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# Consumers' relationships with brands

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Contemporary research on consumer–brand bonds has moved beyond founding notions of loyalty and commitment and the marriage metaphor that encompasses them to explore diversity in brand relationships and the rules that govern them. Research shows that strong, positive relationships are less frequent than anticipated and that all brand relationships carry risks — for consumers and for brands. On the brand side of the relationship equation, anthropomorphism has emerged as a key condition for processes governing human interactions to transfer to brands. On the person side, attachment styles affect brand relationships through compensatory, self-signaling, and assimilative mechanisms. Future research informs pointed critiques about brand relationships and the dynamics that govern their development.

## Addresses

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Driving engagement and generating revenue are key responsibilities for managers, non-profit leaders, and governments, and academic researchers from marketing and consumer psychology have contributed much knowledge to inform this mission. Research has progressed with inspiration from attitude and, later, socio-cultural theories, but a different psychological perspective introduced in the early 1990s [1] offered new insights by focusing on the *relationships* that form between consumers and brands. This review of recent scholarship is structured in terms of the three foundational elements of the brand relationship entity: first, the bond between consumer and brand, second, the brand as relationship partner, and third, the consumer as relationship partner. A critique of assumptions underlying the brand relationships perspective is

considered, and a glimpse into promising future research concludes the review.

## The consumer–brand bond

Since the beginning, a preoccupation of brand relationships research has been the conceptualization and measurement of the strength of the bonds that unite consumers and brands. Evidence linking strong, positive relationships to purchase, resistance to negative information, word-of-mouth advocacy, and sacrifices for the brand [2,3] has accumulated. Research supports how repeated transactions need not be driven by the force of habit alone [4].


Over time, conceptualizations of brand relationship strength have moved from general attitudinal predispositions including loyalty and commitment to more refined notions that qualify the relationship bond. Central is the construct of brand attachment: the strength of the connection between a brand and a consumers' self-concept [2]. A fundamental aspect of any conceptualization of brand attachment is that the self is implicated: relationships are stronger when the brand contributes to or reflects the consumer's sense of self [1,2,5,6]. Alternate multi-faceted models have been offered (Table 1) including brand relationship quality, which involves relationship dimensions such as intimacy, interdependence, and partner quality [7], and brand love, which includes passion-driven behaviors and anticipated separation distress [3]. Brand attachment has been recently re-conceptualized as a bipolar continuum ranging from attachment to aversion to incorporate the negative brand relationships that can form [8].

Recent research reveals that strong brand relationships have drawbacks. Because consumers have limited identity-related goals, and perhaps limited relational capacity, few brands develop strong positive bonds with consumers [9,10], and when strong bonds do develop, they can bring with them negative potential. When brands become associated with identity-degrading meanings, consumers strongly connected with these brands exert efforts to preserve the self without disengaging from the brand [11\*]. Stronger relationships also lead consumers to feel betrayed when the brand fails them, resulting in revenge, avoidance [12] and a need for forgiveness [13]. The ending of a once-strong brand relationships can spark dysfunctional behaviors including disparaging word-of-mouth, theft, and vandalism [14]. When more is at stake for the consumer, there is more risk for consumer and brand.

In addition to qualifying the strength and outcomes of strong consumer–brand bonds, research has mapped the different forms brand relationships may take [15,16].

Table 1

## Selected brand relationship strength constructs.

Construct	Definition	Operationalization	Source
Emotional attachment	'[E]motion-laden target-specific bond' between a consumer and a brand (p. 77–78).	<i>Affection</i> : affectionate; friendly, loved; peaceful. <i>Passion</i> : passionate; delighted; captivated. <i>Connection</i> : connected; bonded; attached.	Thomson <i>et al.</i> [9].
Brand attachment	'[T]he strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self' (p. 2).	<i>Self-Brand Connection</i> : brand is part of you and who you are; personally connected to brand. <i>Brand prominence</i> : thoughts and feelings toward brand are automatic; thoughts and feelings come naturally and instantly.	Park <i>et al.</i> [2].
Customer attachment style	A customer's working model of relating with a specific firm.	<i>Customer attachment anxiety</i> : I worry about being abandoned by [firm] as a customer; [firm] changes how it treats me for no apparent reason; I worry that [firm] doesn't really like me as a customer; I worry that [firm] doesn't care about me as much as I care about it. <i>Customer attachment avoidance</i> : It is a comfortable feeling to depend on [firm] (R); I am comfortable having a close relationship with [firm] (R); It's easy for me to feel warm and friendly toward [firm] (R); It helps to turn to [firm] in times of need	Mende <i>et al.</i> [46]
Attachment-Aversion	A unifying <i>conceptual model</i> of brand relationships that identifies determinants of their <i>valence</i> and <i>salience</i> .	<i>Brand-self distance</i> : brand is far away/close to me and who I am; personally disconnected/connected. <i>Brand prominence</i> : thoughts and feelings toward brand often automatic; thoughts and feelings come to mind so naturally and instantly that you do not have much control over them.	Park <i>et al.</i> [8]
Self-brand connection	Degree to which consumers have incorporated the brand into their self-concepts.	<i>Single dimension</i> : brand reflects who I am; I can identify with it; I feel a personal connection to it; I use it to communicate who I am to other people; it helps me become the type of person I want to be; I consider it to be 'me'; it suits me well.	Escalas [5].
Inclusion of the brand in the self	How much consumers experience a brand's resources, perspectives, and identities as their own.	<i>Single dimension</i> : Considering that one of the circles represents you and the other is the brand, 'which set of overlapping circles below best represents how you feel regarding (brand name)' (p. 108): 	Choi and Winterich [6].
Brand relationship quality	Quality, depth, and strength of the consumer–brand relationship.	<i>Interdependence</i> : need brand and rely on its benefits; brand integral part of daily life. <i>Love/Commitment</i> : really love the brand; very loyal to brand; willing to make sacrifices. <i>Partner quality</i> : brand takes care of me; listens to me; makes up for mistakes; does what's best. <i>Self-connection</i> : brand is part of me; makes statement about what is important to me; connects with part of me that makes me tick. <i>Nostalgic attachment</i> : reminds me of a phase of my life; thoughts of brand contain personal memories. <i>Intimacy Consumer–Brand</i> : know brand history; know what brand stands for; know more than average consumer. <i>Intimacy Brand–Consumer</i> : company understands my needs; knows a lot about me as a person.	Fournier [7].
Brand love	A consumer–brand relationship prototype that goes beyond self-brand connection and attachment.	<i>Passion driven behaviors</i> : passionate desire to use; willingness to invest resources; involvement. <i>Self-brand integration</i> : connection to desired/current self-identity, life meaning. <i>Emotional connection</i> : intuitive fit; emotional attachment; positive affect. <i>Anticipated separation distress. History with the brand. Positive and strong brand attitudes.</i>	Batra <i>et al.</i> [3].

Note: Some items were edited or omitted for brevity.

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