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**Positive and negative behaviours resulting from brand attachment:  
The moderating effects of attachment styles**

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationships between brand attachment and consumers' positive and negative behaviours. Furthermore, this study examines the moderating effects of attachment styles on these relationships.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study is based on a survey of 432 respondents, and the data are analysed using the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) approach.

**Findings** – This study empirically supports that brand attachment and attachment styles (i.e. anxiety attachment and avoidance attachment) are distinct. Brand attachment not only influences consumers' positive behaviour (i.e. brand loyalty), but also negative behaviours, such as trash-talking, Schadenfreude and anti-brand actions. The findings of the study suggest that only avoidance attachment style moderates the relationships between brand attachment and these consumer behaviours. The link between brand attachment and brand loyalty is attenuated for high attachment avoidance consumers. In contrast, the links between brand attachment and trash-talking, Schadenfreude and anti-brand actions are strengthened.

**Practical implications** – This study assists marketing managers in understanding that a strong brand attachment may result in negative behaviours that can harm a company's brand image. Thus, building a strong relationship with consumers will not always be beneficial. Companies should be aware of the consequences of building relationships with consumers who have a high level of attachment anxiety and/or avoidance.

**Originality/value** – This paper highlights that brand attachment not only influences brand loyalty behaviour, but also three negative behaviours: trash-talking, Schadenfreude and anti-brand actions. Moreover, the links between brand attachment and negative behaviours are strengthened when consumers have a high level of attachment avoidance.

**Keywords:** *Attachment styles; Brand attachment; Brand loyalty; Trash-talking; Schadenfreude; Anti-brand actions*

**Paper type:** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

According to Park *et al.* (2010), brand attachment reflects the strength of the bond between a consumer and a brand, which is illustrated by the perceived ease of accessibility and recognition in the consumer's mind. These authors argued that brand attachment is a significant predictor of brand equity, brand attitude and the success of brand extension (Fedorikhin *et al.*, 2008; Schmalz and Orth, 2012). Previous research has suggested that brand attachment motivates consumer-brand relationships and favourable consumer behaviours (e.g. Schmalz and Orth, 2012; Japutra *et al.*, 2014; Brocato *et al.*, 2015). However, recent studies have argued that not every consumer is willing to develop a strong relationship with a brand (cf. Mende *et al.*, 2013).

Hazan and Shaver (1994) noted that establishing relationships between individuals is diverse and complex. The attachment theory suggests that such diverse relationships occur because of the attachment styles that refer to individuals' systematic pattern of expectations, emotions, behaviours and history of attachment experiences (Shaver and Mikulincer, 2005). Mende and Bolton (2011) extended this theory from person-to-person to consumer-company relationships. They posited that the relationships between consumers and companies are guided by the consumers' attachment styles. Adopting this definition to the realm of consumer-brand relationships, we suggest that consumers' attachment styles influence the relationship between consumers and brands. Thereby, we define consumer attachment styles as the consumers' systematic pattern of relational expectations, needs, emotions and social behaviours, within their relationship with a brand, based on their previous attachment experiences.

Different individuals have varying attachment styles, resulting in different characteristics that guide their attachment process (Collins and Read, 1990). Following from studies in the field of psychology, consumer attachment styles are categorised into two distinct dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Mende and Bolton, 2011).

Attachment anxiety is “the extent to which a customer worries that the firm might not be available in times of need, has an excessive need for approval, and fears rejection and abandonment from this firm”, whereas attachment avoidance is “the extent to which a customer distrusts the firm’s goodwill, characterised by an excessive need for self-reliance, fears depending on the firm, and strives for emotional and cognitive distance from the firm” (Mende *et al.*, 2013, p. 127). Only a few studies have acknowledged that brand attachment and consumer attachment styles are related to positive as well as negative behaviours. For instance, Johnson *et al.* (2011) showed that when a brand is more self-relevant in consumer-brand relationships, the greater is the likelihood that a consumer will conduct anti-brand actions. Subsequently, Johnson *et al.* (2012) demonstrated that attachment styles predict a number of consumers’ detrimental behaviours (e.g. complaints, obsessing and payback).

Hence, this study proposes that brand attachment leads not only to favourable consumer behaviour, such as brand loyalty, but also to negative consumer behaviours, such as trash-talking, Schadenfreude and anti-brand actions. Trash-talking refers to negative communications by members of a group about rival brands due to their defence mechanism on behalf of their preferred brand (Hickman and Ward, 2007; Marticotte *et al.*, 2016). Trash-talking can be seen in the case of the Mac vs. Windows operating system (OS), where it is common to see both sets of users express harsh and negative comments toward the other OS (c.f. Hickman and Ward, 2007). Schadenfreude is the consumer’s feelings of malicious pleasure based on the misfortune of rival brands (Feather and Sherman, 2002; Hickman and Ward, 2007). For example, for Schadenfreude, Marticotte *et al.* (2016) noted that failures or problems attributed to the PlayStation (or Xbox) console are considered as a victory for users of the other console. Trash-talking and Schadenfreude have been considered as oppositional brand loyalty (Hickman and Ward, 2007; Marticotte *et al.*, 2016; Marticotte and Arcand, 2017). Brand attachment may drive brand loyalty and oppositional brand loyalty at the same time. This is because oppositional

brand loyalty starts with consumer loyalty (Japutra *et al.*, 2014; Marticotte *et al.*, 2016). Trash-talking occurs when consumers would like to express and justify their choice (Marticotte *et al.*, 2016). Brand attachment drives anti-brand actions when consumers feel disappointed with a brand.

