

COMMUNITAS INTERRUPTUS

Consumer experiences of leaving community

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Introduction

Leaving is a fundamental part of living. We leave the womb, we leave home, we leave school, we leave loves, we leave careers, and, ultimately, we leave life itself. Leaving seems like it should be easy. A simple statement, "I quit," seems adequate. But, leaving can be hard. It can be messy. It can be complicated and it can hurt. Leaving can also be liberating and exhilarating. The heartbreak and joy of leaving home, hearth, and love has been the heart of epic blockbusters, the soul of the poet's craft, and the lifeblood of masterpiece novels. Even the comparatively more mundane experiences of leaving jobs and lifestyles have created the story arcs of Oscar-winning movies and *New York Times* bestsellers. Leaving resonates at the core of our human existence. Yet, the lived experience of leaving has remained relatively unexamined in consumer behavior literature.

The literature provides compelling insights into many of the vital human relationship concerns and issues that impact and are impacted by consumer behaviors (Fournier 1988). However, in cases of relationship endings and community exit, there is much less work. The scholarly locus of concern has been largely on forward movement into a new life space, rather than on the experience of leaving itself. Consumer behavior scholars who have begun to capture aspects of the lived experience of exit (cf. McAlexander 1991; Schouten and McAlexander 1993; Penaloza 1994; Arsel and Thompson 2011; Russell and Schau 2014; Ustuner and Holt 2007; McAlexander 2011) reveal the importance of understanding better what appears, when examined closely, to be a protracted process that does not match the dominant theoretic work associated with linear passage and transition models (Van Gennep 1960; Erikson 1959; Sheehy 1976).

This chapter integrates longitudinal research across our work that has examined the experiences of consumers who leave diverse relationships that have been

central to their lives and identities (McAlexander 1991; McAlexander *et al.* 1993; DuFault 2011; DuFault 2013; Price and DuFault 2014). Our research with respect to leaving deeply invested relationships have included people that navigate departure from the Harley-Davidson brand, marriages, employment, faith communities, and neighborhoods. An important note of terminology: we will refer to those informants who are leaving these important relationships as "Travelers." We do so because the leaving process, across all of our studies of those who have had relationships that were deeply held with brands and communities, share a similar trajectory. Contrary to being a linear path leading to a fixed ending point of "closure," the path is instead, as the Beatles penned years ago, "a long and winding road."

We see that the journey of leaving becomes complicated as ties that have been important and valued become burdensome. Leaving is also complicated by ties that informants wish to maintain, but fear losing. There are roadblocks and exit barriers, and many have experiences that preclude leaving, at least for a time. Thus, informants who seek to leave different communities and relationships experience switchbacks, forks, obstacles, crashes, unexpected turns, and even races back to the beginning. We choose to use the term "Traveler," rather than "leaver" or "one who has left" to emphasize our scholarship's main finding, the Leaving Loop (see Figure 17.1).

The Leaving Loop describes a relationship departure that is messy, lengthy, circuitous, iterative, and may never be fully accomplished. The following Traveler, who is working to leave her faith community, describes her road:

While being supportive, my husband feels as if I have given up, that I am refusing to see the good in the Church. In tears yesterday, I told him I just don't know if I can go back to church. He told me he thinks I'm not trying anymore ... It's been fourteen years of my hanging on by a thread, and I am tired.

(Burton 2009: 51)

The lived experience of leaving

The exit from a tightly knit collectivity is experienced as a tangle of relationship ties that are continually stretched, pulled, and severed as the Traveler seeks the exit. The communities being left have been entwined with consumers' identities, construction of lifestyle, and consumption constellations. For many, these connections have been central to their sense of purpose and life meaning. The stretching of ties too strong to break often pulls the Traveler back. Accepted scholarship has described the process of transition as one that begins with processes of separation and a liminal period where one feels disconnected, or between statuses, and a transition is deemed complete when one is integrated into a new status (Turner 1969; Rosow 1976; Van Gennep 1960). However, we find that this integration does not always occur. We have seen Travelers mired in a liminal state

of leaving and staying that, like Doctor Doolittle's "pushmi-pullyu" trying to decide upon a direction, can last indefinitely. This sentiment is expressed by an anonymous Traveler (as reported in a forum that caters to people navigating the Leaving Loop within the Mormon faith): "Now, I feel like my soul is tied between two poles – one that continues to pretend, and the other that longs to express my true feelings. I am tearing in half."

