Consumer-Retailer Emotional Attachment: Some Antecedents and the Moderating Role of Attachment Anxiety

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Abstract

Purpose of this paper. The purpose of the study is to investigate loyalty-building and the creation of affectionate bonds in the consumer-firm dyad.

Design/methodology/approach. The study relies on face-to-face personal interviews in the context of grocery-store retailing.

Findings. The results identify the significant predictors of consumer-firm emotional attachment to be firm trust, employees’ trust, likeability of service personnel and likeability of co-consumers, shopping enjoyment, self-expressiveness, place dependence, and place identity. Consumers’ self-enrichment, self-gratification and self-enablement likely influence emotional attachment, which in turn is a strong predictor of behavioral loyalty and word of mouth. Attachment anxiety appears to multiply the effects of emotional attachment on behavioral loyalty and word of mouth.

Research limitations/implications. The cross-sectional nature of the study precludes definitive conclusions concerning causality between the constructs utilized. The data come from the supermarket retail channel, limiting the generalizibility of the results.

Practical implications. As results suggest that the consumer’s self-enrichment seems to be the most important factor in determining emotional attachment, managers should incorporate the notion of emotional attachment into strategic performance management systems.

Originality/value. The study incorporates the notion of consumer heterogeneity into the relationship anxiety construct, arguing in favor of a non-additive consumer-firm emotional attachment nomological network.

Keywords: Consumer-firm emotional attachment; attachment antecedents; consumer loyalty; attachment theory; attachment anxiety; grocery retailing

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INTRODUCTION

Many consumer relationships are anchored on a well accepted linkage of satisfaction to trust to consumer loyalty (Yim et al., 2008). However, recent research (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006) suggests that simply providing satisfying experiences might be insufficient for long-term success. Researchers suggest that companies likely fail to build consumer loyalty due to their inability to create affectionate ties with their consumers. The goal of the study is to investigate whether, how and when managers should invest in building affectionate ties with consumers.

To address the whether question we examine whether consumer-firm emotional attachment is likely to influence consumer loyalty and positive word of mouth. These two constructs relate to different managerial goals: consumer loyalty pertains to consumer retention and word of mouth to customer attraction. If managers invest in consumer-firm emotional attachment will it pay off for the company in terms of customer retention and customer attraction?

The how question, is addressed by investigating some antecedents of consumer-firm emotional attachment. We postulate an antecedent model of consumer-firm emotional attachment, thereby addressing the call of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) for more research identifying determinants of the consumer-firm emotional attachment phenomenon.

The when question, relates to the examination of boundary conditions governing the emotional attachment-loyalty linkage. Though there are is evidence (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Thomson 2006; Roberts 2006) highlighting the positive effects of
creating emotional attachment with consumers, research is lacking regarding the role of consumer heterogeneity in modifying the emotional attachment-loyalty link.

Finally the study extends the literature in yet two more important ways. First, contrary to the extant literature (e.g., Fournier 1988; Albert et al., 2008; Smit et al., 2007), this study investigates consumers’ emotional attachment in the context of a service industry, namely, the grocery retailing sector, further addressing the call of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and Yim et al., (2008) for investigating emotional attachment in service firm settings. Building emotional attachment between the service provider and consumers may be a more viable strategy when compared to the inanimate object-consumer dyad, since service managers have the option to strategically use their contact personnel to build emotional bonds with their consumers. Second, the article is novel in that it incorporates insights from the place attachment literature so as to more fully understand consumer-firm emotional attachment in settings that involve physical locations (i.e., servicescapes).

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Attachment Theory and Relevant Research Streams

Attachment theory investigates humans’ tendency to form, maintain and dissolve affectionate ties with particular others (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; Hazan and Shaver, 1994). However, research in psychology and marketing suggests that attachments can extend beyond person-to-person relationship contexts (Thomson and Johnson, 2006) to possessions (Kleine and Baker, 2004; Ball and Tasaki, 1992), places (Williams and Vaske, 2003; Moore and Graefe, 1994), and companies or brands (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Paulssen and Fournier, 2007; Park and MacInnis, 2006). Table 1 briefly describes different research streams investigating the
phenomenon of human attachment, major authors and short descriptions. We find relevant writings in psychology, consumer behavior and leisure sciences.

[Insert Table I about here]

**Consumers’ Emotional Attachment to Product and Service Brands**

Recent marketing research supports the application of attachment theory in marketing (Thomson and Johnson, 2006). Paulssen and Fournier (2007) provide empirical evidence that commercial relationships behave in similar ways to personal relationships.