This study contributes to marketing knowledge in three different ways. First, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to combine attachment styles with brand attachment. Although researchers have argued that the two concepts are distinct, there are no empirical results to support this notion. This is a response to the call for further research to advance the relationship between these two constructs (Mende and Bolton 2011; Mende *et al.* 2013). Second, research on the link between brand attachment and consumers' negative behaviours is limited. Previous research investigating the drivers of negative behaviours does not account for attachment strength and attachment styles (Johnson *et al.*, 2011; Johnson *et al.*, 2012). Third, this study provides insights into how attachment styles (i.e. attachment avoidance) influence the relationship between brand attachment and its positive and negative behavioural consequences. An examination of such consequences of brand attachment is important from the managerial standpoint, because it provides insights into how different consumers are likely to display different behaviours.

## **2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses development**

The majority of researchers have referred to consumers' emotional bonding regarding passion, affection and connection towards brands (Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Brocato *et al.* (2015) showed that brand attachment influences positive word-of-mouth, as well as switching intentions. Japutra *et al.* (2016) revealed that self-congruence, experience, responsiveness and CSR beliefs are antecedents of brand attachment, whereas brand loyalty and resilience to negative information are the consequences of brand attachment.

In addition to brand attachment, a few studies have investigated attachment styles. Thomson and Johnson (2006) showed that attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance style indirectly influence satisfaction through reciprocity. Paulssen (2009) revealed that attachment avoidance predicts satisfaction, trust and repurchase intention in a business-to-business context. Swaminathan *et al.* (2009) suggested that attachment styles moderate the relationship between brand personality and brand choice. Mende and Bolton (2011) investigated specific firm-focused attachment styles, concluding that customers with low anxiety, avoidance, or both, are more favourable in terms of satisfaction, trust and affective commitment toward the firm. Mende *et al.* (2013) found that attachment styles predict preference for closeness, as well as influence loyalty.

The two attachment styles – anxiety and avoidance – are conceptually distinct from brand attachment (Mende and Bolton, 2011). We propose that brand attachment is the magnitude of the relationship between consumers and brands, while attachment styles are the individuals' working models which guide their relationships with brands. Consumers who exhibit a high level of attachment avoidance or attachment anxiety view themselves and others negatively (Mende and Bolton, 2011). In this study, we posit that brand attachment not only influences positive behaviours, but also negative behaviours, as illustrated in Figure 1.

### **INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE**

As shown in Figure 1, brand attachment has a positive relationship with brand loyalty (H1), trash-talking (H2), Schadenfreude (H3) and anti-brand actions (H4). Previous studies have shown that brand attachment leads to loyalty only (e.g. Park *et al.*, 2010). However, strong emotional bonds towards brands may turn into: (1) heightened rivalry, including trash-talking and Schadenfreude, due to social identification (cf. Muniz and Hamer 2001; Hickman and

Ward, 2007), and (2) lasting hate, due to the brands' transgressions (cf. Grégoire *et al.*, 2009), which induce anti-brand actions.

The links between brand attachment and the four consumer behaviours are moderated by attachment anxiety (H5a-H5d) and attachment avoidance (H6a-H6d). The link between brand attachment and brand loyalty is strengthened for consumers with a low level of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. On the other hand, the link between brand attachment and anti-brand actions is strengthened for consumers with a high level of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Consumers with a high level of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance are likely to be more demanding. These individuals are less loyal, and when the brand disappoints them, they are more likely to induce negative behaviours.

### **3.1. Brand attachment and brand loyalty**

According to Park *et al.* (2010), brand attachment influences consumers' favourable behaviours (e.g. promoting a brand or always buying a particular brand). Even if a firm behaves unethically on a specific occasion, those consumers who are strongly attached to a brand will be more forgiving (Schmalz and Orth, 2012). A consumer who is strongly attached to a brand (i.e. high self-brand connection) maintains favourable brand evaluations despite receiving negative information about the brand (Cheng *et al.*, 2012). Brocato *et al.* (2015) showed that attachment to a service location positively influences positive word-of-mouth and negatively influences switching intentions.

When consumers develop brand attachment due to their self-congruence (i.e. similarity between self-concept and brand image), they display favourable behaviours toward the brand (e.g. purchase intention and willingness to pay) (Fedorikhin *et al.*, 2008; Cheng *et al.*, 2012). Also, they are likely to devote ample resources (i.e. money, time, energy) to the brand (Park *et al.*, 2010). These consumers remain loyal to the brand despite receiving negative information



about the brand, because they think that they are protecting their own self (Cheng *et al.*, 2012). Thus, we posit this hypothesis:

H1: Brand attachment is positively associated with brand loyalty.