In our research, we see the messiness of the leaving process expressed poignantly by informants leaving communities that require separation from people, places, brands, and products that have been important pillars of identity. This exit from community does not happen "all at once" in any of our research. As reported by McAlexander (2011), an informant who had been in a deeply committed relationship with a Harley-Davidson branded motorcycle and its associated community, shared with great sadness, a partner-imposed sale of his motorcycle: "It was either keep the bike or keep the marriage." The sale of the motorcycle, however, did not result in a complete personal abandonment of his identity as a Harley brand community member. When probed about his feelings regarding the brand and community, he continues to be uncertain as to whether he has left Harley-Davidson or not. These kinds of feelings are typical of others we have interviewed, as echoed by another informant:

I loved my Harley. I rode with the guys from work almost every week. It was great. When the baby came, we really wanted to get into a house of our own. I sold the Harley for the down payment. I figure in a couple of years, when my wife is working again, I'll get another bike, definitely another Harley-Davidson.

On its face, this may seem a less meaningful experience than for those that we have studied exiting a religious community or a marriage. However, these deeply committed Harley-Davidson owners who reach a point of self or other-imposed exit from the Harley subculture, describe the experience of the Leaving Loop as a difficult, long, and complicated process.

Our findings reveal that the protracted experience of the Leaving Loop is more common than one might expect. Indeed, most of the informants across these studies experience an iterative process wherein they realize they want to leave, they decide to leave, they initiate exit from parts of the community, they then discover the personal costs of exit, and they end up backtracking to restore ties that they discover that they don't want broken. This iterative process is variable, dependent upon the depth of ties within the relevant group, and with the status and capital amassed (Bourdieu 1984) within the collectivity they were attempting to leave (Ebaugh 1984; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Arsel and Thompson 2011; McAlexander *et al.* 2014). While variable, the Leaving Loop appears to be ubiquitous.

The experiences of the leaving loop

We find that the trajectories of leaving for the Travelers in all of the contexts we have studied, surprisingly, mirror each other. Our discussion will focus on the shared thematic experiences of separation from community and the impediments that forestall departure.

Entry: an epiphany

In our studies, a consciousness of separation – an epiphany (cf. Press and Arnould 2011) – was consistently the driving motivator that initiated the leaving process. This epiphany often began with the questioning of basic beliefs, for example: whether the Traveler “truly believed” in church doctrines; whether they were “in love;” or whether they really fit in as a “Harley person.” Informants experienced a realization that resulted in questioning the hold that the consumption community, institution, or other relevant relationships had upon them. For Sandy, the epiphany moment that moves her to separation from her faith has to do with the church’s reaction to her gay brother: “He was destroyed (by the church) for not doing anything wrong. He only had one partner. They loved each other. That partner just happened to be a male not a female. I don’t see that there was anything wrong with this.” Sandy could not reconcile the church’s treatment of her brother with her notion of Christian love, and consequently entered the Leaving Loop. We see that epiphanies like these can become cascading fissures of the belief system upon which the committed collectivity membership rests.

