

Beyond Attitudes: Attachment and Consumer Behavior

C. Whan Park*

*University of Southern California
California, U.S.A.*

Deborah J. Macinnis**

*University of Southern California
California, U.S.A.*

Joseph Priester***

*University of Southern California
California, U.S.A.*

Abstract

Although attachment theorists have examined the attachment concept in diverse relationship contexts (romantic relationship, kinship, and friendship, etc.), the nomological network of the construct has not been fully delineated. The purpose of the present paper is to develop this nomological network. We define brand attachment as the *strength of the cognitive and emotional bond connecting the brand with the self*. This definition involves two unique and essential elements: (1) connectedness between the brand and the self and (2) a cognitive and emotional bond, the strength of which evokes a readiness to allocate one's processing resources toward a brand. We examined factors that create brand attachment, the effects of brand attachment on higher order

* Main author, Joseph A. DeBell Professor of Marketing, Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California (choong@marshall.usc.edu).

** Coauthor, Charles and Ramona I. Hilliard Professor of Marketing, Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California (macinnis@usc.edu).

*** Coauthor, Assistant Professor of Marketing, Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California (joseph.priester@marshall.usc.edu).

relationship-based exchange behaviors, why attachments (and hence relationships) weaken or terminate, and how they may be measured.

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding and predicting consumers' responses to brands in an exchange context represents a fundamental issue for marketing. Notably though, myriad responses to brands have been identified — including brand attitudes, preferences, intentions, satisfaction, loyalty, involvement in brand communities, willingness to pay a price premium and more. Unfortunately no theory currently accounts for the totality of these responses.

We propose that the existence of these responses can be conceptualized along a hierarchy, with different levels characterizing the strength of an individual's brand attachment (Thomson, MacInnis and Park 2005; Park and MacInnis 2006). The low level of this behavioral hierarchy is characterized by product search characterized by a lack of clear brand preference. Behaviors at this level are objective and evaluation-driven with no commitment to a specific brand. At a somewhat higher level, consumers reveal preference toward a brand, and reflect this preference in brand purchase. The next higher level reflects strong response tendencies such as loyal patronage, resistance to competing alternatives, and the forgiveness of mishaps. Behaviors at this level reflect consumers' strong loyalty to a brand. A still higher level is characterized by such behaviors as price insensitivity, purchase postponement if the brand is unavailable, and active participation in brand communities. This level reflects the sacrifice of consumers' resources (e.g., money, time, energy) for the sake of the brand. From a marketing perspective, these brand-related sacrifices represent the destination stage for any brand (whether that brand is an object, person, or place).

One might argue that research on attitudes, defined as generalized predispositions to behave toward an object, is best suited to account for these behaviors. Past research has revealed

when attitudes will be favorable and strong and when they are most strongly linked to behavior (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Cohen and Reed 2006). A variety of theoretical perspectives and integrative theories have also greatly illuminated our understanding of attitudes and the process by which they are formed. Such theoretical perspectives provide considerable managerial insight for creating favorable and strong attitudes.

Unfortunately, research also indicates that the relationship between attitudes and behavior is complex and contingent upon a number of moderating factors (Sheppard, Hartwick, and Warshaw 1988). For example, several “matching hypotheses” (the match between the information activated at the time of attitude assessment and the information at the time of behavior) have been proposed to account for attitude-behavior inconsistencies (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980; Miller and Tesser 1989).

Moreover, attitudes themselves can exhibit temporal instability, as seemingly insignificant changes in context and means of elicitation through priming or framing manipulations lead to altered accessibility of concepts and moods and hence attitudes of varying valence (see Cohen and Reed 2006 and Sia, et al. 1999 for more discussion). This view is partially consistent with a constructionist view of attitudes (Wilson and Hodges 1992; Schwarz 1994) which argues that individuals often have many and sometimes conflicting associations linked to an attitude object. The attitude they exhibit at any one time may not resemble the attitude they exhibit at a different time — and which attitude they exhibit will depend on the subset of data to which they attend (Wilson and Hodges 1992, p.38). According to this view, attitudes are simple evaluations assembled from cued cognitions and feelings rather than explained by stored evaluations that guide behavior (see Cohen and Reed 2006 for more discussion).

Finally, these attitude models have been designed to explain the link between attitudes and purchase, not higher order responses that suggest commitment to future exchanges — concepts like satisfaction, willingness to pay a price premium, favorable word of mouth, willingness to forgo attractive new product offerings, willingness to forgive brand mishaps, and active involvement in brand communities.

One might argue that attitudes *can* explain higher order behaviors assuming the construct incorporates the strength dimension of attitudes. Strong and favorable attitudes should predict higher order responses. One might, for example, say that attitude dimensions such as strength and extremity account for intense affect-driven behaviors. Unfortunately, the strength construct itself lacks clarity as divergent views characterize the term (e.g., strength as attitude extremity vs. an independent dimension of valence; Converse 1995). The extremity dimension seems inadequate because it reflects very positive evaluations or the confidence with one's evaluation is held, not the intense, hot, emotion-laden affect that characterizes strong brand relationships. Additional confusion exists regarding how the attitude strength construct should be measured (Wegner et al. 1995).

Given the above, one wonders whether attitudes, can or should be expected to predict stronger forms of behaviors. This is particularly true since attitudes seem more relevant to the domain of evaluation than the development of relationships — such as the long-term relationships marketers wish to cultivate through exchange. The objective of the present paper is to articulate a different theoretical construct that can help explain these higher order behaviors critical to relationship-based marketing exchanges. The construct we articulate is “attachment”. Below we describe the attachment construct, articulate how it is created, and describe how attachment can explain higher order consumer behaviors. As a construct designed to understand relationships, attachment may provide novel insights into higher order exchange outcomes than what might be possible from brand attitudes.