Regardless of terminology, the main findings of these studies indicate that consumers are likely to develop strong affectionate ties in commercial relationships. Albert *et al.*, (2008) derive eleven dimensions of the love construct in consumer-brand relationships, mostly similar to the antecedents suggested by Yim *et al.*, (2008), Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), Fournier (1998), Sivadas and Venkatesh (1995), and Ball and Tasaki (1992). These dimensions relate to consumer-brand image congruity, trust, relationship duration, passion, attraction, hedonism, and memories, among others.

While the majority of the consumer-brand emotional attachment literature focuses on tangible brands (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Thomson *et al.*, 2005), recent marketing research has investigated consumer-firm emotional attachment in
non-tangible brand settings. For example, Paulssen and Fournier (2007) found that secure personal attachment drives the strongest commercial relationships in the automotive services category.

From these findings we draw two main implications. First, consumers are likely to form strong emotional bonds with both product and service brands, and freely say that they love a store or brand (Yim et al., 2008; however, for a discussion see Albert et al., 2008). Second, creating consumer-firm emotional attachment requires focusing on multiple psychological and functional factors.

**Emotional Attachment as a Distinct Construct**

Research confirms that consumer-firm emotional attachment is distinct from attitude, satisfaction, or involvement (e.g., Thomson et al., 2005). Park and MacInnis (2006), question whether attitudes can adequately account for hot-affect based brand relationships. Emotional attachment can explain stronger forms of behaviors and may be considered a proxy for consumer-brand relationship strength (Thomson, 2006); however, this may not be the case for satisfaction: previous marketing research suggests that even highly satisfied consumers do not always re-patronize a brand (Jones and Sasser, 1995). Emotional attachment requires a personal history between the consumer and the brand (Belk, 1988), whereas satisfaction may stem from only a few consumption experiences. In the same vein, Yim et al., (2008) distinguish consumer-firm emotional attachment from consumption affection. Consumer-emotional attachment entails only positive feelings, whereas consumption affect may entail both positive and negative feelings.
PROPOSED MODEL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The conceptual premise underlying the model is based on attachment theory: people tend to develop affectionate ties with people who seem especially responsive to their needs (Aron et al., 1989; Hazan and Shaver, 1994). In parallel, firms aiming for affectionate ties with their consumers must be extremely responsive to their needs.

Park et al., (2006) provide a conceptual framework indicating that people are most likely to develop attachments to offerings that fulfill their functional needs (enabling the self), their experiential needs (gratifying the self), and their emotional needs (enriching the self). Building from these three pillars, we recognize antecedents that constitute suitable strategies for enhancing the firm-self connection and consequently consumer-firm emotional attachment.

We posit that (a) trust towards the firm and the firm’s employees as well as place dependence are factors that enable a consumer’s self; (b) interpersonal likeability and shopping enjoyment are factors that gratify a consumer’s self; and (c) self-expression and place identity are factors that enrich a consumer’s self. Table II provides definitions of constructs included in the research model.

[Insert Table II about here]

Pillar I: Enabling the Self

Consumer firm-emotional attachment can occur when the firm creates a sense of an efficacious and capable self (Park et al., 2006). If a firm is not able to serve consumers’ needs effectively through reliable functional performance, the basic assumption behind the attachment would prove false.
The Effect of Trust on Emotional Attachment

Consumers’ trust of the firm is critical to attachment formation and sustainability, since trust mainly relates to assessments regarding the future performance of a firm (Park et al., 2006; Selnes, 1998). Importantly, trust relates to the reduction of perceived risk, thus enabling consumers to pursue consumption activities that they would not pursue otherwise.

The major role of attachment is the creation of emotional security through satisfaction of a person’s needs (Hazan and Shaver, 1994; Thomson, 2006). In social and economic exchanges consumers appear to deal with their safety needs via the trust mechanism, and the existence of trust appears to directly satisfy consumers’ need for psychological safety, since “…to say that A trusts B means that A expects B will not exploit a vulnerability A has created for himself by taking the action” (James, 2001, p. 291). In the context of grocery retailing, consumers may feel particularly vulnerable since they undertake physical (food safety and nutritional value), psychological (self-esteem), and financial risks in deciding to buy from a food retailer (Fearne et al., 2001).

