Brand Loyalty through Brand Attachment and Brand Trust: 
A Relational Perspective

Abstract

Given its importance in brand management, the present research initiative primarily concerns the investigation of the antecedents of brand loyalty. Taking a relational perspective, the study investigates the role of brand involvement, brand self-expression, brand trust and brand attachment in building loyal relations with brands. A conceptual model is proposed and tested in the context of professional sport teams. The data of the study comes from 286 consumers of a South East European country. The fit of the model is tested using Structural Equation Modeling and the statistical program LISREL. The results show the pivotal role of brand attachment in developing loyal consumers while they indicate the two ways through which brand trust affects brand loyalty: a direct and an indirect through brand attachment. Furthermore, the findings indicate that two necessary prerequisites in developing strong emotional bonds between consumers and brands are the self-expressive value and relevancy of the brand.

Keywords: brand loyalty, brand trust, brand attachment, self-expression, brand involvement
1. Introduction

Brand loyalty is placed at the center of contemporary brand management, especially in markets where competition is fierce and product differentiation limited. Oliver (1999) defines brand loyalty as “a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts have the potential to cause switching behavior” (p. 34). Companies are focusing on brand loyalty strategies because they create entry barriers to competitors, and generate greater sales and profits whereas loyal consumers become less vulnerable to competitors’ actions (Dick and Basu, 1994; Ballester and Aleman, 2001) and less price sensitive (Birgelen et al., 1997). Moreover, brand loyalty is directly related to reduced marketing costs, increased new customers (Aaker, 1991), favorable word of mouth (Dick and Basu, 1994) while it mediates the relationship between brand attitudes and brand equity (Chandhuri, 1999).

Given its importance in brand management, it is surprising that research on consumer behavior literature is usually confined to specific sources of brand loyalty (e.g. perceived quality and satisfaction) and the do not fully explore the mechanisms through which loyalty is developed. The present research endeavor primarily concerns the relationships between brand trust, brand attachment, and brand loyalty. This perspective adopts a relational view and is interested in the relational aspects of brand loyalty (Fournier, 1998; Fournier and Yao, 1997). In this sense, consumers typically create loyalty relationships with a range of brands; this may include several brands associated with the same category of goods (Uncles et al., 1995). Previous approaches to brand loyalty are confined to outcomes of utilitarian and cognitive decision-making processes, failing to capture the relationship aspect of brand consumption (Fournier, 1998). In line with this reasoning, Fournier, (1998) indicates the lack of attention devoted to interpersonal relationship theories in spite their theoretical connections to loyalty, and their applicability in other areas in the marketing literature.

Thus, the present study adopts a relational perspective in examining the antecedents of brand loyalty and therefore it characterizes the relationship between the brand and the consumer in terms of trust and attachment. The purpose of this research is twofold. First, the study aims to contribute to the brand literature by conceptualizing the formation of brand loyalty. Second, several of the proposed relations have not been tested before in the marketing literature (e.g. the link between brand self expression and brand attachment, and the link between brand involvement and brand attachment). This investigation analyzes the effects of brand self expression, brand involvement, and brand trust on the emotional attachment between the consumer and the brand, which in turn affects the consumers’ brand loyalty. Thus, the proposed framework aims to provide an understanding of the antecedents of brand attachment and the mechanism that converts brand trust and brand attachment into brand loyalty when building consumer-brand relations.
The paper is organized as follows. First, based on the related literature, the conceptual model is presented along with the study hypotheses. The research methodology and the results obtained constitute the next two sections. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings, its theoretical and managerial implications and future research recommendations.

2. Conceptual model – Research hypotheses

As mentioned previously, this endeavor takes a relationship marketing perspective (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Fournier, 1998; Fournier and Yao, 1997; Morgan and Hunt, 1994) centered on the emotional aspects of brand relationships (Veloutsou, 2007). Based on the emerging theory of brand attachment (Park et al. 2006), the present study proposes that brand trust and brand attachment determine brand loyalty. The hypothesized relationships among the constructs of the study are shown on Figure 1.