### **3.2. Brand attachment, trash-talking and Schadenfreude**

Trash-talking refers to negative communications about rival brands (Hickman and Ward, 2007), including insults towards rival brands (Ewing *et al.*, 2013). Hickman and Ward (2007) noted that when trash-talking occurs within a group, it refers to internal trash-talking, whereas if it occurs outside of a group, it refers to external trash-talking. Trash-talking usually occurs in the world of sport (c.f. Simon, 2003; Rainey and Granito, 2010). However, these days, it is evident that consumers conduct trash-talking when defending their favourite brands (Muniz and Hamer, 2001; Marticotte *et al.*, 2016). It has been suggested that trash-talking has intensified due to the increase in competitiveness and rivalry among brands (Japutra *et al.*, 2014). Ewing *et al.* (2013) stated that extreme rivalry results in ridiculing opponents. In sports, the motive for trash-talking is to psych-up one's own self and to psych-out the opponents to intimidate or to impair the opponents' performance (Rainey and Granito, 2010). Teammates and opponents usually instigate trash-talking. In a business context, trash-talking is verbally discrediting alternative brands, to gain an edge in order to express and justify a choice (Marticotte *et al.*, 2016).

Trash-talking is different from negative Word-of-Mouth (WOM), which is the result of an unsatisfactory experience with the brand (Richins, 1983; Hickman and Ward, 2007). Negative WOM refers to interpersonal communication that belittles a firm or brand regarding its products and services, which is driven by emotions (Richins, 1983; Schoefer and Diamantopoulos, 2008). Richins (1983) noted that when consumers are severely dissatisfied

with products, negative WOM is likely to occur. In the service sector, negative WOM occurs when consumers are dissatisfied with an existing service provider and/or when they are more satisfied with alternative service providers (Wangenheim, 2005). On the contrary, trash-talking is the result of consumers' desire to positively differentiate a particular brand from rival brands (Muniz and Hamer, 2001; Hickman and Ward, 2007). Marticotte *et al.* (2016) stated that trash-talking differs from negative WOM in two ways: (1) consumers do not have any experiences with the brands being criticised, and (2) it is intended to discredit one option in favour of another.

The link between brand attachment and trash-talking is driven by consumers' sense of social identity, characterised by self-categorisation, affective commitment and group-based self-esteem (Bagozzi, 2000). The higher the level of consumer commitment to a particular brand, the higher the probability that trash-talking occurs (Hickman and Ward, 2007). Muniz and Hamer (2001) showed that consumers tend to judge their brand choice based on their self-concept (Marticotte *et al.*, 2016). Hence, those consumers tend to positively discriminate their brands in comparison to rival brands (Hickman and Ward, 2007). If someone insults the brand, they consider this as an insult to themselves because they think of it as a threat. They activate a defence strategy to protect their self-esteem (Marticotte *et al.*, 2016). Likewise, Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013) showed that brand identification is by far the most important antecedent of oppositional brand referrals.

Although trash-talking is more likely to happen in the presence of other users (i.e. internal trash-talking), it is also possible for trash-talking to happen without any other users of the brand present (i.e. external trash-talking). Hickman and Ward (2007) noted that internal trash-talking occurs because consumers rate their brands as better than rival brands, perceiving their fellow consumers to be warmer and more competent than rival consumers. They also argued that these reasons support consumers acting as "apostles" for the brands and increase

their inclination for external trash-talking. External trash-talking occurs because consumers are defending their favourite brands (Muniz and Hamer, 2001; Colliander and Hauge Wien, 2013; Japutra *et al.*, 2014). Following this argument, we advocate that trash-talking is a way of reducing anxiety and seeking social support. Thus, we posit this hypothesis:

H2: Brand attachment is positively associated with trash-talking.

Schadenfreude refers to feelings of malicious pleasure based on the misfortune of others (Feather and Sherman, 2002). Schadenfreude occurs when consumers of a brand derive emotional pleasure from rival brands' misfortunes (Hickman and Ward, 2007). Marticotte *et al.* (2016) noted that Schadenfreude is a compensatory phenomenon. Having Schadenfreude generates a certain form of satisfaction because consumers see it as a counterweight, restoring balance to a previously unfair situation. These days, Schadenfreude flourishes due to the growth of social media. People peruse other people's social media pages (i.e. Facebook) because they like to read about other people's misfortunes and find pleasure in them (Veer, 2011).

Cikara and Fiske (2012) posited envy, anger, hate, perceived deservingness and resentment as the predictors of Schadenfreude. Similarly, Smith *et al.* (2009) noted three interrelated conditions that provide support to Schadenfreude: personal gain, resentment and envy. These conditions were discussed within the context of the counterfeiting of luxury brands (Marticotte and Arcand, 2017). Consumers who cannot afford the genuine luxury brand may feel more envious because they would like to be part of that group and may feel resentful because they believe that the success of the luxury brand is not deserved. They feel pleasure from the fact that the original brand is being copied, while at the same time, they are receiving the benefit without having to pay a high price.