Hazan and Shaver (2000) suggest that for a relationship to be considered as an attachment relationship, the attachment figure should promote the other party’s feelings of security and confidence. May et al., (2004) suggests trust as a positive antecedent to psychological safety. Evidence for the positive effect of trust on emotional attachment can also be found in the social psychology literature (Burke and Stets, 1999)

Building on Sirdeshmukh et al., (2002), this study hypothesizes that consumers’ trust in the firm develops around two distinct facets: company policies governing the
service exchange and employee behaviors manifested during the service encounter. A major reason for separately investigating the role of employee trust in the formation of consumer-firm emotional attachment is the probable importance of interpersonal ties. Building on the previous discussion the following hypotheses are formed:

**Hypothesis 1:** Consumers’ trust towards the firm positively influences consumer-firm emotional attachment.

**Hypothesis 2:** Consumers’ trust towards the firm’s employees positively influences consumer-firm emotional attachment.

**The Effect of Place Dependence on Emotional Attachment**

In the grocery retailing context, consumers’ place (e.g., community) dependence may positively influence their attachment to stores located in their community, since place dependence relates to how a place compares with alternative places in satisfying needs (Bricker and Kerstetter, 2000). People are likely to develop emotional bonds with stores located in settings that do well in facilitating their particular needs (e.g., maintaining established friendship ties) (Moore and Graefe, 1994). Based on this discussion:

**Hypothesis 3:** Consumers’ dependence on the place where the firm is operating positively influences consumer-firm emotional attachment.

**Pillar II: Gratifying the Self**

Brands can play powerful roles in people’s lives when people rely on them to provide pleasure through hedonic elements that have immediate mood-altering properties. In what follows, we identify the constructs of enjoyment and interpersonal
likeability as elements provided by the firm that have the potential to gratify a consumer’s self.

**The Effect of Shopping Enjoyment on Emotional Attachment**

While economic theory presents shopping as a chore that consumers perform to acquire utility-producing products, marketing research indicates that many consumers derive intrinsic enjoyment from the shopping process (Cox et al., 2003). Some consumers enjoy shopping as a leisure activity or for recreation, deriving pleasure from the shopping activity itself (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). Since humans tend to form emotional bonds with people who seem especially responsive to their needs (Aron et al., 1989), enjoyment can be expected to have a positive, direct effect on consumer-firm emotional attachment.

Bowlby (1951) suggests enjoyment as a major factor of attachment in intimate relationships. Childers et al., (2001), in the context of interactive media usage, find enjoyment as a direct positive determinant of affective evaluations. This study predicts that grocery retailers providing an enjoyable shopping experience are at an advantage in building affectionate ties with their consumers.

**Hypothesis 4:** Shopping enjoyment positively influences consumer-firm emotional attachment.

**The Effect of Interpersonal Likeability on Emotional Attachment**

The services management literature recognizes service employees and co-consumers as important elements in the creation of favorable consumer perceptions of service performance (Zeithaml et al., 2006). This study assumes that the liking levels consumers develop with respect to both front-line personnel and co-consumers have a
direct positive effect on consumers’ emotional attachments to the firm. This study defines interpersonal likeability as the perception of consumers that both the service firm front-office employees and their co-consumers are pleasant and enjoyable to be around (Ahearne et al., 1999). Liking, a personal and emotional factor, has long been recognized as a strong human motivator for relationship development and maintenance. Nicholson et al., (2001, p. 3) suggest, “liking creates a personal attachment, thus reinforcing economic bonds.” Therefore:

**Hypothesis 5:** Consumers’ interpersonal liking levels towards co-consumers positively influence consumer-firm emotional attachment.

**Hypothesis 6:** Consumers’ interpersonal liking levels towards service personnel positively influence consumer-firm emotional attachment.

**Pillar III: Enriching the Self**

Enriching one’s self relates to self-actualization, discovering one’s true preferences and representing the self to both oneself and others (Ahuvia, 2005). Enriching one’s self may contain elements of identity construction and identifying the lifestyle that will bring self-fulfillment. We argue that both self-expression through consumption and consumers’ symbolic attachment to places positively influence consumers’ emotional bonding levels.

**The Effect of Self-Expression on Emotional Attachment**

Consumers are more likely to form and maintain strong emotional attachment to firms, possessions, brands and people that help them define themselves and retain a positive self image (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Ahuvia (2005) empirically investigated consumers’ reports regarding their loved possessions and activities,
finding that consumers love brands that help them resolve identity conflicts and understand who they are as people. As Belk (1988, p. 188) succinctly suggests when he notes that “we are what we have,” self-expression seems to be a critical human need, which consumption activities seem to satisfy.

*Hypothesis 7:* Satisfaction of consumers’ self-expressive needs positively influences consumer-firm emotional attachment.