The Attachment Construct and its Relevance to Consumer Behavior

The pioneering work on emotional attachment was conducted by Bowlby (1982) in the realm of parent-infant relationships. Bowlby (1982) proposed that human infants are born with a repertoire of (attachment) behaviors designed by evolution to assure proximity to supportive others (attachment figures). This proximity provides a means of securing protection from physical and psychological threats. It also promotes affect regulation and

healthy exploration (see also Mikulincer and Shaver 2005 and Berman and Sperling 1994 for the discussion). According to Bowlby and others (Bowlby 1973; Ainsworth et al. 1978; Reis and Patrick 1996), the desire to make strong emotional attachments to particular others serves a basic human need, beginning from a child's attachment to his/her mother (Bowlby 1982) and continuing through the adult stage with romantic relationships (Hazan and Shaver 1994), kinships, and friendships (Trinke and Bartholomew 1997).

Defining attachment as an *emotion-laden target-specific bond* between a person and a specific object that varies in strength Bowlby sought to understand the adverse influences of inadequate maternal care during early childhood on personality development (Bowlby 1988). A primary conclusion from Bowlby's (1973, 1988) pioneering work was that early patterns of interaction between a child and his/her primary caregiver result in the development of different attachment styles (secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant) (Collins and Read 1994). These styles, once developed, impact future relationships. To illustrate, Mikulincer (1995) found that adults with a secure attachment style had more balanced, complex, and coherent self-structures compared with those with insecure attachment style.

While Bowlby examined attachment as a style that characterizes an individual (an individual difference variable) and that predicts the individual's future relationship behaviors, the attachment concept has also been examined from a different perspective; one which describes the strength of the bond that connects one individual with another in a specific relationship (see Baldwin et al. 1996 and also Berman and Sperling 1994 for more discussion).

Research in psychology concentrates on individuals' attachments to other individuals (e.g. infants, mothers, romantic mates — see Weiss 1988). However, research in marketing (Belk 1988; Kleine, Kleine and Kernan 1989, 1993; Mehta and Belk 1991) suggests that attachments can extend beyond the person-person relationship context. That research shows that consumers can develop attachments to gifts (Mick and DeMoss 1990), collectibles (Slater 2000), places of residence (Hill and Stamey 1990), brands (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), other types of special or favorite objects (Ball and Tasaki 1992;

Wallendorf and Arnould 1988; Richins 1994), celebrities (O’Guinn 1991) and sports teams (Babad 1987). Although attachment to a person may differ from attachment to an object in several ways, the fundamental conceptual properties and behavioral effects of attachment are assumed to be quite similar.

Research on consumption relationships has also touched on the attachment construct. For example, Fournier (1998) articulates 15 types of consumer-brand relationships. While these relationships are described along dimensions that include love, commitment, intimacy and passion, Fournier (1998) argues that feelings of attachment lie at the “core of all strong brand relationships” (p. 363). Some relationships, such as committed partnerships, best friendships, and secret affairs, are characterized by high levels of attachment, while others, such as enslavements, arranged marriages, and marriages of convenience are likely to be characterized by low levels of attachment. Attachment thus serves as a useful higher order construct that discriminates among the relationship types identified by Fournier.

Although attachment theorists have examined the attachment concept in diverse relationship contexts (romantic relationship, kinship, and friendship, etc.), the construct’s conceptual properties, antecedent drivers, and psychological and behavioral responses have yet to be articulated (see Berman and Sperling 1994 for a review). In other words, the nomological network of the construct has not been fully delineated. We describe this network following the logic described in figure 1.

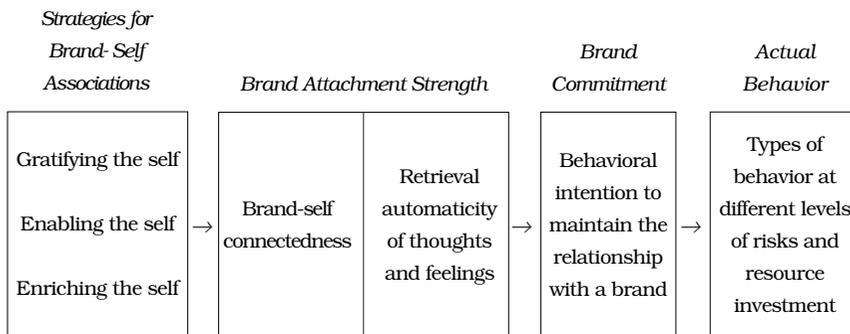


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Brand Attachment

What is Brand Attachment?

Our perspective focuses on attachment as a characteristic of a particular relationship as opposed to a style that describes an individual's tendencies to approach all relationships from a particular perspective. Thus, we examine the extent to which an individual's relationship to an attachment object can be described as strong or weak as opposed to whether their primary relationship experiences have created secure, ambivalent, or avoidant attachment styles. Our focus is based on the view that brand relationships (and hence brand attachments) can be cultivated, while attachment styles are individual difference variables and hence non-actionable by marketers.

We define brand attachment as *strength of the cognitive and emotional bond connecting the brand with the self*. This definition involves two unique and essential elements shown in figure 1: (1) connectedness between the brand and the self and (2) a cognitive and emotional bond, the strength of which evokes a readiness to allocate one's processing resources toward the brand. We elaborate on each element below.