2.1. The antecedents of brand loyalty: Brand attachment and brand trust

Brand attachment refers to “the strength of the cognitive and affective bond connecting the brand with the self” (Park et al. 2006, p. 4) in a symbolic manner (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Fournier (1994) has proposed brand attachment as one of the six dimensions relevant in a consumer-brand relationship. The significance of brand attachment as a key determinant in consumer consumption behavior is substantiated by several attributes inherent to the concept. Attachment expresses emotional bonds which are persistent, resist to change, impact cognition, and predict behavior (Krosnick and Petty, 1995). Persistence reflects the degree to which an individual's attachment toward an object remains unchanged over time. Resistance represents an individual’s ability to refuse shifting to competitive products (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). A strong attachment will lead to consumer’s resistance to change and the ability of a brand to withstand bad performance (Keller et al., 2008).

Park et al.’s (2006) posit that brand attachment is more than an attitudinal construct and accounts for higher-order consumer behaviors associated with commitment to a relationship. Thus, brand attachment is a characteristic of the relationship between a consumer and a brand leading to “automatic retrieval of thoughts and feelings about the brand” (Park et al., 2006).

Recently, affective reactions to brands have been found to predict brand loyalty. Empirical studies report that brand affect determines purchase and attitudinal loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001) whereas brand attachment directly influences brand loyalty (Thomson et al., 2005). Therefore, we expect that:

H1. Brand attachment is positively related to brand loyalty

Originated in social psychology, trust is viewed as an intrinsic feature of any valuable social relationship. Brand trust constitutes an important construct in marketing because it affects consumers’ positive and favorable attitudes, and results in brand commitment (Ballester and Aleman, 2001), an expression of successful relationships
between consumers and brands. Brand trust refers to ‘the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated functions’ (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001, p. 82). Based on the commitment-trust theory, Morgan and Hunt (1994) consider trust as a key variable in developing and maintaining enduring and highly valued brand relationships.

Research reports that brand trust is a predictor of consumers’ brand commitment, even stronger than overall satisfaction (Ballester and Aleman, 2001), and it is linked directly to purchase and attitudinal loyalty with the brand (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

**H2.** Brand trust is positively related to brand loyalty

2.2. *The antecedents of brand attachment – Brand trust, brand self expression and brand involvement.*

Brand attachment is closely related to consumers’ self-concept. According to Part et al. (2006) four conditions/resources are necessary for a brand to foster brand attachment: to “1) gratify the self through hedonic and aesthetic qualities, 2) enable the self by fostering a sense of efficacy and control, 3) enrich the self by providing symbolic meanings that define one’s identity, and 4) can do so reliably and with the customer’s interest at heart” (p. 23, 24). The first three conditions indicate the self expressive value of the brand while the fourth is related to self-assuring trust with a brand. Therefore, we propose that brand self-expression, involvement and trust account for consumers’ brand attachment.

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) defined a self-expressive brand as “the consumer’s perception of the degree to which the specific brand enhances one’s social self and/or reflects one’s inner self” (p.82). It is well documented in the consumer behavior literature that individuals choose specific brands not only for their functional benefits but also for their symbolic properties (Piacentini and Mailer, 1999; Wattanasuwan, 2005). In this case, the symbolic meaning of the brand is used as an expression of a consumer’s self-concept in relation to her / his status in society (Elliot, 1999). Consumers choose brands that assist them in creating, fostering and developing their identity (Elliot and Wattabasuwan, 1998; Yoo et al., 2006). When brands gratify, enrich and enable consumers’ self then, consumers will develop strong emotional bonds with them and therefore, build consumer-brand relations (Part et al., 2006). Following the above discussion it is hypothesized that:

**H3.** Brand self-expression is positively related to brand attachment.

Brand trust has been considered an important and desired quality in understanding consumer-brand relationships and therefore, achieving successful relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Park et al. 2006). When consumers trust a brand, they will commit to a relationship with the brand and be willing to sustain a long-term relationship with it. Because the trust-commitment relationship is
considered pivotal in relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), brand trust has been mainly examined in relation to brand commitment and not to brand attachment, although the latter is perceived as an expression of brand commitment. For example, Chaudhari and Holbrook (2001), and Kennedy et al. (2000) examined the relationship between trust and commitment for consumer products and report positive effects. However, Park et al. (2006) consider brand trust crucial in fostering brand attachment because consumers rely upon the brand to consistently deliver its resources. To the author’s knowledge only one study (Esch et al., 2006) examined the effect of brand trust on brand attachment reporting a strong positive effect (.75), stronger than brand satisfaction (.19). Consequently, it is proposed that:

**H4.** Brand trust is positively related to brand attachment.

Involvement is regarded as a primary determinant of consumer behavior and has been defined as ‘a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 342). Involvement is a function of individual characteristics (e.g. needs, values, goals), situational factors (e.g. purchase occasion or perceived risk associated with a purchase decision), and characteristics of the product or stimulus (e.g. type of the media, variations within a product class) (Zaichkowsky, 1985). The consequences of involvement are higher motivation, heightened arousal and increases in cognitive elaborations (Mano and Oliver, 1993). Zaichkowsky (1985) distinguished involvement into two categories: product involvement and brand-decision involvement. Product involvement refers to the interest consumer finds in a product class. Brand-decision involvement is the interest taken in making the brand selection. To the author’s knowledge, the role of involvement in relation to brand attachment has not been studied yet. Involvement has been studied in relation to brand commitment either as an antecedent or as a moderator. Thus, involvement has been found to be an antecedent of brand loyalty and brand commitment (Beatty and Kahle, 1988) and to act as a moderator in the relationship between brand trust and brand commitment (Ballester and Aleman, 2001). Because brand attachment is considered an indicator of brand commitment, brand involvement is considered here as an antecedent of brand attachment hypothesizing that:

**H5.** Brand Involvement is positively related to brand attachment.

3. **Method**

The target population for this research is the sport industry and specifically, professional sport teams. The particular industry is of great importance due to its characteristics and continuous marketing developments. Sport teams are highly symbolic and experiential products that allow for the development of strong emotional bonds between them and their fans. Moreover, recognizing the benefits of branding and capitalizing on the emotional attachment of their fans, sports teams are consistently turned into brand management strategies in order to instil fan trust and foster loyalty (Desbordes, 2007).
A single industry approach was taken because it allows developing questions understood by all respondents, it provides a degree of control over environmental particularities and it increases internal validity at the expense of its findings’ generalizability (Dobni and Luffman, 2000). Furthermore, because causal relationships are tested, a single industry investigation is more appropriate for inference purposes.

Data were collected from a questionnaire distributed to sport fans of various teams in a Southeast European country. A total of 286 completed questionnaires were collected.

3.1. Construct operationalisation and measures

**Brand Involvement**: A revised version of the Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) (Zaichkowsky, 1994), consisting of 10 items (7-point bipolar scale), was used to measure brand involvement. The scale encompasses two dimensions of involvement, importance and pleasure. The mean score of the two dimensions were used as the two indicators of brand involvement.

**Brand Self-Expression**: To measure the self-expressive value of the brand, the instrument developed by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) was employed. Their scale consists of two factors: inner self (4 items) and social self (5 items) and uses a seven point Likert scale anchored by Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). The mean score of the two factors were used as the two indicators of brand self-expression.

**Brand Attachment**: Eight items were initially used to measure brand attachment. The items were initially proposed and tested in a sport context by James and Ross (2002). Four items measure the degree to which an individual has a felt commitment to their team and four additional items assess the extent to which an individual has internalized the team within his/her self-concept. Respondents responded to the items using a seven point Likert scale anchored by Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7).

**Brand Trust**: Four items using a 7-point likert-type scale anchored by Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7) were initially used to measure trust. These items have been used before in the marketing literature (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001).