While epiphany was the first step, it was just an entry point into the Leaving Loop for the Travelers. In our study of a faith community, leaving did not occur immediately upon the realization that the Traveler no longer believed the tenets of the religion. The abandonment of a long-term marriage did not occur in an instant when it dawned on a spouse that they were not in love with their partner. Leaving did not occur when an employment situation became untenable. As one teacher leaving employment in a school district said: “They moved our location. It was nicer, but we were the step children on the site. When we didn’t even get a copier code, I thought, ‘That’s it.’ But I stayed and taught and acted like the move was a good thing.” A church member when asked, “Why did you keep going?” after he no longer believed, replied:

Because it would affect my social standing and my interactions ... the minute I started saying, you know I’m really not interested in being part of the church anymore, then I would be the guy they had to save as the lost sheep. Or, they would just stop having interest in being with me.

We observed varying responses to this epiphany of separation while Travelers stay within the community. Travelers, like the informant above, may appear to others to be deeply integrated while they are fully engaged in navigating the Leaving Loop.

Other Travelers exercise voice (Hirschman 1970) while in the Leaving Loop. Voice provides opportunities to maintain what Travelers see as productive and meaningful engagement with the community and its members. Our interviews of Travelers reveal that in exercising voice, many see themselves as adopting the role of the "loyal opposition." Some Harley owners, for example, increasingly uncomfortable with the company's relationship with "yuppies" continued to participate in their own Harley community while wearing their Harley insignia upside down to signal their distress (McAlexander 2011). The teacher, above, motivated her students to write letters of complaint to administration about the lack of printed copy lesson materials.

After the legitimacy of the relevant brand community, relationship, product, or institution has been brought into question in a way that releases its hold on the consumer and motivates them to consider leaving, many Travelers proceed on the road to exit. This seems, at first, to the Travelers to be a clear case of "in" or "out," as in the teacher's observation, above. However, it often turns out to be, as it did for her, a long and difficult journey. This experience reflects that character of what we call the "Leaving Loop."

The leaving loop

We find that "leaving," even after strong epiphanies of desired separation from community, is an ongoing experience of untangling different tethers of embeddedness. There are a multitude of "gossamer threads" (or embedded ties) of varying strength that connect us to communities (Baldwin 1950; Boorstin 1973; Friedman *et al.* 1993; McAlexander *et al.* 2003). Leaving a community can be a process of disconnecting significant and powerful bonds. These ties individually might seem like fragile microfibers, but entwined together they strongly bind members to the community. Our data reveal that for highly integrated members of disparate collectivities, these microfibers can extend the experience of leaving to an entire lifetime in such a way that a complete departure never takes place. This interconnected embeddedness is reinforced as the collectivity being left overlaps with other significant groups that the Traveler does not wish to leave behind. These groups may include employers and work peers, family, and social circles (Phillips 1998). Significantly, our findings show that these points of connection and resistance are diverse in nature, and exist in distinctive aspects of both social and personal identity. To leave is to untangle and untie these varied tethers. This experience is protracted as these connections stretch, fray, and break at differing rates and times. The process of leaving can feel like being at the beginning of a race, but bound to the starting line by multiple bungee cords of varying lengths, strengths, widths and materials. As the race starts, the various ties are unraveled, broken, or held at different times and in different ways, ever-exerting differentiated pulls back to the starting gate.

Important to our research is the revelation that these different layers of embeddedness are navigated and resolved at uneven rates, often at completely

different times and experienced in unpredictable ways. The ties stretch, fray, break or hold sometimes independently, and are sometimes influenced by the break in another tie. Further, the tethers can reattach as moments of repentance and unanticipated exit barriers are encountered. The iterative experience emically feels recursive to the Traveler, as they make a break in one tie only to find they are "held" by others, including ones they thought they had already broken.

Communication to others: public performance

The markers that most strongly signal the breaking of each tether of embeddedness can best be described as the public performance of an act or ritual that separates oneself from the community on that particular level (cf. Kates 2002). This public performance can be achieved with either words or action. The same separation rituals may have occurred privately prior to the public leap, but the public acts and presentations that are declarations of separation and markers of exit seem to those watching the Traveler to be a rejection of the collectivity. As the Traveler becomes more comfortable performing identity at odds with the collective he or she is leaving, more ties are broken. At the same time, new ties are made outside the collective and former ties are reknit together in different types of socially constructed relationships that now exist outside of the Traveler's membership in the collective.