Brand-self connectedness reflects the extent to which the brand is linked to the self, given its essentiality in facilitating utilitarian, experiential and/or symbolic needs (goals). In the same way that human infants develop attachments to their mothers from their mothers' responsiveness to their needs (e.g., needs for warmth, comfort, food), individuals develop attachments to brands that can be counted on to fulfill their needs. Although adults' needs are substantially more complex than those of infants, the basic process by which attachments develop is similar. As explained below, individuals develop attachment to brands that can be counted on to fulfill needs to gratify the self (experiential consumption), to enable the self (functional consumption), and/or to enrich the self (symbolic consumption).

Not all consumption objects can satisfy these self-relevant needs. Attachments develop only when a brand establishes a strong connection with the self — the strongest form of which involves the brand as an extension of the self. Strong brand-self connections (and hence strong attachments) evolve over time,

and develop from real or imagined personal experiences that create autobiographical memories, personalized meanings, and trust. The more the brand can create these connections the more it is regarded as an extension of the self (Belk 1988; Klein and Baker 2004). The more it is viewed as an extension of the self, the more distress and sadness are experienced from the prospect of losing the brand. In the same vein, separation distress and depression are strong concomitants of humans' attachments to people.

Bonds that connect the brand to the self are both cognitive and emotional. Personalized experiences and autobiographical memories of the brand evoke rich cognitive schemata (Berman and Sperling 1994), with links connecting the brand with personalized elements of the self. Because they are inherently self-relevant and have strong self implications, the links that connect the brand to the self are also emotional (Mikulincer and Shaver 2005). Due to its connection with the self, this emotional property implicates "hot affect" (Mikulincer et al. 2001; Ball and Tasaki 1992; Thomson, MacInnis and Park 2005). Such hot affect induces desire for the brand, satisfaction with its acquisition, frustration at its lack of availability, fear over its potential loss, sadness over its actual loss, and hope for its future acquisition.

The *strength* of the cognitive and emotional bonds connecting the brand to the self engenders two effects. First, brand related thoughts and feelings become highly accessible and are automatically retrieved from memory whenever the self is implicated (Collins and Read 1994; Holmes 2000; Mikulincer et al. 2001). This automaticity in cognitive and affective responses is well documented (Bargh et al. 1996; Bargh and Chartrand 1999). Second, given its self-linkages, the brand become self-relevant, impacting one's readiness to allocate processing resources to the brand (Holmes 2000; Berman and Sperling 1994; Reis and Patrick 1996). High accessibility and greater willingness to allocate processing resources for a high attachment brand, makes brand-associated information (thoughts and feelings) automatically retrieved when implicit or explicit brand-relevant cues are present.

Defined in this way, brand attachment is quite distinct from the brand attitude construct. Brand attitude reflects the extent

to which an individual has a positive or negative evaluative response to a brand (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Importantly, this evaluative reaction is independent of the nature and strength of the cognitive and/or emotional reactions associated with the evaluative response. That is, knowledge of brand attitude is informative about whether one likes or dislikes a brand, but is uninformative concerning the underlying nature of that reaction. Our definition of brand attachment explicitly conceptualizes the nature of the reaction (emotional) and the unique elements associated with this reaction: self connection with the brand and a readiness to respond. Finally, due to hot affect, brand attachment entails a strong motivation to commit personal resources in the service of relationship maintenance. That is, brand attachment results in specific behaviors that will serve the relationship maintenance needs. In contrast, attitude's relationship to behavior depends on other attitude properties such as attitude strength, attitude knowledge, and/or attitude accessibility (see Krosnick and Petty 1995 for a discussion of these attitude dimensions). These differences between brand attachment and brand attitude are expected to have compelling implications for consumers' behaviors toward a brand, particularly stronger the forms of behaviors described in the introduction.

What Causes Strong Brand Attachments?

The collection of characteristics, traits, and memberships that cognitively represent an individual in memory is generally described as the self-concept (Greenwald and Pratkanis 1984). An attachment object becomes connected to the self when it is included as part of the consumer's self-concept. Aron, Mashek, McLaughlin-Volpe, Wright, Lewandowski and Aron (2005) offer a motivational resource perspective that explains why some entities are included as part of the self-concept. As a relationship forms, an individual offers resources (social, knowledge, material, etc.) to the relationship partner. Over time, a cognitive reorganization takes place that links resources, the individual, and the relationship partner such that the partner's resources come to be seen as one's own. Through this resource/self-other linkage, the partner's perspective and identity become linked to

one's own.

Brands, like people, can offer a number of resources (developed by marketers) to help consumers achieve desired goals (cf. Schultz, Kleine, and Kernan 1989; Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan 1993). When consumers appreciate the instrumental role of brands in achieving their goals, they come to regard the brands as personally meaningful and significant. They become personally connected and emotionally bonded to these brands. As figure 1 shows, we propose that three resource types (hedonic, symbolic, and functional) are particularly relevant in an attachment context. Specifically, a consumer perceives a brand as being personally significant and connects the brand to the self when it offers hedonic resources — when it *gratifies* the self by providing sensory, hedonic or aesthetic pleasure (Mikulincer and Shaver 2005). Brands are also linked to the self when they offer symbolic resources, *enriching* the self by representing, defining or expressing the actual or desired self (Chaplin and Roedder John 2004; Kleine and Baker 2004). And they become linked to the self when they offer functional resources, *enabling* a sense of self-efficacy and allowing the pursuit and achievement of mastery goals. We elaborate on each resource type below.