It is argued that brand attachment may lead to Schadenfreude due to the equality of condition (Fonagy, 2000; Cross and Littler, 2010). According to Marticotte *et al.* (2016), adversity in the form of Schadenfreude (i.e. taking pleasure from others' misfortunes) generates a certain form of satisfaction due to the consumers' inclination to restore balance to a previously unfair situation. For instance, a consumer that is strongly attached to Samsung may feel that there should be a levelling process towards their rival brand (i.e. Apple). When s/he sees consumers of Apple having misfortunes, s/he induces Schadenfreude in order to level Samsung with Apple. Hence, we posit this hypothesis:

H3: Brand attachment is positively associated with Schadenfreude.

### **3.3. Brand attachment and anti-brand actions**

In this study, anti-brand actions refer to the consumers' obsessive behaviours and hatred. Deterioration and dissolution may also occur in stable and close relationships (Anderson and Jap, 2005). For example, Grégoire and Fisher (2006) argued that a loving relationship can turn to hatred. The adverse brand-consumer relationship is more likely to occur when there is dissatisfaction with a brand (e.g. product or service failure). Romani *et al.* (2009) suggested that there are three conditions for negative brand emotions: physical object, symbolic cultural object and agent. They argued that consumers elicit negative feelings when the brand disappoints them. Hegner *et al.* (2017) argued that the consumers' dissatisfaction with brands leads to brand hate. However, Tripp and Gregoire (2011) noted that not all consumers conduct anti-brand actions (e.g. complaints). Consumers who exhibit negative behaviours are those who feel betrayed by the company after investing a considerable amount of their resources (i.e. money, time or energy).

Other reasons attributed to the link between brand attachment and anti-brand actions are: (1) brand opportunism activities (Anderson and Jap, 2005), and (2) the incongruity of values between consumers and the brands (Palazzo and Basu, 2007). Brand opportunism activities may include the abuse of the counterparts' trust (Anderson and Jap, 2005). When consumers realise that their trust has been abused by brands, they are inclined to retaliate (Grégoire *et al.*, 2009). Also, consumers are more likely to exhibit detrimental behaviour for those brands that are more self-relevant (Johnson *et al.*, 2011; Japutra *et al.*, 2014). This occurs when there is a mismatch between the consumer's social, personal or consumption values and the brand's actions (Palazzo and Basu, 2007). It might be that a particular brand offers high quality products, but the brand is not socially responsible regarding the environment. Those consumers who are socially responsible may feel cheated and start engaging in anti-brand actions. Hence, we posit this hypothesis:

H4: Brand attachment is positively associated with anti-brand actions.

### **3.4. Moderating effects of attachment styles**

According to Hazan and Shaver (1994), within the domain of interpersonal adult relationships, being anxious reflects inconsistency in responsiveness that may lead to heightened vigilance, fears of abandonment and neglect, whereas being avoidant reflects rejection of physical affection and intimate emotional expression. These can lead to the evasion of closeness. Both attachment anxiety and avoidance are represented by the failure of proximity seeking (i.e. seeking and maintaining closeness to significant others) to relieve distress (Mikulincer *et al.*, 2003).

Individuals with a low level of attachment anxiety or attachment avoidance have the ability to reduce distress and remove obstacles through turning to others, whereas individuals

with a high level of attachment anxiety or attachment avoidance are less able to confront the distress-eliciting situation, exhibiting fewer resources to explore the environment, have fun with others or attend to the needs of others (Mikulincer *et al.*, 2003). When a failure of proximity seeking to relieve distress occurs, individuals with a high level of attachment anxiety carry out a hyper-activation strategy, whereas individuals with a high level of attachment avoidance carry out a deactivation strategy (Mikulincer *et al.*, 2003; Shaver and Mikulincer, 2005).

A hyper-activation strategy is defined as “intense efforts to attain proximity to attachment figures and ensure their attention and support”, whereas a deactivation strategy is defined as “the inhibition of proximity-seeking inclinations and actions, and the suppression or discounting of any threat that might activate the attachment system” (Shaver and Mikulincer, 2005, p. 26). Individuals who abide with a hyper-activating strategy are hyper-sensitive to signs of abandonment, and are prone to pondering personal insufficiencies and threats to relationships, while individuals who adopt a deactivating strategy tend to distance themselves from others, strive for self-reliance, and experience discomfort with closeness (Shaver and Mikulincer, 2005).

Insecure attachment (i.e. high in attachment anxiety and/or attachment avoidance) is the root of multiple dysfunctional behaviours that result in relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution (Hazan and Shaver, 1994). It might be that insecure attachment mobilises the activation of hyper-activating and deactivating strategies. Hyper-activating and deactivating strategies put the attachment system chronically in check, causing insecure individuals to be constantly on the alert for threats, separations and betrayals, with serious consequences for cognitive and emotional openness (Mikulincer *et al.*, 2003).