We term this entire iterative and circular process the "Leaving Loop" because the connections, weak and strong, on the various tethers, as they continually hold, sever, and reattach, create the distinctive pendulum-like experience of "living leaving." Common to our informants in the Leaving Loop was their describing of yet another epiphany of another tie that held them after they thought they had left. Marcus, an informant who moved from a stigmatized neighborhood and spent two decades on the other side of the country, moved back to buy his mother's house. He spoke repeatedly about the negative aspects of the neighborhood, refuted the positives, and expanded upon why he did not live there. When asked why he moved back, he paused a long time, and finally said, softly: "I associate that house with my mother, and it took me a lot of time to get over that. But I couldn't."

The Leaving Loop can last for months, years, or a lifetime, and thus is worthy of focus. In the Leaving Loop, the Traveler is liminal, as he or she works toward, but has not yet accomplished, a full post-community autonomous identity. We consider The Leaving Loop, and the lived experience of circularity while being a Traveler trying to exit community, to be a key finding of this research. Due to the nature of the embeddedness of the various ties, the varying rates of separation, and varying length and strength of the embeddedness, leaving feels at times as if one has split identities, or like living in two worlds. To some Travelers who have long, elastic, weak bungee cord ties, eventually the tethers rest easily and are not felt strongly. These are Travelers who are able to reconcile "staying" in one layer of embeddedness while "leaving" in another. To others, however, the split identity causes great pain as the separation process is navigated. A forum poster reflects on

this uncomfortable situation: "For years I struggled to live in both worlds. It became obvious to me, however, that they were worlds in collision."

At the time of this writing, some Travelers in each of our contexts have continued to live in the two worlds: in the collective, and, in their life, in separation from that collective. They make constant micro- and macro-corrections to avoid collisions. Below, we share data to reveal the Travelers' emic experiences of the phenomenon of feeling the embedded tethers holding them in the Leaving Loop. These tethers have been deemed field dependent capital in the work on leaving a faith consumption community (McAlexander *et al.* 2014), but, to the Traveler, they are experienced simply as ties that are, in turn, easy, difficult, or impossible, to break.

Experiences of the leaving loop

Personal choices of individual family members have consequence for family identity (Price and DuFault 2014). To act in ways misaligned with a family's shared sense of engagement in such things as faith, social activities, or recreation can be upsetting to other family members. The Traveler often would prefer to not distress the family, or at least to avoid a full scale eruption of conflict. Many times, the Traveler specifically does not want to lose the family tie and fears this consequence most of all. The consequences of leaving a collectivity that affects the identity of other family members creates stress and anxiety for both those who leave and for those who are left behind, as informants Peter and Sara communicate about the effect leaving their faith community had upon their son: "That – that really hurt him. His junior year he started getting in with a group of friends he really liked – they were a lot of fun, he loved hanging out with him. Then the moment they found out he wasn't LDS they didn't hang out with him anymore."

As a result, exit from a faith, a marriage, a neighborhood, or even a brand that gives personal or reflected identity to others in the family can create distress and even uproar. This may seem obvious in the case of faith, but we observe that family contention may appear at the very first signs of fissures that signal an intent to leave – and thus the family tie may be the first tether felt pulling back against exit from any community. For example, as informant Cindy said about leaving employment in the school community that was changing:

My family was upset when I drove out to interview [in another school district]. My husband said, "Think about what you're doing. This school district is important to us." I said, "But the kids don't go there anymore." He said, "That doesn't matter. It's your identity." I was like, "Yeah, right." But he was right. It was like we did all lose that connection – to the schools, to the town, to the people.