Gratifying-the-Self through Aesthetic/Hedonic Experiences

Brands can play a powerful role when they can be consistently relied on to provide gratification (pleasure) through aesthetic or hedonic elements that have immediate mood-altering properties. Such gratification can be delivered through any combination of sensory experiences — visual, auditory, gustatory, tactile, olfactory, thermal, equilibratory, and/or kinesthetic. Brands with such qualities play a primitive and efficacious role in altering attention from external and potentially distracting negative stimuli or thoughts to the self and emotions relevant to pleasure. Such brands also impact emotions like hope, efficacy, and optimism regarding daily distress management, one's ability to cope with life problems, and emotional stability (Mikulincer and Shaver 2005).

Starbucks' ability to build a brand that evokes pleasure from multiple sensory modalities (e.g., hot, strong tasting coffee with a

pleasant aroma) set in a visually and aurally pleasing retail atmosphere that allows for relaxation and self-indulgence is a good example of a brand that targets brand-self connections through aesthetic/hedonic elements. Canyon Ranch Spa has earned a loyal following and established strong brand-self connections through its ability to provide aesthetic/hedonic gratification. From the verdant, peaceful grounds, to the relaxing, richly lit, lightly scented treatment rooms with warm tables and soft linens, to the plush and comfortable bedrooms, the Ranch focuses attention on the self, aesthetic/hedonic gratification, and pleasure. Disneyland evokes a similar connection to the self. From the visually clean, organized, and friendly walk down Main Street, to the thrilling rides on Space Mountain and Star Tours, to the Disneyland Parade, Disney delights the senses, focuses attention on the self and the here and now and provides strong mood-altering properties. Strong brand-self connections thus evolve through *aesthetic and hedonic elements of brands that evoke sensory gratification for the self*.

Enriching-the-Self through Brand Concept Internalization

A second and independent route to strong brand-self connections and brand attachment is through an internalization process in which the brand is linked to the self and its enrichment. Here, brands enable brand-self connections by symbolically representing one's ideal past, present, or future self (Markus and Nurius 1986). At least three routes characterize the manner in which brands can enrich the self through symbolic self-representation.

First, brands can enrich the self by serving as an anchor to and symbolically representing one's core *past self*. Such brands foster a sense of one's origin, history and core self, providing a basis from which current selves are viewed and future selves are framed. They provide a sense of security and comfort by referencing times of safety. They have the capacity to evoke feelings of bittersweet nostalgia, fondness, and satisfaction. They access rich, if not selective, memories about the past (Kaplan 1987; Snyder 1991). They keep one's past alive and thus relate to later-life tasks of maintaining a sense of continuity, fostering identity, protecting the self against deleterious change,

strengthening the self, and helping the individual retain a positive self-image. Place brands like one's city, state or country of origin or college are representative of such brands (Joy and Dholakia 1991; Oswald 1999). They emotionally bind a person to that place and evoke a sense of self and the maintenance of a coherent sense of self over time. Brands related to music, sport halls of fame, athletes, celebrities, museums, or brands used by one's parents (Moore-Shay and Lutz 1988; Oswald 1999) create strong connections with consumers their linkage with past and oftentimes ideal past selves.

Second, brands can enrich the self by symbolically representing one's *current self* — reflecting who one is and what one believes. A person derives *meaning* from close relationships and other life goals that reflect his or her core beliefs, values, and role identities (Lydon, Burton and Menzies-Toman 2005; Shavitt and Nelson 2000). Brands like the Body Shop help consumers define themselves as concerned citizens and communicate to others their values of the environment and nature. Consumers who donate to philanthropic organizations like Amnesty International, Habitat for Humanity, and the Doctors without Borders do the same. Such brands provide a link to consumers' ideal selves by representation of consumers' values and beliefs. Other brands enrich one's current self by connecting the individual to others consumers who share their values and beliefs (Kozinets 2001).

Finally, brands can take on symbolic meaning representing who one is or wants to be, linking the brand to an ideal future self. Such brands reflect one's aspirations, hopes and ideal *future self*. For some consumers, such brands are linked with status, success, and achievement — as would be the case for brands like Rolex and Hummer. However, other ideal future selves pave the way for self-enrichment through different brand meanings. One's ideal future self as someone who is healthy (e.g., Atkins), athletic (Nike), famous (e.g., American Idol), or a good parent (e.g., Parents Magazine) involve other brands whose linkage to an ideal future self enriches the self.

Brands can enrich the self through any or all three routes. For example, Harley Davidson evokes strong brand-self connections by linking the self to deeply held values like freedom and machismo. And it involves accoutrements that work with the

motorcycle to express personal identity and values. Usage of the brand creates linkages to personal experiences that are part of one's nostalgic past. It evokes connectedness to others who are members of various Harley groups. It evokes position within a social hierarchy of other Harley owners and hence creates possible future selves for aspiring Harley owners (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). *Symbolic brand concept internalization thus enriches the self.*

Enabling the Self through the Product Performance

Finally, strong attachments can occur when a brand creates a sense of an efficacious and capable self, enabling consumers to pursue goals and tasks. Creating a sense of efficacy is in turn contingent on product performance attributes that consistently and reliably enable task performance. If and when a brand is not able to serve the consumers' needs effectively through reliable functional performance, the basic assumption behind the attachment would be violated. Consumers' trust with a brand's competence is therefore critical for the attachment formation and its sustainability. For example, FedEx's overnight delivery assurance and Swiss Army Knives' versatile applications must have contributed to the consumers' attachment to these so-called functional brands by fostering a sense of mastery over one's environment. Through self-related mastery experiences such brands also impact one's ability to cope with life problems. *Product performance thus enables the self.*

While the discussion above posits that brand attachment can be created through gratifying, enriching or enabling the self, these routes are not mutually exclusive. Hence any or all combinations of routes may foster strong attachments. The greater the number of associations and the stronger each associative link is, the stronger the brand attachment becomes (Carlston 1992).