We apply these notions to the consumer-brand relationship context. We surmise that consumers with a high level of attachment anxiety activate hyper-activating strategies towards

their relationship with a brand, while consumers with a high level of attachment avoidance activate deactivating strategies. When they activate these strategies, they expect the brand's products or the brand's employees to increase efforts to exceed their expectations. The reason behind this is the feeling that they have allocated cogent resources in this relationship. Thus, these consumers' expectations are raised. These conditions might weaken a sense of loyalty to the brand. In addition, Whelan and Dawar (2014) showed that attachment style predicts the attribution of blame following a product-harm crisis. Hence, we posit:

H5a: The relationship between brand attachment and brand loyalty is weakened for consumers with a high level of attachment anxiety.

H5b-d: The relationships between brand attachment and trash-talking (H5b), Schadenfreude (H5c), as well as anti-brand actions (H5d), are strengthened for consumers with a high level of attachment anxiety.

H6a: The relationship between brand attachment and brand loyalty is weakened for consumers with a high level of attachment avoidance.

H6b-d: The relationships between brand attachment and trash-talking (H6b), Schadenfreude (H6c), as well as anti-brand actions (H6d), are strengthened for consumers with a high level of attachment avoidance.

### **3. Data collection**

#### **3.1. Design and respondents**

The data were collected using an online platform, which was distributed through web survey software (i.e. Survey Monkey). The invitation to participate in the survey was posted on several boards on the Internet (e.g. DailyInfo, Craigslist, LinkedIn) covering all UK cities,

ranging from Aberdeen to London. The participants were informed that they could win one of three Amazon vouchers if they participated in the survey. The respondents were asked to choose their favourite brand from a list of brands provided. The brands listed were diverse and from a mix of categories, including car manufacturers (e.g. Toyota, Volkswagen), electronics (e.g. Samsung, Apple), food and beverages (e.g. Cadbury, Coca-Cola), fashion retailers (e.g. Next, M&S) and airlines (e.g. Virgin Atlantic, British Airways).

Overall, 432 questionnaires were used for the analysis. Sixty-one per cent of the respondents were women, 77% were British, and 26% worked as professionals. Thirty-seven per cent of the participants were in the age group of 16-34, 38% of the participants were in the age group of 35-54 and the rest were in the age group of 55 and over. Fifty-four per cent of the respondents had been using the brand that they chose for 10 years or more, 24% purchased the brand several times a year, and 34% had purchased the brand less than a week ago.

### **3.2. Measures**

Brand attachment was measured using four items; two items reflect brand-self connection, and two items reflect brand prominence (Park *et al.*, 2010). Following Mende and Bolton (2011), the anxiety and avoidance attachment styles were measured with multi-item Likert-type scales (see Appendix 1). An exploratory factor analysis was undertaken on the data to identify a priori dimensionality of the attachment styles scale. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity were computed to assess the appropriateness of factor analyses to the data. The KMO value was 0.75, and Bartlett's test was significant at the 0.00 level. Both results demonstrate the factorability of the matrices being considered (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Principal component factor analysis with Varimax rotation was used to identify the underlying dimensions. Items exhibiting low factor loadings (< 0.45), high cross loadings (> 0.40), or low communalities (< 0.30) were candidates for elimination (Hair *et al.*, 2010). A final



2-factor model was estimated. The factor solution accounted for approximately 57% of the total variance, with all communalities ranging from 0.40 to 0.64.

Brand loyalty was measured with three items following Yim *et al.* (2008). We measured trash-talking with three items adapted from Hickman and Ward (2007). To measure Schadenfreude, we used three items adapted from Feather and Sherman (2002). To measure anti-brand actions, we created a scenario-type direction: “Imagine that [this brand] disappoints you severely (e.g. infringing ethical standards or malfunctions that cause severe injuries or whatever wrong-doing you can think of)”. Anti-brand actions were measured with four items following Johnson *et al.* (2011, 2012).

#### **4. Results**

A structural equation model (SEM) approach was employed to test the research hypotheses. SEM has its merits particularly in theory testing and in explaining marketing phenomena (c.f., Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 2000). Iacobucci, (2009) argued that SEM simultaneous fitting provide more precise results (i.e., indicated by smaller standard errors) and less bias (i.e., each effect is estimated while partially out the other effects). SEM has been considered as a natural progression of regression as SEM handles measurement error better compared to regression since the measurement is properly represented (i.e., multiple indicators are represented by a factor). We performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the measurement model to ensure that each of the items strongly loaded on its respective construct. Before the CFA analysis was conducted, we conducted a normality test in order to confirm the normality of the data (Hair *et al.*, 2010). The normality testing was conducted using the absolute value of the skewness and kurtosis of each item. The results of the skewness and kurtosis were around the absolute value of +/- 1, suggesting that the data distribution was normal.

#### 4.1. Measurement model

The measurement model produced an overall good fit (Hair *et al.*, 2010):  $\chi^2_{(209)} = 335.58$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.61$ , GFI = .94, NFI = .94, CFI = .98, and RMSEA = .04. One item from anxiety and one item from avoidance were deleted, since the items exhibited low factor loadings. Details on the measurement can be seen in Appendix A. The adequacy of the measures was assessed through evaluating the validity and the composite reliability values of the constructs. The discriminant validity of the constructs was assessed through comparing the average variance extracted (AVE) from each construct with its squared correlations with the other constructs (cf. Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Table 1 also displays the means and standard deviations.

#### INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

As indicated in Table 1, all values representing the AVEs were greater than all of the squared correlations, indicating that discriminant validity was achieved. The composite reliability of the constructs exceeds .70, indicating that the constructs were reliable (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Before continuing to test the hypotheses by creating the structural model, we checked whether there was a common-method variance problem. Common-method variance was checked through Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003), which suggests that a common-method problem exists when (1) a single unrotated factor solution appears from the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) test, or (2) one general factor accounts for the majority of the covariance among the measures. The results of the EFA test revealed six factors with Eigen values greater than 1. The results account for 71.60% of the total variance, where the first factor accounts for 25.20% of the total variance. This suggests that common-method variance does not pose a significant problem, since there was no general factor in the unrotated structure.

## 4.2. Structural model and test of hypotheses

Since our model includes a moderating effect, we tested the research hypotheses following hierarchical moderator regression analysis. Thus, we created two structural models. Model 1 was created to test the main effects. Model 2 was created to test the main and interaction effects. As is often the case in testing moderating effects through the use of interaction terms, the preliminary analysis revealed several multicollinearity effects among the variables. Therefore, to address this issue, the continuous independent variables (i.e. brand attachment, anxiety and avoidance) were summated and mean-centred to reduce the multicollinearity between the main and interaction terms (Aiken and West, 1991). Table 2 reports the fit statistics of Model 1 and Model 2.

**INSERT TABLE 2 HERE**

As shown in Table 2, both Model 1 and Model 2 produced an overall good fit. M2 is marginally better due to better model fit indices (i.e., higher CFI, lower  $\chi^2/Df$  and lower RMSEA). The proposed research hypotheses were examined from the standardised path coefficient and the t-value as shown in Table 3.

**INSERT TABLE 3 HERE**

Model 1 explains 31% of the variance in brand loyalty, 16% of the variance in trash-talking, 22% of the variance in Schadenfreude and 13% of the variance in anti-brand actions. With regard to brand attachment and brand loyalty, the results show that the stronger the

attachment towards a brand, the more loyalty there is to that particular brand, which supports H1 (SPC = .03,  $t = 1.83$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The next three research hypotheses (H2-H4) propose that strong brand attachment may also result in consumers' negative behaviours. H2 proposes that the stronger the attachment between consumers and brands, the more likely consumers are to exhibit trash-talking. The results strongly support H2 (SPC = .18,  $t = 4.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This outcome is similar to H3 (SPC = .17,  $t = 4.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which proposes that consumers are more likely to exhibit Schadenfreude when they have a strong attachment to a particular brand. We also find support for H4 (SPC = .06,  $t = 1.73$ ,  $p < .05$ ), which states that when the brand disappoints severely, the consumers strongly attached to it tend to exhibit anti-brand actions.

Model 2 concerns the moderation effects of attachment styles, where it explains 32% of the variance in brand loyalty, 17% of the variance in trash-talking, 24% of the variance in Schadenfreude and 14% of the variance in anti-brand actions. The results reject H5a-H5d. By and large, anxiety does not moderate the relationships between brand attachment and its positive and negative behavioural consequences. Although our results do not find support for the moderation effect of attachment anxiety, interestingly, the direct effect of attachment anxiety on these behaviours is statistically significant. The directions of the relationships are negative towards brand loyalty and positive towards the negative behaviours, as predicted. Attachment anxiety has negative direct effects on brand loyalty (SPC = -.25,  $t = -5.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and positive direct effects on trash-talking (SPC = .28,  $t = 5.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Schadenfreude (SPC = .39,  $t = 8.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and anti-brand actions (SPC = .34,  $t = 6.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The results show strong support for the moderation effect of attachment avoidance. H6a proposes that the relationships between brand attachment and brand loyalty are attenuated when consumers have a high level of attachment avoidance. From the results, it can be seen that the interaction of brand attachment and avoidance on brand loyalty was significant (SPC = -.10,  $t = -2.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ), which supports H6a. The results of the SEM also show support for H6b (SPC

= .09,  $t = 1.85$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and H6c (SPC = .11,  $t = 2.37$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Both of these hypotheses propose that consumers who have a high level of attachment avoidance tend to exhibit more negative behaviours, such as trash-talking and Schadenfreude. We also find strong support for H6d (SPC = .10,  $t = 1.92$ ,  $p < .05$ ), which means attachment avoidance moderates the relationship between brand attachment and anti-brand actions.