**The Effect of Place Identity on Emotional Attachment**

It is expected that symbolic attachment on the place where the firm is operating positively influences consumer-firm emotional attachment. Place identity refers to the symbolic importance of a place as a repository for emotions and relationships that give meaning and purpose to a person’s life (Williams and Vaske, 2003). Park *et al.*, (2006) note that place brands such as one’s city or country symbolically represent one’s core past self, providing a basis from which one can view and frame one’s current and future selves.

*Hypothesis 8:* Consumers’ symbolic attachment on the place where the firm is operating (i.e., place identity) positively influences consumer-firm emotional attachment.

**The Effect of Emotional Attachment on Behavioral Outcomes**

Marketers want to move beyond repetitive buying to consumer loyalty, namely, consumer commitment and enduring psychological bonds between a consumer and a company (McEwen, 2005). The study proposes that consumers emotionally attached to the firm will be more committed to repurchase from the firm and more likely to positively recommend the firm to others (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006).
Hypothesis 9: Consumer-firm emotional attachment positively influences (a) consumers’ loyalty to repurchase from the firm and (b) positive word of mouth.

The Moderating Role of Attachment Anxiety

Guided by attachment theory, the present study suggests that the effect of consumer-firm emotional attachment on loyalty and positive word of mouth is moderated (i.e., multiplied) by consumers’ levels of attachment anxiety.

Conceptually this hypothesis builds on the premise that consumers are heterogeneous in their needs for relationship building (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999). Attachment anxiety— the degree to which individuals worry and ruminate about being rejected or abandoned by their partners— is one of the two orthogonal dimensions that appear to tap individual differences in adult attachment (Campbell et al., 2005). Evidence indicates that consumers with higher scores on anxiety in purely personal relationships tend to experience more positive emotions and greater satisfaction in commercial relationships (Thomson and Johnson, 2006). This evidence implies that highly anxious people desire positive emotions in commercial relationships so as to make up for negative emotions experienced in purely interpersonal relationships.

For highly anxious people, then, the saliency of consumer-firm emotional attachment in determining loyalty and word of mouth is likely heightened. While emotional attachment is still an important determinant of loyalty and word of mouth for less anxious individuals, it is not as important as for highly anxious individuals. From this discussion, one can logically conclude that:
Hypothesis 10: Anxiety levels moderate the effect of consumer-firm emotional attachment (a) on behavioral loyalty and (b) on word of mouth in that high anxiety multiplies the effect of consumer-firm emotional attachment on these two behavioral outcomes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Empirical Context

Grocery retailing was chosen as the empirical context of the study for three reasons. First, grocery retailing is characterized by low loyalty levels, and multi-chain patronage on the part of consumers. Building affectionate ties with consumers in this context may be the missing loyalty link.

Second, most research on emotional attachment focuses on either product brands or service brands characterized by hedonic consumption experiences and relational characteristics (e.g., hair salon services). Research on transactional industries like grocery retailing or banking is largely missing. Importantly, while hedonism may reside innately in shopping for or consuming some products and services, it arguably is something that may be delivered to consumers through strategy and execution.

Third, the study is supported by a Fortune 500 consumer packaged-goods company which for the foregoing reasons has interests in investigating consumer-retailer emotional attachment.

Method of Analysis

We have chosen PLS analysis so as to accommodate the presence of a large model and moderating effects (Ringle et al., 2005). The primary goal of this research
is to investigate the determinants of emotional attachment, rendering prediction-based structural equation modeling (i.e., PLS) more appropriate (Echambadi et al., 2006).

Measures and Instrument Design

We measured consumer-firm emotional attachment by adapting items used by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and items adapted from the possessions attachment literature (see Appendix A). Specifically, we drew from Sivadas and Venkatesh (1995) and Ball and Tasaki (1992). We adapted items capturing the construct of self-expression, intense loyalty and positive word of mouth from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), whereas we measured firm trust and employees’ trust according to Sirdeshmukh et al., (2002). We adapted interpersonal likeability measures from Nicholson et al., (2001). Note that we use these items to capture the likeability of consumer service employees as well as the likeability of co-consumers. We adapted place identity and place dependence measures from Williams and Vaske (2003). Items capturing shopping enjoyment were adapted from Childers et al., (2001). Attachment anxiety measures were adapted from Fraley et al., (2000). Measures were assessed using nine-point semantic differential and Likert scales.

We employed procedural remedies to control for common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Specifically we made use of the “proximal separation” technique of the predictor and criterion variables (Sparfeldt et al., 2006). For item arrangement, we employed a block rather than a random item arrangement (Sparfeldt et al., 2006). Further, researchers intercepted respondents in seven different grocery retailers, each in a different geographic area, to address common method variance generated by contextual cues (Podsakoff et al., 2003).
Sampling

The population target for this study was supermarket shoppers who are inhabitants of the broader Attica region in Greece. The sampling frame includes ten stores selected from seven different supermarket retail chains in such a way as to offer a broad geographical coverage of the Attica region.

