination segmentation

Our discussion indicates strong differences across respondents in terms of their post-termination responses. By depicting the biplots of respondents and CATPCA loadings to express the relationship between the identified constructs and the respondents, Fig. 2 points at the existence of distinct post-termination customer clusters.



Notes: Respondents appear in the figure according to their CATPCA object scores; the variables/categories are located on the basis of their respective factor scores. The distance between respondents represents the similarity (or difference) between individual respondents; respondents with a comparable profile appear in close proximity in terms of their plot positions.

Fig. 2. Biplots of respondents and CATPCA loadings.

To determine these post-termination clusters, we conducted a post hoc cluster analysis, using the standard squared Euclidean distance in combination with the Ward criterion. The two CATPCA scores were used as cluster variables. To determine the appropriate number of clusters, we used the pseudo-*F* index developed by Calinski and Harabasz (1974) which uses a variance ratio criterion that puts the between-groups sum of squares and the within-groups sum of squares into relation (large values indicate a good solution), and the pseudo *T*-squared values resulting from the procedure suggested by Duda and Hart (1973), a ratio criterion that divides the within sum of squared errors before a cluster merger by the squared errors after the merger (small values indicate a good solution). Both approaches were found to determine the correct cluster number best in an extensive Monte Carlo study by Milligan and Cooper (1985). As can be seen in Table 3, both methods suggested a four-cluster solution; a result that was also consistent with the visual “elbow criterion” (in which the number of clusters is plotted against the cumulative within-clusters sum of squares; Hair et al. 2006, p. 594f.) and found to be both interpretable and manageable.

To develop a thorough understanding of the clusters, we returned to the interview transcripts and reread them to combine the qualitative and quantitative insights. Therefore, when describing the clusters, we use the post-termination responses

(active cluster variables) and the termination reasons as well as information about each cluster’s intention to repurchase, for both the cluster as a whole and its centroid member (see Table 4 for detailed profiles of the cluster centroids).

Cluster 1: Positive Attached ($n = 18$). Customers in this cluster terminated their relationship for personal reasons. They cherished their positive memories and retained positive attachments to and identification with the former brand. They would talk positively about the brand relationship and maintained contact. Approximately half of them intended to repurchase the brand. Customer David, the cluster centroid, claimed he had to end the brand relationship because he retired, but he still

Table 3
Fit indices for different cluster solutions.

Number of clusters	Pseudo- <i>F</i> index (Calinski and Harabasz 1974) ^a	Pseudo <i>T</i> -squared values (Duda and Hart 1973) ^b
2	30.82	98.06
3	95.27	27.66
4	<i>114.38</i>	<i>8.15</i>
5	110.53	16.01

Numbers in italics indicate best cluster solution.

^a Larger values indicate more distinct clustering.

^b Smaller values indicate more distinct clustering.

Table 4
Profile of cluster centroids.