### 4.3. Post hoc analysis

In order to check whether there are any differences between respondents of different genders and ages, these were added as control variables in Model 2. The fit statistics produced an overall good fit:  $\chi^2_{(128)} = 368.09$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.88$ , GFI = .93, NFI = .91, CFI = .94, and RMSEA = .07. The results reveal that males are more likely engage in trash-talking (SPC = -.13,  $t = -2.74$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and Schadenfreude (SPC = -.12,  $t = -2.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than females. We confirmed the results through an independent t-test. The mean differences between males and females for trash-talking ( $M_{\text{male}} = 3.72$ ,  $M_{\text{female}} = 3.23$ ,  $t = 3.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and Schadenfreude ( $M_{\text{male}} = 2.66$ ,  $M_{\text{female}} = 2.18$ ,  $t = 3.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ) are significant. Meanwhile, younger consumers are more likely to engage in Schadenfreude (SPC = -.10,  $t = -2.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and anti-brand actions (SPC = -.14,  $t = -2.90$ ,  $p < .01$ ) than the elderly. We confirmed the results through a one-way ANOVA test. The results show that the mean differences between younger consumers (i.e. 16-34 years old) for Schadenfreude ( $F = 8.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and anti-brand actions ( $F = 11.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ) are significant.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Most researchers regard brand attachment as a prominent marketing construct that leads to favourable consumer behaviours (e.g. Park *et al.*, 2010; Japutra *et al.*, 2016). In interpersonal

relationships, they suggest that people are guided in their relationships by their attachment styles (e.g. Mikulincer *et al.*, 2003; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2009). However, the relationship-specific attachment styles are an under-studied topic in the marketing literature. In particular, research that combines attachment styles and brand attachment is limited (Mende and Bolton, 2011). This research is one of the early studies to examine this phenomenon. Thus, this study provides guidance for managers who wish to understand the complete relationship between brand attachment and its consequences.

The major contribution of this paper is to offer knowledge about how brand attachment operates in relation to unfavourable consumer behaviours. Although extant research (e.g. Park *et al.*, 2010; Schmalz and Orth, 2012) has suggested that brand attachment produces favourable behaviours, our study shows that brand attachment may also produce unfavourable behaviours. Our findings confirm H1, revealing the positive relationships between brand attachment and brand loyalty. This result provides support for prior research (e.g. Cheng *et al.*, 2012) suggesting that the emotional attachment between brands and consumers will result in favourable behaviours (e.g. purchase and recommend intentions). Companies should begin to design marketing campaigns that foster these relationships (e.g. building a community and a forum). Another conclusion that can be drawn from this research is with regard to the role of brand prominence (perceived ease and frequency) towards loyalty (Park *et al.*, 2010). Managers must communicate the brand's prominence to their consumers. This can be done by designing a promotion campaign based on the usefulness of the brand in solving everyday problems.

The results of this study show that brand attachment also leads to negative behaviours. In particular, this study shows that higher brand attachment may lead to a higher tendency to incur trash-talking (H2), Schadenfreude (H3) and anti-brand actions (H4). Trash-talking and Schadenfreude are the manifestations of adverse brand loyalty (e.g. Muniz and Hamer, 2001). This study adds to the brand rivalry literature (e.g. Ewing *et al.*, 2013) by highlighting the

reason why consumers display adverse brand loyalty behaviours. Our study explains that these behaviours can occur at the individual level because such consumers have a strong attachment to the brand. Surprisingly, consumers who are strongly attached to particular brands are the ones who tend to display anti-brand actions when their brands severely disappoint them. This might be due to the fact that consumers who are strongly attached to those brands feel betrayed and have greater resentment towards these brands (Park *et al.*, 2010; Tripp and Gregoire, 2011).

This research also examines the moderating effects of attachment styles on the relationships between brand attachment and the four behavioural consequences. By investigating consumer attachment styles, we acknowledge that not all consumers are the same when it comes to building consumer-brand relationships. The results offer support to our propositions (H6a-H6d) that attachment avoidance moderates the relationships between brand attachment and its consequences. This study suggests that consumers who exhibit high attachment avoidance attenuate favourable behaviours (e.g. loyalty) and strengthen unfavourable behaviours (e.g. anti-brand actions). As predicted, it is harder to establish loyalty in individuals with high attachment avoidance. They are more demanding since they tend to avoid relationships. However, when these consumers have become loyal, they are more likely to engage in trash-talking and Schadenfreude. These consumers also have the tendency to conduct anti-brand actions when their brands severely disappoint them. Relationship-avoidant consumers are likely to generate higher loyalty towards the brands. However, managers should note that these consumers think that they have put forward their trust and resources for the brands. Thus, these types of consumers need to be taken care of differently. Mende and Bolton (2011) argued that these consumers appertain to financial rather than social programmes. In addition, managers could set up a designated employee as a point of contact.

Interestingly, the results show that attachment anxiety does not moderate the relationships between brand attachment and the four consumer behaviours examined by this

study (H5a-H5d). However, attachment anxiety has direct effects on these behaviours, as predicted. Thus, this study shows that when consumers have high attachment anxiety, they tend to exhibit lower brand loyalty and a higher tendency to conduct trash-talking, Schadenfreude and anti-brand actions. It seems that individuals who are highly anxious in their relationships are more unforgiving towards the brand. Mende *et al.* (2013) noted that anxious consumers are more sensitive to relational cues, and they respond positively to being recognised, while at the same time, they respond negatively to being downgraded. Thus, managers need to take extra care in dealing with these types of consumers. They could offer personalised treatment towards these consumers (e.g. sending birthday cards, calling their names, inviting them to a designated lounge or date).