Researchers collected data in low, medium, and high-peak shopping days (Bush and Hair, 1985). The researchers intercepted a total of 163 respondents in supermarket stores, employing a face-to-face personal interviewing method. The intercept procedure is a relatively inexpensive method of collecting high quality, accurate data in a face-to-face manner (Bush and Hair, 1985).

Of the respondents, 69% were women and 56% were married. The sample was balanced in terms of age groups represented: 51% were in the 25-44 age group and approximately one out of three was in the +44 age group. Overall in terms of gender, age, and marital status, the sample was representative of Greek supermarket shoppers, as indicated by retail managers of five supermarket chains.

RESULTS

Figure 1a reports results based on a regression-based conceptualization; figure 1b presents results based on a second-order formative factor conceptualization. We note that the two conceptualizations do not differ in terms of the hypotheses that wait to be tested. The main reason for using a second-order model relates to its ability to deal with multi-co-linearity. Despite the satisfactory VIF values found (VIF across the eight independent variables is 2.15), multi-co-linearity is likely to be a problem, due to the large number of estimated parameters and the small sample size of the study.
Further, it is should be noted that a second–order molar model makes a statement regarding the formation process of consumer-firm emotional attachment, which is theoretically more interesting (Chin and Gopal, 1995). The purpose of the study is not to empirically examine this formation process. However, our research may be a good starting point for future research on this matter.

To test the second-order formative model, we used the repeated indicators method (Chin et al., 2003; Kleijnen et al., 2007). We first report results using the first-order conceptualization.

[Insert Figure 1a and Figure 1b about here]

**Assessments of Validity and Reliability**

The reliabilities of all constructs (CR) are acceptable since they all exceed .70. We investigated convergent and discriminant validity using the PLS confirmatory factor analysis procedure (Agarwal and Karahanna, 2000). All items loaded well on their respective factors, which are much higher than all cross loadings. Importantly, the square root of all AVEs is much larger than all other cross-correlations, indicating discriminant validity with the stringent test of Fornell and Larcker (1981) (see Table III).

[Insert Table III about Here]

We use Harman’s single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003) so as to examine for common method variance. This model did not fit the data ($\chi^2$ (703) =5.158,3; CFI=.34; RMSEA=.20), inferring no common method variance.
Test of Hypotheses

Model estimates explain a large amount of variance in consumer-firm emotional attachment ($R^2=.80$), loyalty ($R^2=.37$) and word of mouth ($R^2=.69$) (see Figure 1a). Variance explained is the main model fit criterion in PLS analysis.

As predicted, trust towards the firm ($b=.29$, $t=4.40$), trust towards employees ($b=.14$, $t=2.14$) and place dependence ($b=.13$, $t=2.26$), significantly influence emotional attachment; therefore H1, H2 and H3 are not rejected. Shopping enjoyment influences emotional attachment in the predicted direction ($b=.32$, $t=5.79$), but this is not true for the likeability of consumers ($b=.02$, $t=.72$). Therefore H4 is not rejected whereas H5 is rejected. Likeability of employees is a significant predictor of emotional attachment ($b=.13$, $t=1.82$) and the same stands for the self-expressive properties of the retailer brand ($b=.30$, $t=6.17$). Therefore H6 and H7 are not rejected. Place identity, positively influences emotional attachment ($b=.17$, $t=2.70$); therefore H8 is not rejected. Further H9 is not rejected since consumer-firm emotional attachment seems to be a strong positive determinant of loyalty and positive word of mouth ($b=.61$, $t=10.39$ and $b=.82$, $t=31.29$ respectively). These results indicate emotional attachment offers a more influential strategy for retailers when the goal is customer attraction (i.e., through positive word of mouth). However, this empirical conjecture requires further investigation.

As models yielding significant bootstrap statistics can still be invalid in a predictive sense (Chin, 1995), measures of predictive validity for focal endogenous constructs should be employed. One such measure is the $Q^2$ measure (i.e., the Stone-Geisser test). $Q^2$ is a kind of cross-validated $R^2$, representing how well observed values are reconstructed by the parameter estimates of the model (Tennenhau et al.,
Q^2 for emotional attachment, loyalty and word of mouth is .53, .28 and .60 respectively, indicating that the model’s predictive relevance is good (Sirohi et al., 1998; Tennenhaus et al., 2005)

To test H10, we entered the multiplicative terms into the linear-only terms model (Ping 1998). Composite reliability for the multiplicative variable is .94 and AVE equals .51. The square root of AVE is greater than its correlations with the other variables, indicating discriminant validity.

