



Brand and product attachment in an industrial context: The effects on brand loyalty



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 August 2014

Received in revised form 23 April 2015

Accepted 23 April 2015

Available online 2 July 2015

Keywords:

Brand attachment
Product attachment
Brand loyalty
Owner-operators
Trucks

ABSTRACT

The role of attachment as a driver of industrial brand loyalty has largely been investigated at the inter-organizational level, while there is a notable lack of studies on industrial buyers' attachment to industrial brands and products. By researching an empirical setting in which buyers have first-person experience of product use, this study proposes the existence of brand attachment and product attachment in an industrial context and tests their influence on brand loyalty based on the results of a survey of 317 owner-operators of heavy trucks. Findings suggest that while brand attachment positively and directly influences brand loyalty, product attachment indirectly drives brand loyalty through the mediating effects of brand attachment. Product irreplacability, however, was found to be a direct driver of brand loyalty. The current research also proposes tests to measure the relationship between the constructs of brand attachment and product attachment. This research has several managerial and theoretical implications indicating that paying attention to the emotional meanings of industrial brands and products is warranted, as are further studies on the application of attachment in industrial marketing.

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1. Introduction

Brand loyalty has attracted attention in recent decades as brands are increasingly regarded as a vehicle to meet the challenge of building long-term relationships with customers in business-to-business markets (Mudambi, 2002; van Riel, de Mortanges, & Streukens, 2005).

Previous studies provided evidence that industrial brand loyalty is driven primarily by the sense of attachment linking industrial buyers to their supplier(s), and secondarily by rational and normative motives (Čater & Čater, 2010; Čater & Zabkar, 2009; Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). However, despite the growing acknowledgment of the role attachment plays in fostering loyalty in business relationships, there is a dearth of studies on another two forms of attachment that have been found to be strong precursors to brand loyalty in consumer contexts, and that previous scholars have suggested are also applicable in the business-to-business domain (Erevelles, 1998; Esch, Langner, Schmitt, & Geus, 2006; Gilliland & Johnston, 1997). The first deals with buyers' attachment to industrial brands, that is, brand attachment, and the second with buyers' attachment to industrial products, that is, product attachment. In brief, brand attachment and product attachment can be defined as the emotional feelings that link individuals with brands and

products (Kleine & Baker, 2004; Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2006; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010).

Although similar, scholars suggest these constructs should be considered conceptually distinct (Kleine & Baker, 2004; Mugge, Schifferstein, & Schoormans, 2010; Nagy & Koles, 2014) as brands and products differ in terms of tangibility (Gardner & Levy, 1955; Kleine & Baker, 2004, Manning, 2010). The differences in the materiality of brands and products produces different subjective experiences (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002) which, in turn, may prompt different affective responses and different behavioral outcomes (Nagy & Koles, 2014). From the marketers' viewpoint, to say that these forms of attachment are different, means that they have differentiated effects on the desired marketing outcomes intended to flow from customers' feelings of attachment. However, no research to date in either the business-to-business or the consumer context has empirically tested the differential impact of both forms of attachment on individuals purchasing choices and behavior, or combined brand attachment and product attachment in the same conceptual framework.

The lack of research on brand attachment and product attachment in the specific domain of industrial marketing, is largely due to the still prevailing idea among both scholars and marketers that industrial brands are not affected by emotional considerations (Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004; Veloutsou & Taylor, 2012), and to the belief that there is no attachment between the purchaser of an industrial product and the product itself (Gilliland & Johnston, 1997). However, since organizational buying behavior consists of individuals making decisions, and since individual decisions are also swayed by affective

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inputs, these are naturally bound to influence behavior also by the decision-making unit too (Erevelles, 1998). The extent of that influence varies according to the role of the individual, in other words whether he or she is a buyer, user, influencer, gatekeeper, etc. (Webster & Wind, 1972)—and the subsequent level of involvement in the purchase decision (Lynch & De Chernatony, 2004). Previous studies suggested that when the person who has a role in a buying center also acts as a user, purchasing choices are strongly affected by emotional considerations linked to their experience as a user, including attachment (Erevelles, 1998; Gilliland & Johnston, 1997; Wilson, 2000). Attachment in fact, requires a connection between the individual and the attachment figure to emerge, to develop, and to affect individuals' behavior (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003): the tighter this connection, the stronger the attachment.