On another note, further analysis displays that consumers' gender and age play a role in predicting behaviours. In particular, female participants tend to exhibit lower trash-talking and Schadenfreude, and elder participants tend to exhibit lower Schadenfreude and anti-brand actions. These confirm the findings of Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013): The relationships between brand identification and oppositional brand referrals are stronger for males compared to females.

Academic researchers (e.g. Mende *et al.*, 2013) have advocated the importance of measuring consumers' attachment styles. We support these researchers by providing a crucial standpoint: that attachment styles are prominent moderating variables affecting consumers' behaviours. We highlight that the unfavourable behaviours (i.e. trash-talking, Schadenfreude and anti-brand actions) will escalate for consumers who have a high level of attachment anxiety or attachment avoidance. Managers need to fine-tune their segmentation and targeting efforts. They should start segmenting not only using demographic profiles, but also using a psychographic profile, such as consumer attachment styles. Managers should understand that consumers' with high attachment avoidance are more likely to conduct anti-brand actions when



they are disappointed with the brands. Consumers' with high attachment avoidance are more receptive to financial programs compared to social relationship programs (Mende and Bolton, 2011). Thus, managers could provide financial rewards (e.g., gifts, vouchers, cash back) with no reservations (e.g., fine print conditions) to reduce retaliation from those customers.

## **6. Limitations and directions for future research**

This research enlightens practitioners and academics in understanding how consumers can be categorised based on their relationship-specific attachment styles. However, it is not without its limitations. The framework was tested with cross-sectional survey data in the context of UK consumers. This context may raise issues of method and measurement bias, as well as limit conclusions about causality. Thus, further research, to test the framework in a different context and using a longitudinal study, is needed. The measurement of attachment styles used in this study follows Mende and Bolton's (2011) measure of consumers' relationship-specific attachment styles. It is worth taking the time to check on the consumers' general attachment styles. In particular, Paulssen's (2009) measure of attachment styles accounts for both personal and business relationships. Thus, future studies should investigate the conceptual framework of our study incorporating Paulssen's measures.

The scenario in which the brand disappoints its consumers leaves room for interpretation. Thus, future studies should test this conceptual framework in a more controlled environment, for example, using experimental studies. Additionally, a qualitative approach would be useful in understanding the reasons why consumers with a high level of attachment anxiety and avoidance are more demanding. Finally, the findings provide support for the moderating effects of attachment avoidance, but not attachment anxiety, on the dependent variables. Interestingly, the findings support the direct effects of attachment anxiety on the

dependent variables. Future studies could further investigate the direct, indirect and moderating effects of attachment avoidance and anxiety.

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## Appendix A

### Measurement items and the standardized path coefficients (SPC)

| Scale              | Scale Items   | SPC |
|--------------------|---|-----|
| Brand Attachment   | To what extent is [this brand] part of you and who you are?   | .77 |
|                    | To what extent do you feel that you are personally connected to [this brand]?   | .84 |
|                    | To what extent are your thoughts and feelings toward [this brand] often automatic, coming to mind seemingly on their own? | .85 |
|                    | To what extent do your thoughts and feelings toward [this brand] come to you naturally and instantly?                     | .89 |
| Brand Loyalty      | I will continue to purchase [this brand] even if it increases price.  | .72 |
|                    | I intend to keep purchasing [this brand].   | .81 |
| Trash-Talking      | I will recommend [this brand] to someone who seeks my advice.   | .77 |
|                    | With other users of [this brand], I talk about how negatively we feel about competing brands.                             | .79 |
|                    | With other users of [this brand], I talk about competing brands being inferior.   | .91 |
| Schadenfreude      | With other users of [this brand], I say negative things about competing brands.   | .84 |
|                    | When I encounter others' misfortune (who use competing brands) I feel happy.  | .90 |
|                    | I couldn't resist a little smile upon others' misfortune (who use competing brands).                                      | .92 |
| Anti-Brand Actions | I enjoyed it when a misfortune happened to others (who use competing brands).   | .86 |
|                    | I would make it one of my life's missions to damage [this brand].   | .82 |
|                    | I would become obsessed over what I could do to get back at [this brand].   | .85 |
|                    | [This brand] is my enemy.   | .81 |
| Anxiety            | I am a fanatic against [this brand].  | .76 |
|                    | [This brand] changes how it treats me for no apparent reason.   | .69 |
|                    | I worry that [this brand] doesn't really like me as a customer.   | .74 |
| Avoidance          | I worry that [this brand] doesn't care about me as much as I care about it.   | .69 |
|                    | I am comfortable having a close relationship with this brand. (reversed)  | .72 |
|                    | It is a comfortable feeling to depend on this brand. (reversed)   | .64 |
|                    | It's easy for me to feel warm and friendly towards this brand. (reversed)   | .69 |