**Brand Loyalty**: Brand loyalty was measured with nine items used in the marketing literature (Zeithaml et al., 1996). The first four items measure brand loyalty, and the remaining 5 measure loyalty intentions using a seven point Likert scale anchored by Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). The mean scores of the two sub-scales were used as the two indicators of brand loyalty.

4. Results

First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used for testing the measurement model and then, structural equation modelling (SEM) was deployed to test the theorized model (Figure 1).

4.1. Confirmatory factor analysis

The initial 18 items used to measure the five latent constructs were subjected to Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using LISREL 8.52. CFA was employed to test the
proposed theoretical framework and to verify uni-dimensionality and convergent validity. Several items were dropped from the analysis due to small loadings (Table 1). The revised measurement model consisted of 12 items and was found to fit the data well with the chi-square goodness of fit index not being statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 110.47$ with 44 degrees of freedom, ratio $\chi^2 / d.f.=2.5$, and $p=.123$). When the chi-square value is not significant, the model is an adequate representation of the data (Hoyle, 1995). Moreover, the fit indexes values met or exceeded the critical values for good model fit (RMSEA = 0.07, NFI = 0.96, GFI = 0.94, CFI = 0.98).

Next, internal consistency was evaluated by using Cronbach $\alpha$ and composite reliability (CR). The Cronbach $\alpha$ for the latent variables ranged from 0.83 to 0.93, well above the recommended 0.70 cut-off point. Both composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were calculated using the procedures recommended by Fornell and Larker (1981). As shown on Table 1 all the composite reliabilities for the seven multi-item scales ranged from 0.64 to 0.95, indicating acceptable levels of reliability for the constructs. Moreover, the AVEs ranged between 0.80 and 0.94, well above the recommended 0.50 level (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). Finally, the model was tested for convergent and discriminant validity by using the factor loadings and the $\Phi$ matrix. These two tests indicated that the conditions for convergent and discriminant validity were satisfied indicating that the constructs are measured reliably and can be discriminated.

4.2. The structural model

After the preliminary analyses, the structural model of the study was tested using the statistical package LISREL 8.52 and employing Maximum Likelihood (ML). The proposed model (Figure 1) did fit the data well with a chi square value of 129.47 (ratio $\chi^2 / df=2.8$), and 46 degrees of freedom ($p=.00$). The fit indexes values were larger than the 0.90 threshold (NFI = 0.96, GFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.97) and the RMSEA value was close to the acceptable levels (0.08), another indication of the good model fit. All the hypothesized effects were confirmed with all paths being significant at the .05 level as Figure 1 shows. The total, direct and indirect effects on the endogenous variables of the proposed model were all significant whereas all constructs used in the model presented significant positive direct and/or indirect effects.

With respect to the explained variance of the endogenous variables, 87% of the variance on Brand Loyalty was explained by the model. Moreover, 83% of the variance on Brand Attachment was explained by Brand Trust, Brand Involvement and Brand Self Expression.

5. Discussion of findings and future research directives

This study provides important contributions, both in theory and praxis, for the study and practice of brand loyalty. Brand trust, brand attachment and brand loyalty are relevant constructs in the relationship marketing literature, which considers them as key mediating variables in relational exchanges (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). In this line, brand loyalty can be perceived as a link in the sequence of effects that indirectly connects brand
trust and brand attachment with the market performance features of brand equity (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001).

Consistent with past findings, the pattern of results reported here suggest that brand attachment is a direct determinant of brand loyalty whereas brand trust affects brand loyalty in two ways: one direct and one indirect via brand attachment. The findings confirm the proposed model and highlight the important role of brand attachment in developing brand loyalty. The current research provides an empirical validation of the conceptual framework proposed by Park et al. (2006) and verifies the role of self-expressive factors (brand self-expression and brand involvement) and trust in developing brand attachment. The study also extends this framework to the outcomes of brand attachment such as brand loyalty and shows its significant role in building longitudinal relationships with brands.