It should be noted that increasing the number and strength of associations requires that a firm perform two different managerial decisions: (1) a strategic positioning decision and (2) a tactical execution decision. Which specific brand-self associations should be developed for a brand is a strategic positioning question that can be addressed by understanding

which brand positioning is feasible and desirable in the brand's competitive context. How strong, authentic, rich and vivid brand specific associations are created is a tactical execution question.

The strategic and tactical issues are inseparable and must be coordinated. If coordinated and well-integrated, consumers see the brand as an extension of themselves (through the various routes to attachment) and (2) their thoughts and feelings toward a brand become automatic (by virtue of the strength of association between the brand and the self). By the salience of the brand and its linkage of the self, attachment fosters strong behaviors (described below) that promote a competitive advantage, enable efficient growth through line and brand extensions, and hence enhance the equity of the brand.

What are the Effects of Attachment?

An impressive array of research supports the relationship between attachment and social behaviors (see Mikulincer and Shaver 2005 for the discussion). Previous research on mother-child attachments has identified four distinctive behavioral indicators of attachment (Bowlby 1979; Hazan and Zeifman 1999): (1) *proximity seeking* (an infant's desire to be close to his/her mother), (2) *secure-base behaviors* (the willingness to explore unfamiliar environments when the mother is within close proximity), (3) *safe haven* (seeking security, protection, and comfort from the mother when the environment is threatening), and (4) *separation distress* (experiencing emotional and physical distress from real or threatened separation from his/her mother).

Building on these ideas and focusing on separation distress, the attachment literature has developed a more general model of attachment and behaviors. Specifically, individuals avoid the separation of danger from the attachment object by adopting *hyperactivating attachment strategies* (Mikulincer and Shaver 2005; Berman and Sperling 1994). Such strategies involve increased vigilance to threat-related cues and a reduction in the threshold for detecting cues of attachment figure's unavailability (Bowlby 1973). In a marketing context, such hyperactivating strategies are revealed by hoarding behavior to prevent product unavailability and hypervigilance to threats of the product being taken off the market (e.g., being replaced by a new brand).

The attachment literature also indicates that hyperactivating strategies can lead to self-defensive motivation revealed by cognitive closure and rigidity, the rejection of information that heightens ambiguity and challenges the validity of one's existing beliefs, derogation of members of other groups, and prejudice toward people who are different from oneself. In a marketing context, such behaviors would include counter-arguing of competitive information that derogates the brand, biased processing of information that is ambiguous about the brand, and selective attention to information that is positive about the brand (Jain and Maheswaran 2000). It would involve derogating others who use competing brands and a rejection of what they stand for (e.g. Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel 2006).

The adult attachment literature reveals other marketing-relevant outcomes of strong attachment. In person to person contexts, individuals who are strongly attached to others are *loyal to their partner* (Drigotas and Rusbult 1992), and *resist competing alternatives* (Johnson and Rusbult 1989). In marketing, strong attachments should therefore be characterized by resistance to the allure of new product offerings and their purported benefit superiority. Brand loyalty, despite potentially better alternatives, should prevail. Individuals who are strongly attached to others also *forgive the mishaps of their partner* (McCullough et al. 1998). Hence, one would anticipate that consumers who are strongly attached to a brand show loyalty even during times of marketplace failures, such as product recalls, evidence of product harm crisis, and negative information about the company or the people who work for it (Ahluwalia, Unnava and Burnkrant 2000).

The literature also suggests that when attachment to others is high individuals are willing to make sacrifices and personal investments so as to support the relationship's continuation (van Lange et al. 1997). In a marketing context, one would anticipate that consumers would make sacrifices of their personal resources — money, time, and energy to continue their relationship with the brand. Time and energy investments would include willingness to delay purchase when the brand is unavailable, the engagement in extended search for the brand, involvement in brand communities, writing letters and participating in blogs related to the brand. Monetary investments

include a willingness to pay a price premium.

The introduction of this paper noted that consumers' behaviors toward a brand may be understood in the form of a hierarchy. Given the numerous behaviors that consumers can enact toward a brand, a critical question concerns the relationship between brand attachment strength and the various behaviors that comprise the hierarchy. Earlier, we noted that one's willingness to make sacrifices to maintain a relationship with the brand is an empirically supported discriminator of brand attachment strength. We therefore identify willingness to sacrifice personal resources for the brand as the basis on which attachment strength is linked to the behaviors within the hierarchy.

We articulate two dimensions of the sacrifices of personal resources. The first concerns consumers' willingness to sacrifice self-image resources for the brand. Self-image (or ego) resources refer to psychological resources one cherishes with respect to the self. They include self-pride and self-esteem. By publicly displaying, defending, advocating, or promoting their support for a brand, consumers are willing to face the risk of social ridicule, discredit and social rejection. The second dimension is consumers' willingness to sacrifice scarce discretionary resources. To support a brand, consumers often make sacrifices of such personal discretionary resources as money, time and energy. While the self-image resource dimension concerns others' judgments on one's self-image, the personal resource dimension refers to one's willingness to expend one's own discretionary resources for the brand.