To investigate whether the inclusion of the multiplicative term in the main effects model is empirically meaningful, we used the difference of R^2 values (Ping, 1998). Results indicate that the addition of the moderating term is empirically meaningful for both loyalty and word of mouth (f^2 = 5.05, p<.01 and f^2 = 4.97, p<.01 respectively). Attachment anxiety multiplies the effect of emotional attachment on loyalty (b=.14, t=2.41). For word of mouth, the estimate is in the predicted direction and seems to have a weak statistical significance (b=.08, t=1.59, p<.10). Therefore, H10 is not rejected.

**Structural Model Results for the Molar Conceptualization**

The measurement model properties for the molar conceptualization all conform to accepted reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity standards. AVE and composite reliability indexes for the three newly added emergent factors are all greater than .55 and .88 respectively. The results are in accordance with the regression-based conceptualization. Interestingly, likeability of consumers is statistically significant (see Figure 1b). Compared with the regression-based conceptualization, these results may be attributed to lowered multi-co-linearity levels inherent in the molar conceptualization (Chin and Gopal, 1995).
Further, the moderating effect of anxiety on the emotional attachment-word of mouth link is no longer marginally significant (b=.10, t=1.97). As predicted, enabling consumers’ self has a positive effect on emotional attachment (b=.27, t=4.49). Similarly, gratifying consumers’ self influences emotional attachment (b=.33, t=4.69) and the same stands for the effect of enriching consumers’ self (b=.39, t=6.17). Based on these values, enrichment of consumers’ self seems to be more important for building consumer-firm emotional attachment, and gratifying consumers’ self is of greater importance than enabling consumers’ self.

**DISCUSSION**

Extant research under the relational paradigm indicates that consumers’ post-consumption evaluations (e.g., satisfaction judgments) represent core drivers of consumer loyalty (Yim et al., 2008). However, while most service loyalty programs rely on the satisfaction-trust-loyalty paradigm, consumer loyalty remains unpredictable. To that end, our study provides a path that considers consumer-firm emotional attachment as a major driver of consumer loyalty.

This study extends the emotional attachment literature by proposing some antecedents of the phenomenon using the theoretical lens of attachment theory, place attachment and brand love. Moreover, we investigate a second-order factor model, which provides empirical support for the conceptual work of Park et al., (2006). Specifically, we posit consumers’ self enablement, gratification and enrichment as second-order molar constructs theoretically building from attitudinal research (e.g., Bagozzi, 1988). This model is superior to a first-order factor model in that it makes a statement regarding the structure of the formation process of consumer-firm emotional attachment.
Importantly, the study is one of the first to investigate whether personality traits matter in the emotional attachment-loyalty link. We find that consumer-firm emotional attachment is more important in building loyalty in consumers who score high on interpersonal anxiety levels. In what follows we summarize our findings.

*Is consumer-firm emotional attachment an important strategic goal for service providers?* Apparently so, in light of the large effect size consumer-firm emotional attachment has on behavioral loyalty self reports and word of mouth. Our results suggest that managers need to begin longitudinally measuring emotional attachment levels and conducting studies to understand whether antagonistic firm emotional attachment moderates (i.e., weakens) their respective emotional attachment-loyalty link.

*In which strategic assets should the service provider invest in order to build emotional brand attachment?* Numerous factors determine how and to what extent consumers form emotional attachments to service providers. The results indicate that managers interested in building affectionate ties with consumers should focus primarily on strategies intended to enrich consumers’ self, and that retailers can achieve such a goal through the place identity and self-expression mechanisms.

Managers should also make tactical efforts to build consumer trust, enjoyable shopping experiences, and service offerings that help consumers to symbolically express themselves. Moreover, since interpersonal likeability also appears to be important, managers should try to make their employees likeable and attractive to consumers.

*In the context of in-store grocery retailing, place attachment influences consumers’ emotional attachment. This finding suggests that managers should
localize their offerings at the community level (e.g., by posting signs that clearly indicate their stores’ locations and attachment to the neighborhood or by hiring local personnel).

*Does context matter with respect to personality characteristics?* The present study incorporates the notion of consumer heterogeneity in terms of the relationship anxiety construct, arguing in favor of a non-additive consumer-firm emotional attachment model. The results of the present study indicate that highly anxious consumers view emotional attachment as being important with respect to their behavioral loyalty. Market researchers should begin to identify these segments and strive to appeal to their emotional attachment needs.