Family is also the tether that most often persistently pulls the Traveler back into alignment over a protracted exit. Failure to attend church or its activities, absence from family events, consumption of proscribed products (e.g., caffeinated

beverages, alcohol, Japanese motorcycles), taking off a wedding band, stopping by model homes in a new neighborhood – these and more are powerful signals of exit to family members from the various collectives in our contexts, even though they might go completely unnoticed by others. Prior informants have used what is called “anticipatory socialization” to traverse the oftentimes lengthy leave-taking of exit: for instance, a law student planning to divorce his spouse studied divorce law, and another husband considering leaving insisted that his wife return to school (McAlexander *et al.* 1993). To those who become aware, these consumer behaviors are perceived correctly as markers of leaving.

Members of a Traveler's family who do not want to leave the collective, and the Traveler him or herself, may be complicit in delaying the public show of exit. A faithful Mormon wife dutifully hid all of the alcohol and put the coffee maker in the cupboard before her husband's family came to visit to hide the fact that her husband was leaving the Mormon faith. One informant's spouse was fully aware that his partner desired divorce and was taking steps toward leaving, but both kept up consumer behaviors that provided a shield and facade of union in order to avoid losing the social and economic capital that was entrenched within the partnership. Members of a collective may also work consciously to install exit barriers by flaunting and strengthening ties linking the Traveler to the collective in question, to oppose exit. An informant's husband began planning weekly family get-togethers with both sets of in-laws and all adult children, and made scrap books of happy times, after his wife initiated a conversation about a trial separation.

Membership in the brand and consumer collectives that we study contributes broadly to the structure of the informants' lives. We observe that these collectives enrich, frame, and impact their sociocultural status. Often, we find that Travelers are held in community by the pain of losing sociocultural status, friendships, and career opportunities if they exit. Sociocultural status change due to leaving can be difficult whether moving “up” or “down.” Informant Janice moved to a more upscale community and has stayed there. She has, however, continued to work in the economically distressed community from which she left and maintains her sociocultural ties there. She talks passionately about leaving:

From that point on, whenever you said you were from [our town], you were like someone to be watched, someone that was not to be trusted, someone who was poor, someone – so wherever you went, people had this infamous – not famous, but infamous – mentality about [our town].

Even though she has left the neighborhood, like the informant who has sold his Harley, she still considers herself part of the former community. She became a community development activist. She is there every week and has her offices there. Although it has been decades since she moved, and she readily indicates the stigma she was escaping, Janice talks about herself as a resident.

Travelers still in community often develop impression management strategies to avoid severing sociocultural tethers that would be threatened by public signs of exit

before they are ready to leave. Informant Sam spoke of what he said Mormons call the "100 mile" rule:

Actually, in my opinion, that's a very standard path guys follow. I remember growing up and hearing about my granddad going on the deer hunt and not finding out until I was fourteen or fifteen that that meant going hunting and drinking with his buddies. That's what the deer hunt was for, maybe kill a deer, maybe not!

Participation in relationship collectives and subcultures can have a great effect on a person's ability to maintain their lifestyle. For instance, a faith community can impact career choice and career performance. For one informant, a degree from a church-owned university on his resume, and his visible faith participation, provided entrée to high status clients of the same faith. When it was publicly apparent that he had left the church, he lost important clients who were a large portion of his practice. To lose clients is to risk livelihood and lifestyle. Further, the reputation and friendships that one has in a job often come from the persona one has played while in it. Feeling the pull of this tether – where staying in community would prevent economic loss – has caused Travelers in our contexts to delay leaving.