The more resources (self-image and/or personal discretionary resources) the individual is willing to risk or expend for the brand, the more strongly attached to the brand they are likely to be. Specifically, when attachment is high, consumers perceive the brand to be an extension of themselves. They are defensive of attacks or criticisms against their brand and interpret such criticisms as personally threatening. Thus they are willing to engage in behaviors on behalf of the brand, despite the potential self-image-related risks such behaviors may carry. Moreover, since strong brand attachment involves automatic retrieval of brand-self connections, these individuals have less control over brand related defensive behaviors. These consumers are also less cost-benefit oriented in their reactions to their brands. Thus

Table 1. Brand Attachment and Behaviors

| Attachment | Types of Resource Sacrifice | | Brand Supporting Behaviors |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| | Self-Image Resources | Personal Discretionary Resources | |
| Low | Low | Low | None |
| Moderate | Low | Moderate | Repeat purchase behavior accompanied with paying a price premium, postponement of purchase, or prolonged brand search |
| | Moderate | Low | Repeat purchase behavior accompanied with public display, public defending of a brand, or recommendation to others |
| | Moderate | Moderate | Repeat purchase behavior accompanied with participation in the brand community |
| High | Low/Moderate | High | Stronger repeat purchase behavior accompanied with more willingness to pay a price premium, postpone purchase, or prolong brand search Additional brand supporting behaviors: investing in a firm, applying for a job to work, refusal to exchange the attached product for financial gains |
| | High | Low/Moderate | Stronger repeat purchase behavior accompanied with more willingness to display, defend, or recommend a brand to others Additional brand supporting behaviors: investing in a firm, applying for a job to work, refusal to exchange the attached product for financial gains |
| | High | High | Stronger repeat purchase behavior accompanied with more willingness to participate in the brand community Additional brand supporting behaviors: investing in a firm, applying for a job to work, refusal to exchange the attached product for financial gains |

personal sacrifices of time, money and/or energy are more automatic.

Table 1 describes the relationship among brand attachment strength, the two dimensions of personal sacrifice, behavioral characteristics, and possible types of behaviors. Three levels of brand attachment strength (low, moderate, and high) are shown in table 1. At the low level, automatic retrieval of brand-self connections are unlikely given weak brand-self connectedness. Brand purchase, if engaged, is not linked to attachment. Rather such behavior is more adequately explained by evaluation-based mechanisms like attitudes. In other words, favorable brand attitudes can exist even at a low level of brand attachment, and may better predict purchase behavior than would attachment. Thus, brand attachment is not necessarily present even with a favorable brand attitude. This also suggests that while favorable attitudes may be a necessary condition for strong brand attachments, they are neither redundant with nor sufficient for strong brand attachments. Moreover, since consumers at a low level of brand attachment would be weak in their willingness to incur the loss of either self-image or personal discretionary resources, they would not engage in the types of strong brand supporting behaviors described above (see table 1).

At a moderate level of attachment, brand attitudes are also strong. Such moderate attachment levels are characterized by brand supporting behaviors. Such behaviors arise from attachment however, not attitudes. Such behaviors reflect a moderate degree of willingness to sacrifice self-image and/or personal discretionary resources. Thus, consumers at a moderate level of attachment would reveal behavioral characteristics linked to these sacrifices noted in table 1. Moreover, consumers at this level of brand attachment show brand loyalty (repeat purchase behavior) and other additional brand supporting behaviors, due to their motivation to maintain their relationship with the brand. These various forms of behavior and their link to attachment are described below.

The first of the three forms of behaviors occurs when consumers' willingness to sacrifice self-image resources is low but their willingness to sacrifice personal discretionary resources is moderate. Possible behaviors characterizing this form are paying price premium (money resource), postponing purchase

when one's favorite brand is not available (energy resource), and prolonging brand search when one's favorite brand is not easily located (time resource).

The second form occurs when consumers' willingness to sacrifice self-image resources is moderate but their willingness to sacrifice personal discretionary resources is low. Possible behaviors belonging to this form include public display of a brand ownership, publicly defending a brand against criticisms, and recommending a brand to others.

The third form occurs when consumers are moderate in their willingness to sacrifice both of self-image and personal discretionary resources. A possible behavior belonging to this form is consumers' participation in a brand community. Such behavior involves brand promotion and devoting time energy and possibly money through community involvement (Muniz and O'Guinn 2000).

The highest level of brand attachment is characterized by an even greater willingness to sacrifice either or both resources. At this level, consumers also reveal stronger brand loyalty and more intense brand supporting behaviors than is expected at the moderate level (table 1). For example, a consumer would reveal greater consistency in repeat purchase behavior. Furthermore, brand community participation would be more intense. Brand supporting behaviors not characteristic of a moderate level are also likely to be present. They include, for example, consumers' investing in the firm that owns the brand, applying for a job at that firm, or refusing to exchange the brand with other valued goods. These are possible examples of behaviors that may be uniquely associated with a high level of brand attachment. It is implicitly assumed that the sacrifice of both types of resources is linked to stronger brand attachment than is true when sacrifice of only one type of resource is present.

Other Issues with Brand Attachment Construct

When and How Attachment Weakens or Terminates

While attachment formation processes are interesting and important, equally relevant is the process by which attachments weaken and terminate. Understanding such factors provides

insight into how weakened bonds can be prevented. Moreover, because attachments involve economic, time and psychic costs (Kleine and Baker 2004) as well as a commitment of resources that could be invested elsewhere (Belk 1988), understanding how attachments can be weakened provides insight into how to avoid unhealthy attachment relationships.