	Cluster 1, Positive Attached David (66 years)	Cluster 2, Hurt Yearners Frank (66 years)	Cluster 3, Furious Leavers Harold (54 years)	Cluster 4, Detached Leavers Brian (48 years)
Happy marriage	David was a loyal customer for about 10 years driving two cars of Brand A in row. Throughout this time he had a very positive brand relationship with Brand A. Though he experienced core failures, he perceived them as relationship amplifiers as they were solved successfully and he experienced goodwill by the brand (no payment for a failure even after guarantee ending) and benevolent dealer treatment e.g. by getting a rental car for free during the repair. (“In the beginning I was disappointed, but then I saw how it was solved and this changed my feeling. [...] it was solved properly and without any charge.”).	Frank has been an enthusiastic and loyal customer of Brand A (“I used to be a loyal buyer and thrilled driver. I have never hidden my positive experiences”). The last years Frank has been driving the most expensive Brand A car and he is very proud about it (“you should know that I am very proud of my x-model”). He talks full of enthusiasm about his happiness with the brand (“I was thrilled about my x-model, and once I had a xy which made me so happy”). Frank is able to express his status and portray himself by driving Brand A. For him Brand A is a representative car which regularly offers him recognition. (“With the x model, one can impress. It is a very representative car. And everything, everything was good. When I arrive somewhere, I frequently receive positive reactions about my car.”)	Harold used to drive Brand Y for many years before buying Brand A for the first time. “It was always a dream to drive Brand A.” In the beginning of the relationship his brand perception was “an image of being very solid, reliable and with a high resale value.” Based on his perception of a fair relationship, Harold was willing to bear the imbalance during the relationship without any complaints (“I did not cause any trouble despite my disappointment”) assuming that the dealer would restore the balance in case of a repurchase.	Brian drove two different models of Brand A for about four years. In Brian’s perception, Brand A enjoys a good reputation of manufacturing durable and reliable cars.
Reasons to terminate the relationship	The only reason for David to terminate the brand relationship was due to personal reasons. He would have loved to continue the relationship with Brand A, but due to his retirement and his preference for an automatic gear Brand A was not affordable anymore ([...] “an automatic gear from Brand A is above my retirement pay, let me put it this way. Therefore, we changed to a cheaper car and ended up at brand X.”).	Frank’s first disappointment in the service interaction started with the last purchase of Brand A. When Frank picked up his new car, the dealer made fun about the car (“the dealer told me I should not drive too fast, because the motor could fall out and more of these ‘jokes’, which frustrated me a lot”). Years later when Frank was planning another purchase of a new car, he would like to continue the relationship and buy again one of the most expensive cars. The dealer however does not seem to be interested in a relationship with Frank and expresses that he is just one of many customers. Frank experiences that the relationship is not a balanced partnership, but rather an asymmetric power relationship in which he is dependent upon the dealer. In contrast to the past the dealer is not willing to discuss the resale price of the used car. Despite positive attachment and satisfaction about the car, Frank decided to terminate the relationship involuntarily, as the dealer seemed to abuse his power and can no longer be seen as a fair partner.	During their relationship with Brand A, customers experienced different kinds of strong, unsolved core failures, many times accompanied by additional service encounters. During the time Harold possessed the car, he experienced many product failures (“I had so much trouble with this thing. You even would not have accepted this from a cheaper brand”). The relationship becomes worse, when Harold experiences that the dealer does not intend to offer any recovery action. “You really feel betrayed. If you know that a customer has had so much bad luck, then you also know that the smallest problem during the repurchase situation will cause a breakup [...] and what makes me most unhappy was the repurchase. This bothered me so much. There, I really had the feeling now I get ripped off. The trade-in price was scandalous low and they knew it. Even a year later, the dealer of brand Y offered a trade-in price of 25% more. A year later and at a different brand.”	During their relationship with Brand A, customers experience more or less severe service encounters and/or core failures. Additionally, personal restrictions affect future affordability. Consistent with this perception, Brian bought a diesel vehicle, which caused him trouble, when using the car for city rides. (“I just drive in the city, so it was a wrong purchase. I should have bought a petrol car, but one sometimes simply does things. At Brand A one drives a diesel car and not a petrol.”). He ends the relationship because of the core failures (“The car was more in the garage than anything else. And that was more or less the reason to get rid of it”) and because of his rising awareness of his financial limitations (I thought “it is a too expensive car for me.”).
Post-relationship processes				
<i>Relationship-related responses</i>				
Attachment	David states “attachment is a far too strong word for a car brand.”, but he has “positive emotions towards Brand A [...] based on positive experiences” and says “I have not yet said good-bye to Brand A.”).	Distinguishing between the good brand and the bad dealer allows Frank to continue his strong attachment to the existing Brand A. For Frank, Brand A is still the superior product (“Brand A is solid and Brand B is a very nice car. But if you close the door from Brand A and Brand B, that is a difference of night and day.”).	Harold shows strong negative attachment implicitly by rejecting the previous importance of the brand and his “negative emotions” towards the dealer.	
Identity	David shows his identification with Brand A due to his brand enhancing comments while neglecting his current brand relationship with brand X.	Frank considers his former relationship with Brand A superior to the new brand relationship with brand B (“Brand A is stronger. This was the case and will always be the case), the brand meaning and positive brand relationship continues even after relationship termination.	Though he intended to continue the relationship with Brand A, Harold states that he identifies with his previously driven brand Y which he now drives again (“This is a car which fits me. [...] This stubbornness of brand Y was always appealing to me.”)	