Identity consequences

Identity is socially constructed, and deeply embedded relationships in collectivities and relationships construct parts of that sense of self (cf. Belk 1986). In religion, for example, one is surrounded by people who share a common belief system, and thus beliefs and aspirations are mirrored, enacted, rewarded, and deviations punished by a surrounding and relatively homogeneous audience. In a marriage, identity is as part of a dyad, the dyad itself is embedded within larger family networks, and resources are combined to work toward shared family and extended family identity goals. In a brand or consumption community, such as that of Harley owners, identity is also performed and the performance is reflected back by a Harley owner's riding peers. In all contexts, when interacting with people who are "outsiders," one can also see personal identity reflected back, as the "audience" reacts to the consumer's performance. In a sense, one can receive affirmation or approbation of identity by all with whom one interacts (Goffman 1959).

When identity performance is adjusted during leaving and doesn't align well with the community membership, there can be repercussions. A Traveler reveals this identity performance misalignment as she chooses to wear a sleeveless shirt as she is beginning to leave the Mormon faith:

Just sleeveless. That right away targets me as not-Mormon. Because I'm not wearing garments. I mean, it's not a big deal anywhere else because I'm not wearing anything super low-cut or anything, but sleeveless – especially around here, you immediately go – oh, they're not Mormon.

Goffman (1959) talks at length about the small, informal, generally unnoticed ceremonies that permeate everyday interaction – the ones that only feel unnatural to self and other when they don't happen. In the social community, discordant micro-signals are noted and reacted upon in the everyday life experience as the Traveler finds above.

You can never leave: the identity hangover

Interviews with informants after symbolic ceremonies of leaving (asking to be taken off the rolls of the church, receiving a divorce decree, selling a Harley, handing in a letter of resignation from a job, or moving from their lifelong neighborhood) reveal an important aspect of the Leaving Loop. Even after formal exit, some of the tethers are still embedded. Although the Traveler enters the equivalent of a new frontier, with the possibility of being free from the affiliation to the former collectivity, exit often comes with residual hangover (cf. Ebaugh 1988). Informants can be reluctant to inform current community members that they have left. Informant Sandy reveals: "I haven't shared it with the Mormon portion of my Facebook community. It isn't because of getting back to my father, I just don't know where the discussion would be beneficial to all of us." Informant Cindy says: "I change the subject before work comes up with my friends from [that city]. It's like I don't have any legitimate ties to them anymore. What if a large part of our friendships rested on me having a position with the school district?"

Even after formal resignation, ties with family, friends, and work colleagues who are still members of the community that was left are maintained. Further, there is a lifelong decision of whether or not to identify yourself as an "ex," whether to reveal your history or keep it hidden, and with whom to share what. As Janice says about her old neighborhood:

Trying to make someone understand ... "Look, there's some really nice people that live there, you know? They've got a bad reputation, but nice people." Unless you've been there – like you've been, now you've been to my mom's – now you see that all of us just don't live in that kind of ghetto mentality that we're – that that's what we're known for. And that there's some really nice people in [our town], and it's hard to explain that.

Janice is uncomfortable not being a member of her neighborhood in one circumstance, and uncomfortable being a member of her neighborhood in another. This stems, in part, from the portion of the identity hangover that is the lingering and persistent feelings the ex-member has toward the collective. The attachment of some of the tethers may persist past formal exit. Further, if one defines oneself as an "ex," then one is de facto defined by being in opposition to that particular something.

We end this overview of our studies on leaving by reflecting that if trying to exit a deeply embedded collectivity or relationship is often a long and winding