Attachment theorists have proposed several features that distinguish attachment relationships from other kinds of relationships (Fraley and Shaver, 2000). For example one such characteristic relates to the use of the attachment figure as a secure base for exploration that promotes feelings of security and confidence. Service managers should try to build on such features, and many of the antecedent factors presented in this article seem to be in accordance with these features. For example, the feature of the attachment figure as a secure base for exploration suggests the notion of trust. Consumers who trust their grocery retailer may feel more confident about trying new brands and services that the grocery retailer provides.

**LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

We tested our model on cross-sectional data, which precludes any conclusions concerning causality and probably renders the results tentative.
Another limitation of the study relates to its sample size. This limitation is strengthened in light of the large number of parameters estimated. The length of the survey instrument inhibited us from collecting responses from more consumers. Future research should try cross-validating the results using larger sample sizes.

The setting of this study, grocery retailing, is characterized by limited consumer contact and attracts consumers with price, speed of service consistency, and convenient location. Future research could compare the results of this study with those from other retailing sectors, especially where hedonic shopping experiences and interaction with the sales personnel are more important (e.g., fashion retailers and theme parks).

Pertaining to the second-order molar conceptualization used in the study, future research should identify more first-order factors capable of forming the respective three second-order factors. In this respect our model is theoretically suitable since each second-order factor is likely to be formed by more first-order factors. Our study may be a starting point for a more exhaustive investigation of first-order factors influencing consumers’ self-enrichment, gratification and enablement. We have suggested that the second-order model is *theoretically* more interesting compared with the first-order model since it makes a conceptual statement regarding the formation process of consumer-firm emotional attachment. Our empirical derivations for the second-order model are based on cross-sectional data precluding any conclusions regarding causality. The posited formation process remains to be empirically investigated using longitudinal data.

Satisfaction or retail store image measures were not included in this study. Future research could investigate the antecedent role of these constructs on emotional
attachment and also compare whether emotional attachment is a more important predictor of behavioral outcomes than satisfaction judgments and retail store image. Further, future research should investigate the effect of emotional attachment behavioral outcomes beyond loyalty and word of mouth, including as consequences, for example, constructs like willingness to pay more and complaining behavior (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Comparisons should be made regarding the relative importance of emotional attachment in influencing these differing managerial goals.

Finally, future research should investigate specific tactical efforts that build the higher order antecedent factors this study presents. For example, future researchers should investigate whether cause-related marketing actions influence consumers’ trust and corporate character perceptions, which in turn may influence consumer-firm emotional attachment.

References


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Figure 1a. A One Factor-Model Based on a Regression-Based Conceptualization

NOTES: **p<.05, *p<.10
Figure 1b. A Molar Second-Order Factor Model Conceptualization