Drigotas and Rusbult's (1992) dependence model provides a viable perspective on attachment termination. Using concepts from interdependence theory (Kelley and Thibaut 1978), the authors find that the decision to remain in or voluntarily end a relationship is strongly related to the degree of dependence on that relationship. According to the authors, an individual may sometimes remain in an unsatisfying relationship because it fulfills needs that cannot be gratified in alternative relationships (see also Berman and Sperling 1994). As such, the individual becomes dependent on the relationship partner — despite the relationship's unsatisfactory nature. Levinger's (1979) cohesiveness model similarly argues that stay-leave decisions are influenced by relationship attractions and alternative attractions—respectively, the forces that drive one toward a relationship versus away from a relationship. When the brand loses its ability to gratify, enable, and enrich the self attachments weaken and terminate, particularly when better options become available. The fact that individuals may stay in unsatisfying relationships underscores the importance of differentiating attachment from repeat purchase. Individuals may continue to purchase brands that fail to strongly provide highly satisfying levels of gratification, enrichment, or enabling outcomes simply because alternatives for more satisfying relationships are limited. However, as soon as better options become available, the individual will terminate the relationship with the brand.

While these models suggest that the opportunity for more satisfying relationships predicts relationship termination, attachment relationships may also terminate through processes that alter the appraisal of the attachment object. According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2005), when proximity seeking is appraised as failing to alleviate distress attachment-deactivating strategies are adopted. The individual distances him/herself from the attachment object and attempts to handle distress alone. The authors propose that attachment-deactivating strategies include

(1) dismissing threat- and attachment-related cues, (2) suppressing threat- and attachment-related thoughts and emotions, and (3) repressing threat- and attachment-related memories. By adopting a self-reliant attitude that decreases dependence on others and discouraging acknowledgement of personal faults or weaknesses, one may in fact further reinforce these tendencies. One may adopt this type of coping strategy when one realizes the downside of maintaining strong attachment with the attachment figure. In a marketing context, such weakening may occur when the brand-self connection is no longer appreciated by consumers, due to the failure of the brand to sustain the connection (e.g., failure to provide gratification, enrichment or enabling outcomes).

A third reason why attachments weaken occurs when the individuals feels too close to the attachment object. Recent research indicates that the self (and its development) can be influenced detrimentally when others limit our ability to control over our environment and/or our personal identity (Mashek and Sherman 2004; Aron et al 2005). As a response to being unable to differentiate the self from the relationship partner, the individual begins a process of lowering attachment intensity. The above idea resembles Deci and Ryan's (1991) self-determination theory that holds that human beings have three primary innate psychological needs, one of which is interpersonal relatedness. Relatedness encompasses intimacy and other social involvement strivings, but with the qualification that interpersonal relations must be authentic (Reis and Patrick 1996). According to Deci and Ryan (1991), authentic bonds are possible only for people who approach social relations with a sense of their own autonomy. Basic needs for relatedness thus cannot be fully satisfied through relationships that are controlling, suffocating, power oriented, superficial, or constraining in a manner that limits partner's ability or willingness to express themselves openly and honestly.

In a marketing context, one might anticipate that when the ideology or values that characterize the brand impose undue burden on one's desire to expand the self, thus restricting rather than nurturing the development of the self, the individual may terminate his/her relationship with the attachment object. This adoption of attachment-deactivating strategies seems to account

for consumers' behaviors that often reveal in many consumption contexts such as losing interest in maintaining high mental, psychological and financial resources-requiring relationship with celebrities, collectible items, and fashion items, etc.

These issues have interesting implications for the activities marketers must engage in to sustain high resource requiring relationships over time. While brand attachment may be achieved through strategic considerations of the hedonic, symbolic and functional resources offered by the brand, how the attachment was initially developed influences its sustainability, and is, in turn, influenced by the tactical execution decisions. Specifically, when the attachment is developed through the tactical executions by creating strong, high arousal emotions such as passion, attachment is difficult to sustain. High arousal may be difficult to sustain over time. It may be more prudent for a brand to rely on the tactical decisions that develop consumers' attachment through moderate arousal emotions such as warm and pleasant feelings (gratifying), feelings of competence and hopefulness from task enablement brought about by reliable and consistent performance-based trust (enabling), and feelings of inspiration, belongingness or nostalgia from self-enrichment tactics. Although the development of attachment through these alternative emotional routes may take more time than might attention grabbing execution tactics that trigger strong and highly arousing emotions, they may be easier to sustain over time.

Another way to sustain strong attachment may be to continuously strengthen brand-self associations and connections through a creative mix of the three resource types over time. Such a strategy expands memory associations between a brand and self, allowing memory associations to accumulate and strengthen in the brand memory network. These stronger associations enhance the brand's accessibility in memory, facilitating the automatic activation of thoughts and feelings.

Finally, sustaining attachment requires that the brand continuously improve its tangible product-specific benefits, independent of its specific resource type positioning. No matter how great the resource type-based positioning and the execution tactics may be, it may not be sufficient for brand attachment to be sustained over time unless specific tangible product benefits

continuously improve over time.