Table 4 (Continued)

	Cluster 1, Positive Attached David (66 years)	Cluster 2, Hurt Yearners Frank (66 years)	Cluster 3, Furious Leavers Harold (54 years)	Cluster 4, Detached Leavers Brian (48 years)
Communication	David's communication about the brand or parts of the brand (i.e. product, dealer) is positive. He describes his current brand perception as "a reliable, qualitative high-end car with a touch of luxury [...] and this is not only sales rep talk about reliability and quality, Brand A does translate/implement this in their cars."	Frank's involuntary ending of the relationship is accompanied by grief about the loss of the relationship. He says: "I am satisfied with this new brand, although something is missing: It is not Brand A." In the communication about the brand, Frank expresses brand-strengthening and brand harming lexis. The pejorative remarks can be seen as emotional coping with the relationship termination. The existing positive attachment towards the brand is reflected in positive communication. For Frank, the positive communication also shows in his recommendation behavior ("my son in law used to drive brand C, now he drives Brand A. So I still have this much influence (laughs).")	In line with Harold's emotional coping his communication about the brand is negative.	Brian does not devalue Brand A by humiliating or belittling the brand or other customers, but he is critical in his comments about the product ("For such an expensive car it is rather small") and unsure, whether he would recommend Brand A (Brian (in doubt): "I do not know, there are so many good cars.").
Contact	David is still in contact with the brand and is following their current developments ("When I see a newspaper article about Brand A, I am always interested in it [...] and so I am still in contact with Brand A.")	Despite the ambiguous communication, Frank's own information search behavior leads to contact to the former brand.	When asked about his interest in Brand A, Harold replies: "no, never ever."	He is not interested in brand developments and does not want to stay in contact with the brand (Interviewer: "Are you still interested in Brand A cars?" Brian: "(silence) Hmmm. No." Interviewer: "No?" Brian: "No." Interviewer: "Do you search for information about Brand A cars or do you read about them?" Brian (with emphasis): "No, no.")
<i>Termination-related responses</i>				
Attribution/account making	In his account making, David presents himself as responsible for the relationship termination, whereas the brand is presented as a supporting relationship partner, who tried to make it possible to continue with the relationship ("He [the dealer] offered me a good deal [...] a good trade-in price for my car, more than I finally got from Brand X.").	After relationship termination, in his account making, Frank blames the dealer for the dissolution.	In the post-relationship termination stage, Harold makes account by presenting himself as the victim and the brand as a deceptive and non-benevolent relationship partner, who only wants to capitalize on its customers.	In his account making, Brian gives a technical explanation, why a diesel engine has to break, if you only drive in the city. ("I got every time glow plugs and little technical failures because of the short rides I made. And that had to do with the pressure differences that occur. And those occur when making short rides."). By this kind of explanation he only blames himself, and presents brand and product as being not responsible. As the Detached Leavers feel responsible for their switching, they do not feel treated badly nor rejected by the brand (or dealer).
Coping	David copes with his relationship termination by rationalizing and putting rational-logical motives in the front ("See, those are situations where you only can decide if you know your personal situation. Then, you cannot allow yourself to say: 'Brand A is the best car, hence is has to be Brand A'. It does not work like this in our world.").	Frank applies emotional coping by devaluing the product ("the new model of Brand A is not worth the money") and the devaluing the dealer network ("the dealers are repulsive", "arrogant monkeys"). Frank clearly distinguishes between the brand and the dealer ("Brand A is not responsible, I assume the dealer has his own responsibility") which can be seen as a type of cognitive coping.	Harold copes with the brand rejection and exploitation by devaluing the brand itself ("Brand A has no status at all anymore.") and accusing it to be a liar ("Brand A promises qualities, which – as I realized – are not true."). Though he intended to buy another car of Brand A, in the post-relationship-stage he presents the current product of Brand A in a very negative manner ("disappointing quality", "costly," "not innovative," "not really outstanding," "model did not change," "Brand A used to be leading in safety technology, now they are passed by any medium-sized car brand as those offer better safety technology"), a way of emotional coping.	Though Brian drove Brand A two times in row, he finds a rational explanation, why it is not appropriate to drive Brand A anymore ("I had the feeling that my customers have to pay for my car"). When talking about the brand, he does not show any emotions nor uses emotional terms. Though Brian mainly drives premium brands -which is normally accompanied by emotions- he reduces the car to "It is just a mean for transportation." Although he once purchased Brand A, he now makes clear, that he does not belong to its customer group ("Look, when I am a director of a company of 20 people and I have to drive through Europe all week, then I would definitely drive Brand A. But I am not. And I do not have to so.")

thought, felt, and talked positively about the brand, which he kept contact with by reading newspaper articles. He practiced mainly cognitive coping.