Investigating issues of attachment to brands and products in the business-to-business domain requires a researcher to consider the subjective relevance of industrial brands and products to the buyer (Gilliland & Johnston, 1997; Veloutsou & Taylor, 2012). Researchers must also assume the direct experience of buyers with industrial brands and products is an antecedent condition if they are to determine the role that attachment plays in buying decisions (Biedenbach & Marell, 2010; Lynch & De Chernatony, 2004). By adopting this theoretical position, this research aims to answer the following research question: how does the attachment to industrial brands and products affect brand loyalty? To do so, a theoretical framework is developed and tested by drawing on the theory of attachment (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), on the theory of self-expansion (Aron & Aron, 1996), and on previous studies on attachment. The current research relies on brands and products differing in terms of tangibility, to provide strict conceptual properties of brand attachment and product attachment, to propose specific behavior outcomes, and to test the causal relationships between them. We use the heavy truck industry as a research setting, with a particular focus on owner-operators of heavy trucks. Truck owner-operators belong to the wide group of self-employed workers who start up their own business with no employees aside from the owner. In 2013, it is estimated that nearly three in ten workers worldwide are self-employed (Gallup, 2014). Self-employment is very common in professional service industries such as accounting, legal advices, consulting services, and construction (e.g., specialist plumbing, ventilation, or painting contractors) and in some non-professional services, such as the retail trade, real estate, and rental leasing (Rissman, 2003), and is a widely found organizational form in the transportation industry (Nickerson & Silverman, 2003).

Self-employed workers are a category of buyers who are also users, and as such they represent an archetype of a buying situation in which buying behavior is supposed to be strongly affected by emotional considerations, including attachment (Erevelles, 1998; Gilliland & Johnston, 1997; Wilson, 2000). Moreover, since the self-employed have both first-hand experience with products and the organizational legitimacy to make brand choices, a study sampling the group can investigate if and how their attachments affect brand loyalty.

A total of 317 owner-operators working in a European country participated in the research. The results of a structural equation model show that brand attachment and product attachment are indeed different constructs, and influence brand loyalty in different ways.

This study makes three incremental contributions to the industrial marketing research, and one contribution to the specific domain of studies on attachment.

With regard to industrial marketing research, first it contributes to the existing literature on organizational buying behavior (Bonoma & Zaltman, 2011; Webster & Wind, 1972) by showing the significant role that affective forces play when buyer and user roles overlap. Second, it contributes to expanding the domain of attachment studies in industrial relationships beyond the affective bond that may link industrial buyers and sellers (Paulssen, 2009) by shedding light on the role played by buyers' feelings of attachment to industrial brands and products. Third, it contributes to expanding the stream of studies in

which business-to-business brands and products are scrutinized in a manner that goes beyond their functional/utilitarian features (Gilliland & Johnston, 1997; Herbst & Merz, 2011; Veloutsou & Taylor, 2012) to encompass ego-related and self-expressive meanings.

Besides contributing to industrial marketing research, this study offers a further contribution relating to the specific field of studies on attachment, as it is the first to combine brand attachment and product attachment within the same empirical design, and to test the causal relationships between the two.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows: It begins with a review of the literature on previous applications of the attachment construct in industrial marketing research, and by highlighting the opportunity to extend studies on brand and product attachment to the business-to-business domain. There follows a section on the theoretical differences between brand attachment and product attachment, which is at the foreground in the conceptual development of the entire research design. The third section presents the conceptual framework and research hypotheses and is followed by an explanation of the paper's methodology, including the data gathering process, the measure development, and the analytical procedures. The following section presents the results and a discussion of the study's theoretical contributions, its managerial implications, and potential directions for further research. Finally, a conclusion is presented to summarize the research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Attachment, brand attachment, and product attachment: background literature, present and future applications in industrial marketing studies

The construct of attachment was originally developed to understand the deep and enduring emotional bonds that connect one person to another or a person to an object across time and space (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Attachment theorists were hence principally concerned with the "psychological connectedness between human beings" (Bowlby, 1969: 194) and with the effects of such connectedness on individuals' behavior. As stated by Bowlby (1969), an individual who is attached to someone or to something is "strongly disposed to seek proximity to and contact with [that] specific figure" (p. 371).¹ The basic tenet of attachment theory is in fact that individuals are naturally motivated to seek proximity to specific (attachment) figures to secure protection from physical and psychological threats and to promote the regulation of affect.

As the main outcome of attachment is the individual's willingness to maintain proximity with the attachment figure, this construct has often been applied in marketing studies to explain the phenomenon of loyalty. Several works have shown that strong brand-customer bonds (brand attachment) and strong product-customer bonds (product attachment) increase individuals' willingness to make repeated purchases of the same brand (Kressmann et al., 2006; Matzler, Pichler, Füller, & Mooradian, 2011; Park et al., 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005) allowing marketers to benefit from non-spurious loyalty (Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011).

Brand attachment and product attachment are defined as follows: the former, as an emotion-laden bond between a person and a brand characterized by deep feelings of connection, affection, and passion involving thoughts and feelings about the brand and its relationship to the self (Thomson et al., 2005). The latter, as a multifaceted property of the relationship between a person and a specific material object that an individual has psychologically appropriated, decommmodified, and singularized through person-object interaction (Kleine & Baker, 2004).

¹ The term "figure" is commonly applied in attachment studies to indicate everything toward which an individual can feel attached including material objects, e.g. a product (Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008), special possessions (Ball & Tasaki, 1992), etc., immaterial entities, e.g. experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993), brands (Park et al., 2010), etc., human, e.g., celebrities (Thomson, 2006), and non-human entities, such as pets (Hirschman, 1994).

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