Measuring Attachment

As described earlier, two factors represent brand attachment: 1) the degree of the brand-self connectedness and 2) the automaticity of thoughts and feelings about a brand. The degree of brand-self connectedness may be measured based on statements that reflect the personal relationship between a consumer and a brand. They would include statements like “emotional bonding” or “connection”, “part of me,” or “an extension of the self”. The automaticity of thoughts (cognition) and feelings (affect) about a brand may be measured on agreement scales. Items might include “positive thoughts and feelings of (the brand) come to me automatically and naturally”, or “positive thoughts toward (the brand) are elicited *automatically and unconditionally* whenever I am exposed to it”.

One may suggest that brand-self connectedness and retrieval automaticity are highly correlated, the latter being the outcome of the former. While possible, we assume that the automaticity of brand retrieval may vary even at the same level of the brand-self connectedness. This is expected since the degree of retrieval automaticity should be influenced by factors other than brand-self connectedness. These factors include, for example, the length of the brand possession and the amount of brand-associated information. It would thus be useful to further discriminate the level of brand attachment at any given degree of the brand-self connectedness. We propose that automaticity and brand-self connectedness describe, represent and characterize the state of mind of those who are highly attached to a brand. The presence and degree of both better indicates brand attachment than either one alone.

These measures are quite distinct from previous measures of attachment developed in the consumer behavior literature. Specifically, existing measures only partially represent these two factors. For example, Ball and Tasaki's (1992) 9-item measure of possession attachment reflects both the brand-self connection measure (identification) and associated hot affect, but not the automaticity factor. Sivadas and Venkatesh's (1995) 4-items measure of possession attachment and Thomson, MacInnis and

Park's (2005) 9-item measure primarily reflect the hot affect component of brand self-connections.

DISCUSSION

The present paper suggests that "attachment" is a more appropriate construct than attitude for explaining higher order, relationship based behaviors relevant to marketing exchange. We define brand attachment as the *strength of the cognitive and emotional bond connecting the brand with the self*. This definition involves two unique and essential elements: (1) connectedness between the brand and the self and (2) a cognitive and emotional bond, the strength of which evokes a readiness to allocate one's processing resources toward a brand. We explored factors that create brand attachment, the effects of brand attachment on higher order relationship-based exchange behaviors, and why attachments (and hence relationships) weaken or terminate. Finally, we identified potential self-report indicators of attachment and describe their relationships to extant measures of attachment reported in the consumer behavior literature.

While the focus above has been on attachment and its potential superiority in predicting exchange relationship outcomes relative to attitudes, it is also useful to distinguish the construct from potentially related constructs, including *brand commitment*, *involvement*, and *love*. These constructs share some common characteristics with but are conceptually distinct from brand attachment.

While the commitment construct has been defined in a variety of ways (Johnson 1973, 1991; Lydon, Burton and Menzies-Toman 2005; Fehr 1988), in a marketing context the construct has been primarily conceptualized in terms of intentions to remain loyal to (and hence maintain a relationship with) the brand in the future (Ahluwalia, Unnava and Burnkarnt 2000; Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992). We argue that in brand (and other) relationships commitment is an outcome of attachment. Brand attachment reflects a consumers' psychological state of mind (strong self-brand linkages and automatic retrieval of thoughts and feelings about the brand) while brand commitment reflects intention to engage in

behaviors that maintain a brand relationship. Attachment leads to commitment; not the reverse. Moreover, we propose that attachment is a more valuable destination for marketers than is commitment. Commitment may involve a pledge to stay in a relationship for a variety of reasons unrelated attachment. Individuals may be committed to a brand due to lack of competing alternatives or out of some sense of moral or contractual obligation to the company or its sales people. Commitment formed through factors other than attachment may not be associated with strong forms of behavior like investment in the brand. Commitment not based on attachment will not have strong self-brand connections and automatic retrieval of thoughts and feelings about the brand and hence will not predict higher order relationship-based behaviors.

Emotional attachment can also be conceptually distinguished from "involvement". As with commitment, involvement is subsumed within attachment. Consumers who are attached to an object are also likely to be involved with it. Hence involvement should be high for brands for which consumers are emotionally attached. However, emotional attachment is neither necessary nor sufficient for involvement. Consumers can be involved with brands for which they have developed little or no attachment. Further, emotional attachments to brands are clearly relevant to the realm of emotions, whereas the concept of involvement arguably taps the realm of cognition (Thompson et al. 2004). While involvement and attachment share a readiness to respond (Park and Mittal 1979), with involvement this readiness is linked to personal consequences and the desire to avoid risk, as well as extensive objective processing of information designed to reduce risk. In contrast, attachment is linked to the connection between the brand and the self and the motivated processing of information designed to retain this emotional bond.

Finally, attachment bears some similarity to the construct of love. Undoubtedly most of the prototypical features of love (e.g., trust, caring, honesty, and friendship; see Fehr 1993) are also typical of strong attachments. However, love is an emotion that characterizes the attachment bond, not the attachment bond itself. Thus, while one may feel love in the presence of the attachment object, attachment is more than this feeling. The construct of love has also been considered in terms of

relationships. For example, some researchers have characterized different types of love that characterize relationships (Sternberg 1987; Fehr and Russell 1991). Examples include friendship love, familial love, maternal love, romantic love, infatuation, sexual love, etc.). Regardless of the type of love, we anticipate that attachment is reflective of strong connections between the self and the brand and automatic retrieval of thoughts and feelings about the attachment object. Familial love can vary on these dimensions, as can romantic, friendship, and maternal love.

We anticipate that a valid scale of consumers' emotional attachments to brands that is based on the two key properties should be *correlated* with measures of brand commitment, involvement, love, and attitudes. However, the conceptual differences described above suggest that these constructs should also be *empirically discriminable*.

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