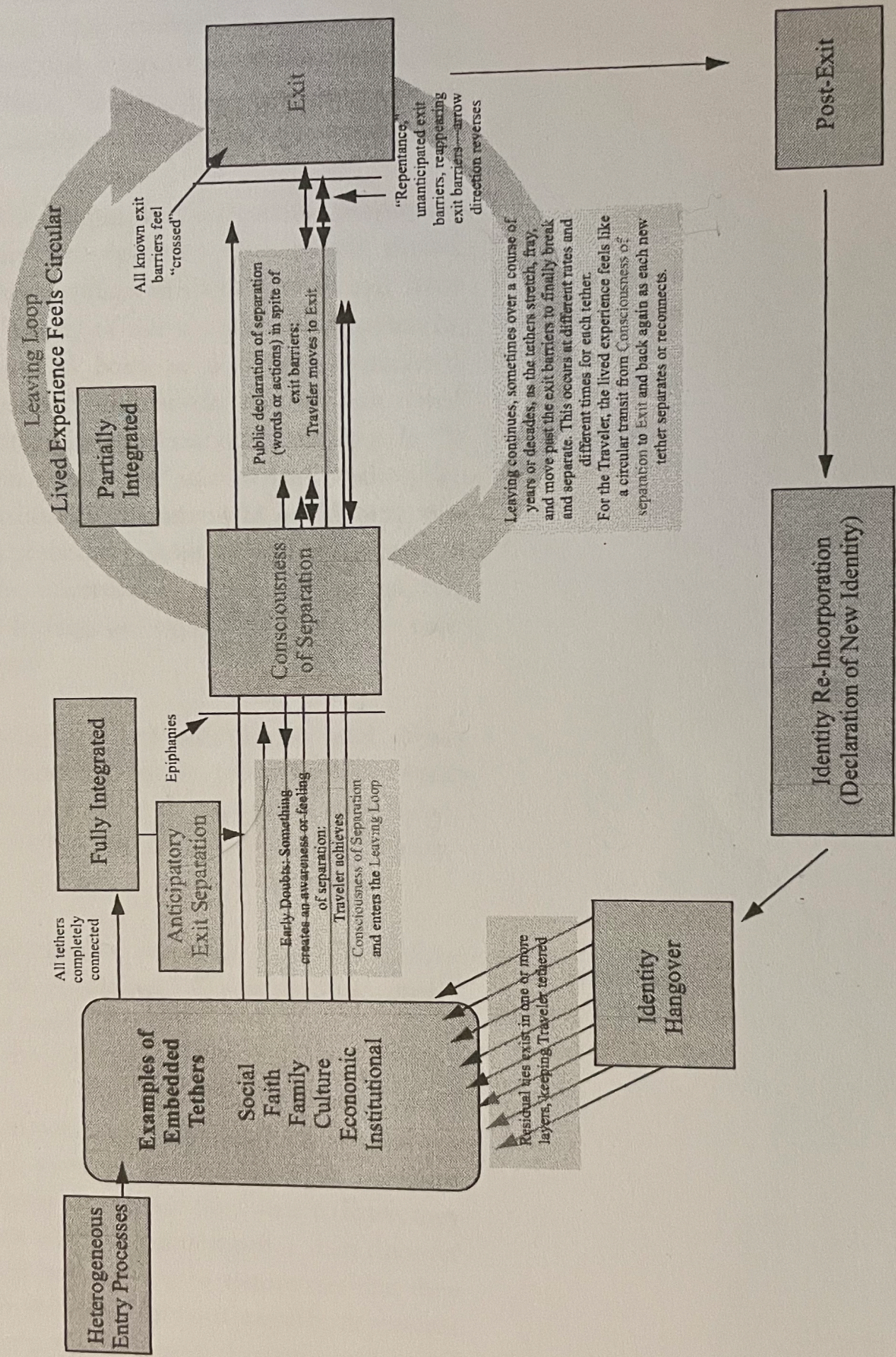
road with no real finish line, there must be many disparate definitions of the phrase "I've left." When is one done leaving a relationship? As one informant, Michael, said when discussing his 12 years of exit from the Mormon faith and its community: "The song, 'Hotel California'... 'You can check out any time you like but you can never leave.' You can never leave! You *cannot* ever leave. You can't."

This research adds to our understanding of consumer behavior while consumers are in life transitions that involve leaving community, and specifically opens new areas of potential research into our understanding of the experience for consumers that leave brands and brand community. The long and winding process of exit that consumers experience while embedded in the Leaving Loop offers intriguing opportunities for additional study.

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1 Leaving process model (for formerly highly integrated community members)