Cluster 2: Hurt Yearners (n=8). This cluster exhibited strong responses related to both post-termination dimensions. Members terminated their brand relationship in response to company-related service delivery failures and engaged in emotional coping. Yet they still revealed positive or very positive attachments and identified with their former brand. They spoke positively and negatively about their brand relationship after it ended; almost all cluster members maintained contact with the brand by gathering information. About half of them indicated they would favor Brand A for their next purchase. Cluster centroid Frank was hugely disappointed by but still identified with (and was attached to) the brand. He felt a sense of grief about the end of their relationship, so he engaged in strong emotional coping to develop his feelings toward both the brand and the dealer.

Cluster 3: Furious Leavers (n=12). Customers in this cluster left because of core product or service failures. They blamed the brand for the end of their relationship and used emotional coping. Their relationship-related responses were very negative; consumers still suffered from frustration and negative emotions. Negative attachment and communication dominated, and they developed identities related to a new brand. None of them would consider Brand A for their next car purchase. Cluster centroid Harold experienced several product failures and a sense of betrayal by the brand dealer; he remained strongly negatively attached and identified with a competitive brand. Harold considered himself a victim and coped emotionally by devaluing the brand.

Cluster 4: Detached Leavers (n=5). Finally, the members of this cluster are the only ones who expressed neither relationship- nor termination-related responses. In a sense, these consumers reflect the traditional marketing thinking that considers relationship termination the final stage of the relationship, with very limited post-termination processing taking place. We find

it insightful that this cluster is the smallest group in our sample. These customers all took responsibility for what happened and used cognitive coping strategies. Respondents no longer sensed an attachment to Brand A; instead, they derived their identity from a new brand relationship. Consistent with this lack of attachment, they were no longer interested in the brand and rejected any ideas about recovering the relationship. Centroid Brian (48 years) terminated his brand relationship after several failures, but did not blame the brand, because according to his cognitive coping strategy the reason for the failures were “technical.” Brian also maintained no contact with the brand.

Linking termination reasons and post-termination clusters

To deepen our understanding of the link between the post-termination clusters and the reasons that led members to terminate their brand relationships, we apply exact logistic regression analysis (ELR) (Hirji, Mehta, and Patel 1987; Mehta 1995). When traditional asymptotic methods for analyzing data sets become unreliable because of small sample sizes such as the one used herein, ELR offers an important analytical alternative. Because the reasons for relationship termination did not serve as active cluster variables in the segmentation, ELR also provides a test of external validity (Dant and Gundlach 1998).

We compared each cluster against the remaining sample. As we report in Table 5, termination reasons have significant impacts on cluster allocation in all cases. By testing whether the reason parameters equal zero ($H_0: \beta_1 = \beta_2 = \beta_3 = 0$, or the joint option), we can reject H_0 for all four clusters. The results also support the external validity of the cluster solution.

Personal reasons ($p < .001$) mainly distinguish the positive attached (Cluster 1) from the remaining sample. Apparently, the personal decision to terminate the relationship results in positive post-termination responses toward the former brand. Service encounter failures ($p < .001$) instead distinguish the hurt yearners (Cluster 2); in their post-termination responses, these

Table 5
Exact logistic regression results.

Dependent variable (cluster comparison)	Independent variable (reasons to terminate)	Coefficient ^a (<i>p</i> -value)	Odds ratio ^b
Positive attached	Joint	(0.000)	
	Personal reason	4.932 (0.000)	138.661
	Service encounter	0.080 (0.480)	1.083
Hurt yearners	Joint	(0.000)	
	Service encounter	3.511 (0.000)	33.480
	Core failure	0.894 (0.290)	2.444
Furious leavers	Joint	(0.000)	
	Service encounter	2.525 (0.011)	12.491
	Core failure	4.696 (0.000)	109.555
Detached leavers	Joint	(0.000)	
	Personal reason	−3.715 (0.001)	0.024
	Service encounter	−4.015 (0.001)	0.018
	Core failure	−3.724 (0.001)	0.024

^a Median unbiased estimates (MUE).

^b An odds ratio higher than 1.0 indicates that that specific reason to terminate the relationship has greater odds in the reported cluster than in the rest of the sample; an odds ratio lower than 1.0 means that a reason to terminate the relationship has smaller odds in the reported cluster than in the rest of the sample.

Table 6
Switch reasons and post-termination responses per cluster.