NOTES: **p<.05, *p<.10
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<td>Sternberg (1986); Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991); Hazan and Shaver (1994); Bowlby (1979)</td>
<td>Adult-pair attachment, infant-caregiver attachment</td>
<td>Conceptualizes the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others</td>
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<td>Consumer behavior</td>
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<td>Fournier (1998); Thomson et al., (2005); Carroll and Ahuvia (2006); Park and MacInnis (2006); Albert et al.,(2008); Paulssen and Fournier (2007); Yim et al., (2008)</td>
<td>Emotional attachment, brand love, affectionate ties</td>
<td>Investigates the importance of affectionate bonds in consumers’ long-term relationships with brands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consumer behavior</td>
<td>Consumer-object relationships</td>
<td>Belk (1988); Shimp and Madden (1988); Ball and Tasaki (1992); Kleine and Baker (2004); Ahuvia (2005),</td>
<td>Possession attachment</td>
<td>Investigates consumers’ ability to love objects and consumption activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure sciences</td>
<td>Relationship with surroundings</td>
<td>Moore and Graefe (1994); Bricker and Kerstetter (2000); Williams and Vaske (2003); Kyle et al., (2005)</td>
<td>Place attachment</td>
<td>Investigates emotional ties individuals form with their surroundings, providing insight into the meaning people assign to outdoor settings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Major Research Streams Investigating the Phenomenon of Human Attachment
**Table II. Construct Definitions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Firm trust</td>
<td>An evaluative construct reflecting expectations that the firm is dependable and can be relied on to deliver on its promises (Sirdeshmukh <em>et al.</em>, 2002).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees trust</td>
<td>An evaluative construct reflecting perceptions pertaining to the honesty, reliability and competence of service staff (Sirdeshmukh <em>et al.</em>, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place dependence</td>
<td>The construct reflects the importance of a place in providing features and conditions that support consumers’ goals or desired activities (Williams and Vaske, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place identity</td>
<td>The symbolic importance of a place as a repository for emotions and relationships that give meaning to life (Williams and Vaske, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping enjoyment</td>
<td>The extent to which the shopping activity is perceived to provide reinforcement in its own right, apart from any anticipated performance consequences (Childers <em>et al.</em>, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal likeability</td>
<td>An attraction to other consumers or service staff such that the consumer would desire to be around the other out of choice, even if shopping activities were to terminate (Nicholson <em>et al.</em>, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-expression</td>
<td>Consumer’s perception of the degree to which the specific retailer enhances one’s social self and/or reflects one’s inner self (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional attachment</td>
<td>The construct includes passion for the retailer, positive evaluation of the retailer and declarations of love for the retailer (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of mouth</td>
<td>The degree to which the consumer praises the retailer to others (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>The degree to which the consumer is committed to repurchase of the retailer (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment-related anxiety</td>
<td>Vigilance concerning rejection and abandonment (Fraley and Shaver, 2000). People who score high on this construct tend to worry whether their partner is responsive and attentive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table III. Descriptive Statistics, Correlation Matrix, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Attachment anxiety</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Likeability (consumers)</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Likeability (employees)</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Word-of-mouth</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Emotional attachment</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Loyalty</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Enjoyment</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Place dependence</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Place identity</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Self-expression</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Firm trust</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Employees trust</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** Values in the diagonal represent the square root of AVE. Lower diagonal values indicate factor correlations. CR: Composite Reliability
## Appendix A: Measurement Model Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship anxiety</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All too often I worry that people close to me do not understand my needs</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I worry a lot about my relationships</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consumer-firm emotional attachment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at (grocery retailer name) makes me feel good.</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at (grocery retailer makes) me very happy.</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I love shopping at (grocery retailer name)</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at (grocery retailer name) is a pure delight.</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am passionate about shopping at (grocery retailer name)</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at (grocery retailer name) reminds me people that I love and beautiful experiences</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I were describing myself shopping at (grocery retailer name) would likely be something I would mention.</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If someone ridiculed shopping at (grocery retailer name) I would feel irritated.</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If someone praised shopping at (grocery retailer name) I would feel somewhat praised myself.</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably people who know me might sometimes think of me shopping at (grocery retailer name) when they think of me.</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would feel sorry if (grocery retailer name) stopped its operations</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal likeability (service employees)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I really like being around people working for (grocery retailer name)</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even without shopping at (grocery retailer name), I would choose to be around service employees working at (grocery retailer name)</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal likeability (consumers)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I really like being around customers shopping at (grocery retailer name)</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even without shopping at (grocery retailer name), I would choose to be around consumers shopping at (grocery retailer name)</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Word-of-mouth</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have recommended (grocery retailer name) to lots of people.</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I ‘talk up’ (grocery retailer name) to my friends.</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to convince friends to do their shopping at (grocery retailer name)</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Loyalty</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ll ‘do without’ rather than shop at another grocery retailer.</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I go grocery shopping, I don’t even think of visiting competing grocery retailer brands.</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shopping enjoyment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at (grocery retailer name) is not boring at all</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I really enjoy shopping at (grocery retailer name)</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Place dependence</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at (name of the community where the grocery retailer is located) is more important to me than shopping in any other place.</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important for me to do my shopping at (name of the community where the grocery retailer is located)</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Place identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel (name of the community where the grocery retailer is located) is a part of me.</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Name of the community where the grocery retailer is located) is very special to me.</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at (name of community where the grocery retailer is located) says a lot about who I am.</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-expression</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at (grocery retailer name) symbolizes the kind of person I really am inside.</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at (grocery retailer name) reflects my personality</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at (grocery retailer name) has a positive impact on what others think of me.</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping at (grocery retailer name) improves the way society views me.</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Firm trust (grocery retailer X is)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very undependable/Very dependable</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of very low integrity/of very high integrity</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is dishonest and untrustworthy/honest and trustworthy</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not trust at all this grocery retailer/ I completely trust this grocery retailer</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employees trust</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not trust at all employees working (grocery retailer name)/ I completely trust employees working for (grocery retailer name)</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees working for (grocery retailer name) are dishonest/ Employees working for (grocery retailer name) are honest</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees working for (grocery retailer name) are incompetent/ Employees working for (grocery retailer name) are competent</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>