The consideration of loyalty in branding derives some important and interesting implications. First, the adaptation of an inherent quality of interpersonal relationships (i.e. loyalty) in the relationship between the brand and the consumer implies that the brand possesses some characteristics that go beyond its consideration as a simple product. Second, viewing the brand as the consumer’s partner in a long-term relationship implies that, at a broader level of abstraction, the everyday execution of marketing activities can be built as behaviors performed by the brand acting in its relationship role (Fournier, 1998). That is, all decisions and activities carried out constitute a set of behaviors enacted on behalf of the brand.

Up to recently, brand managers spent substantial resources on measuring brand awareness and brand image. The results of the present study indicate that managers should also use brand relationship measures and develop strategic and tactical initiatives that ensure that consumers find self expressive value in the brand, trust it and feel attached to it. Thus, managers should measure brand trust, brand attachment and brand loyalty when conducting brand evaluation analysis. Because brand loyalty has been found to determine brand performance (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001), and brand attachment plays a key role in building brand loyalty, brand managers should invest their resources in increasing the self-expressive value of their brand, consumers’ involvement with the brand, and brand trust if they wish to foster consumers’ emotional bonds with their brands.

As previously discussed, the results of the study are in line with the theoretical expectations. However, as in any research, further investigation is needed to replicate and extend these findings. Because the data of the study comes from a single product category (sport teams) and a single country (a South East European country), the present model should be validated in other product categories (more utilitarian in nature) and other countries. Moreover, other determinants of brand loyalty as well as its brand performance outcomes might complement the current model and provide a more comprehensive picture on the way(s) consumers develop and retain relations with brands. Product class, variety seeking, impulsiveness, and brand love could be studied in order to provide a more detailed understanding of the relationship between brand loyalty and other marketing variables. Finally, the role of brand loyalty in brand strategies (e.g.-brand extensions, co-branding) is another possible future research avenue.
References


Sung Y-S, Park E, Han M-K. The influences of the brand personality on brand attachment and brand loyalty: centered on the differences between the brand community members and non-members”, in Asia Pacific Advances in Consumer Research 2005; 6: 156. Eds. Yong-Uon Ha and Youjae Yi, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research.
Table 1. Measurement Model and Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Exogenous Variables</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>AVE**</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BRAND INVOLVEMENT (α=0.93, CR = 0.95)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Importance (BINV1)</td>
<td>0.97*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pleasure (BINV2)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BRAND SELF-EXPRESSION (α = 0.91, CR = 0.84)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Inner Self (BSEX1)</td>
<td>0.98*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Self (BSEX2)</td>
<td>0.84*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BRAND TRUST (α = 0.83, CR = 0.64)</strong></td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I totally trust my team (BT1)</td>
<td>0.89*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I count on my team (BT2)</td>
<td>0.81*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>My team is reliable (BT3)</td>
<td>0.69*</td>
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<tr>
<th>Endogenous Variables</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>AVE**</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BRAND ATTACHMENT (α = 0.90, CR = 0.75)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel like I am a member of the team (BAT1)</td>
<td>0.84*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>It is important for me to be a fan of my team (BAT2)</td>
<td>0.88*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The team is an important part of my life (BAT3)</td>
<td>0.87*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BRAND LOYALTY (α = 0.92, CR = 0.87)</strong></td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Loyalty (BL11)</td>
<td>0.97*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty Intentions (BL2)</td>
<td>0.90*</td>
<td></td>
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Chi square = 110.47 (p=0.123) with 44 degrees of freedom, RMSEA = 0.07, GFI = 0.94, NFI = 0.96, CFI = 0.98

* significant at the 0.05 level
**CR = Composite Reliabilities, \( \alpha = \) Cronbach alpha, AVE = Average Variance
Extracted estimate
Fig. 1. Conceptual and structural model of brand loyalty

Brand Attachment $R^2 = .83$

BRAND LOYALTY $R^2 = .87$

H1 $\beta = .80^*$
H2 $\beta = .18^*$
H3 $\beta = .46^*$
H4 $\beta = .14^*$
H5 $\beta = .50^*$