	Cluster 1: positive attached	Cluster 2: hurt yearners	Cluster 3: furious leavers	Cluster 4: detached leavers
Switch reason	Personal	Company (service failures)	Company (core product/service failures)	Combination of personal and company
Repurchase intentions	Yes	Yes	No	No
<i>Relationship-related responses</i>				
Attachment to former brand	Positive	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Identity related to former brand	Initial brand	Initial brand	New brand	New brand
Communication about former brand	Positive	Ambivalent	Negative	Ambivalent
Contact with former brand	Yes	Yes	No	No
<i>Termination-related responses</i>				
Account making (blaming)	Personal decision	Dealer	Brand	Personal decision
Cognitive coping	Rationalization	No	No	Rationalization
Emotional coping	No	Yes	Yes	No

customers blame the dealer and cope emotionally with the perceived humiliation, but they still exhibit positive responses to the brand. A combination of service encounter failures ($p < .05$) and core failures ($p < .001$) separated the furious leavers (Cluster 3) from the remaining sample, which likely explains their negative post-termination responses and tendency to blame the brand for the relationship dissolution. Finally, the detached leavers (Cluster 4) differ from the other clusters with regard to personal reasons ($p < .001$), service encounter failures ($p < .001$), and core failures ($p < .001$), with all three termination reasons having smaller odds to occur in isolation in this cluster than in the rest of the sample. However, a separate logit regression including the *combined* occurrence of personal and company reasons as independent variable (something that was exclusive to this cluster and affected four the five cluster members) showed a highly significant positive coefficient of 1.665 for this variable and an odds value of 92.25. We summarize the four clusters in Table 6.

Discussion and implications

Implications for theory and further research

We introduce and explore the post-termination stage of consumer relationships, an underresearched link between the stages of relationship dissolution and potential relationship recovery. Our investigation provides empirical evidence that a substantial share of customers undertake intense and complex post-termination processing with regard to both the relationship and its termination. As another substantive contribution, we empirically account for post-termination heterogeneity by identifying four illustrative post-termination clusters.

Relationship-related responses encompass attachment, identity, communication, and contact. The few existing studies on post-switching behavior mainly report negative responses, but we find that about 60% of the respondents in our sample exhibit positive or very positive attachment to the brand even after relationship termination; members of clusters 1 (Positive Attached) and 2 (Hurt Yearners) show a particularly high level of positive attachment, while members of 3 (Furious Leavers) and

4 (Detached Leavers) are less positively attached.⁶ Attachment thus represents a crucial concept for research on recovery management (e.g., Stauss and Friege 1999). Given the high-involvement context of this research, scholars are encouraged to consider whether this finding holds in a low-involvement setting too.

The identity construct also emerged as a key relationship-related response; 40% of our respondents still identified with their former brand (identification was particularly high for “Hurt Yearners” and “Positive Attached” segments), and 44% provided positive communication about it (with “Positive Attached” members engaging strongest in communicative activities). This finding extends Fournier’s (1998) discussion of the role of identity in brand relationships to the post-termination stage; that is, identification may last longer than the relationship. A promising area for study includes the assessment of causal relationships among these post-termination responses.

The final relationship-related construct refers to customers’ contact behavior. We find that 56% of respondents still had some kind of contact with their former brand (contact being highest for “Hurt Yearners”). Additional research should investigate which relationship revival strategies would be most effective for customers with high contact across different contact points.

Furthermore, we identify termination-related responses among the 23% of respondents who attribute blame to the dealer (mostly members of “Hurt Yearners”) and 21% who blame the brand (mostly “Furious Leavers”). Respondents who blame the brand are far more negative in their post-termination responses than are respondents who blame the dealer; brand attachment appears to be stronger than disappointment in the dealer. Spillover effects between brand and dealer attributions thus would be an intriguing area for further research. Respondents also cope either rationally or emotionally with the loss of their consumer–brand relationship.

⁶ Although being informative about the responses’ relevance for our respondents, please note that the sample percentages reported in this section should not be interpreted as representative of the population in general, or of other product categories, as a result of the small sample size.

When linking termination reasons and cluster membership with an exact logistic regression, we found that termination reasons provide a solid basis for predicting a customer's cluster membership, though clearly more work is needed in this area. Additional studies should combine existing work on recovery management with our customer clusters to investigate which are most receptive to win-back efforts.

Retail implications

A fundamental implication of this research is that retailers and other companies should account for the existence of a post-termination stage of customer relationships when designing CRM programs. To validate this claim, we conducted three post hoc interviews with managers from the automotive industry, which all three saw strong business potential in the extension of CRM activities toward customers who have reached their post-termination stage (all three managers' companies were not acting on post-termination stage customers).⁷

Our research provides companies with knowledge on the internal and overt processes that take place in the post-termination stage and offers a first look at inter-customer differences. Our respondents noted that the lack of knowledge was the main reason for not systematically exploring the business potentials provided by the post-termination stage. To exploit the knowledge generated by this research, it will be crucial for companies to systematically collect information on termination reasons and post-termination behaviors. An important role in this regard can be assigned to salespeople who should pay attention to lost customers who still maintain contact with the brand, such as visiting the brand at a car fair. Other media which offer powerful information might include the customer's continuing newsletter membership or his or her contributions to the brand's (online) community.

Such information should then be used to assign a former customer to one of the four post-termination segments and to develop appropriate measures for re-vitalizing terminated relationships. Again, the salespeople might help, as manager A argues: If a lost customer with positive feelings toward the brand visits the car fair, sales representatives can propose an appropriate offer to entice the customer to return to the brand. For members of clusters 3 and 4, similar proactive behavior (e.g., offering a better trade-in price, manager B) can help avoid negative word-of-mouth communication, another benefit of engaging in post-termination marketing activities.

Finally, we encourage companies to include the post-termination stage in their relationship lifecycle models. Combining insights on such lifetime models with post-termination knowledge, dealers might want to contact not only existing, but also "lost" customers (at least those of clusters 1 and 2) before their finance contract with the new brand is about

to end (in the car industry, this is typically the case after 25–37 months; manager C).

In summary, marketers can benefit from acknowledging the post-termination stage and managing corresponding customer responses effectively. Retailers should be aware of post-termination heterogeneity, which has key implications for customer recovery management.

Appendix A. Sample description

Object_Nr	Name	Gender	Age	Months since switch	Household size	Last car model
101	John	Male	42	9	4	Small family
102	Harry	Male	64	9	2	Small family
103	Paul	Male	48	8	2	Compact
104	Barbara	Female	75	18	2	Compact
105	Louis	Male	44	12	2	Luxury
106	Howard	Male	55	21	1	Compact
107	Alan	Male	71	40	2	Compact
108	Linda	Female	70	15	2	Compact
109	David	Male	66	14	2	Small family
110	Thomas	Male	59	17	2	Compact
111	Helen	Female	51	9	3	Compact
112	Thomas	Male	39	21	4	Compact
113	Charles	Male	70	11	2	Compact
114	Michael	Male	42	9	3	Compact
115	Gary	Male	49	18	1	Luxury
116	Tim	Male	35	15	5	Compact
117	Joseph	Male	67	29	3	Compact
118	George	Male	71	12	2	Compact
201	Peter	Male	54	8	2	Small family
202	Carl	Male	72	30	2	Compact
203	Walter	Male	78	18	2	Executive
204	Fred	Male	70	33	2	Compact
205	William	Male	67	14	1	Compact
206	Frank	Male	60	19	2	Luxury
207	Leonard	Male	66	21	2	Executive
208	Robert	Male	70	26	2	Executive
301	Dennis	Male	71	21	2	Compact
302	Harold	Male	54	14	2	Compact
303	Larry	Male	59	17	5	Compact
304	Ralph	Male	58	11	1	Small family
305	Henry	Male	55	21	2	Small family
306	Richard	Male	56	43	2	Compact
307	Patrick	Male	50	18	4	Compact
308	Eric	Male	58	9	2	Compact
309	Christopher	Male	56	10	2	Small family
310	Ronald	Male	63	24	2	Compact
311	Kenneth	Male	57	32	2	Compact
312	James	Male	41	12	2	Executive
401	Brian	Male	48	25	3	Compact
402	Gerald	Male	73	11	2	Small family
403	Betty	Female	31	9	2	Small family

⁷ Respondent A was a marketing manager of a car producer (male, 36 years); Respondent B represented a car dealer (male, 57 years), and respondent C managed an automotive supplier (male, 43 years). All three managers lived in the Netherlands when the interviews were conducted.

Appendix A (Continued)

Object_Nr	Name	Gender	Age	Months since switch	Household size	Last car model
404	Mary	Female	55	18	2	Luxury
405	Jeffrey	Male	61	18	2	Small family

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