



## Brand Meaning Management

Identification and Attachment in Consumer-Brand Relationships

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### Article information:

**To cite this document:** Sankar Sen, Allison R. Johnson, C. B. Bhattacharya, Juan Wang, "Identification and Attachment in Consumer-Brand Relationships" *In* Brand Meaning Management. Published online: 05 May 2015; 151-174.

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# IDENTIFICATION AND ATTACHMENT IN CONSUMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIPS

Sankar Sen, Allison R. Johnson, C. B. Bhattacharya  
and Juan Wang

## ABSTRACT

*Purpose – We examine two conceptualizations of consumer-brand relationships: identification, as identity-based relationships between a consumer and a brand, and the related construct of attachment as a bond based on security and personal history with the brand.*

*Methodology – Predictions emanating from the two constructs' disparate theoretical traditions regarding the relative antecedents and outcomes of these brand relationship constructs are tested in a survey of real consumer-brand relationships, where the two are likely to co-occur.*

*Findings – Identification is more socially motivated, wherein the brand is used for “identity building” and impression management, such as through public endorsement. In contrast, attachment is more personally*

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**Brand Meaning Management**

**Review of Marketing Research, Volume 12, 151–174**

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**ISSN: 1548-6435/doi:10.1108/S1548-643520150000012006**

*motivated; it is more likely to be founded on an intimate history with the brand and feelings of security inspired by the brand.*

*Implications – This is the first work in marketing to explicitly compare identification with attachment in contexts where they co-occur. In doing so, it underscores the validity and usefulness of these two related but distinct relationship constructs.*

**Keywords:** Attachment; identification; social identity; consumer-brand relationships; brand loyalty

## INTRODUCTION

With both product proliferation and homogeneity on the rise, marketers want to, more than ever before, build strong, enduring, and meaningful connections with their consumers. This has been reflected, not surprisingly, in unprecedented levels of research attention to the precise nature of such connections, as well as their antecedents and consequences (e.g., [Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005](#); [Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012](#); [Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003](#); [Escalas & Bettman, 2005](#); [Fournier, 1998](#); [Johnson, Matear, & Thomson, 2011](#); [Marin & Ruiz, 2007](#); [Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010](#); [Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012](#); [Thomson & Johnson, 2006](#); [Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005](#)). Two key notions to emerge from these efforts are those of consumer-brand identification and brand attachment. Based on theories of social identity ([Turner, 1975](#)), consumer-brand identification has been conceptualized as consumers' sense of congruence between their own identity and that of the brand ([Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000](#); [Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003](#); [Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012](#)). The notion of brand attachment, rooted in attachment theory, has been conceptualized as “an emotion-laden target-specific bond” between a consumer and a brand ([Thomson et al., 2005](#), p. 78). The value of both these constructs, and the consequent research interest they have generated, stems from their roles in myriad marketer-friendly outcomes such as loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and tolerance for negative information about the brand ([Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, 2005](#); [Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006](#); [Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012](#)).

Interestingly, however, research on each of these undoubtedly valid manifestations of consumer-brand connections has evolved in parallel, without any comprehensive considerations of their relative expressions and impacts in a given consumption context. It may not be surprising, then,

that there remains, to this day, a marked degree of overlap in how each of these constructs have been construed and understood. For instance, recent research on consumer-brand identification (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) and brand attachment (Park et al., 2010) alike, have implicated identity-based overlaps between brands and their consumers, as well as consumers' historical associations with these brands as defining elements of each construct. A similar conflation can be observed in other examinations of consumer-brand connections as well (e.g., Batra et al., 2012; Gregoire & Fisher, 2006). At the same time, in their focus exclusively on one or the other construct, the bodies of work on both identification and attachment in the consumption domain have thus far bypassed the likelihood that the connections consumers feel with many of the brands they consume are based on not just identification or attachment but, in fact, on both. In other words, though the brands with which consumers identify are often likely to be those to which they are attached as well (and vice versa), the two constructs have never been investigated concurrently.

The current research attempts to advance our extant understanding of consumer-brand connections based on attachment and identification by examining their potentially joint expressions in consumers' bonds with real brands, with the objective of not only establishing possible commonalities but also teasing apart key differences between these two constructs. Based on a survey of consumers' connections with real brands, our findings suggest that while in some cases these connections are characterized primarily by identification or attachment, in other cases they are characterized by both. As well, in such contexts, the key distinction between identification and attachment appears to be in the former's ties to consumers' social identity-related needs. Specifically, brands consumers use to manage impressions and endorse publicly are those they identify with; attachment is far more weakly related to these socially motivated impulses. On the other hand, consumers' history with a brand, the extent to which it gives them emotional security, and their loyalty toward it, while tied to both identification and attachment, are stronger for the latter than the former. While these findings are comfortably consistent with the extant conceptual distinctions between these two constructs, they also point to the significant overlaps in contexts wherein both exist and are assessed. In this, our research provides an improved conceptual understanding of the interplay between these two types of brand connections in the real marketplace. Next, we briefly trace the historical evolutions of identification and attachment, theorizing about their antecedents and outcomes in contexts where they might co-occur. We then present a study that tests our predictions and end with a brief discussion of the implications of our findings for theory and practice.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Identification and attachment are rooted in distinct bodies of basic research. The extant notions of consumer attachment (e.g., [Park et al., 2010](#); [Thomson, 2006](#)) draw on attachment theory ([Bowlby, 1977](#)) in articulating a narrative of relationship strength in the consumption domain. On a similar but distinctly parallel trajectory, the construct of identification in the context of consumer relationships (e.g., [Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003](#); [Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012](#)) has emerged from basic research related to theories of social identity ([Turner, 1975](#)). In particular, the notion of identification was originally articulated in the context of group membership, and argued to result in stronger commitment to the group, producing greater citizenship and extra-role behaviors ([Terry & Hogg, 1996](#)). Researchers subsequently moved beyond formal membership contexts to examine, based on theories of social identity ([Tajfel & Turner, 1985](#)), the potential of identification in nonmembership contexts ([Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003](#); [Scott & Lane, 2000](#)). [Bhattacharya and Sen \(2003\)](#), for instance, define identification as a cognitive state of self-categorization, which is possible even in the absence of formal membership, as in the case of consumers' identification with the companies they consume from, turning them into loyal advocates of those companies. This is consistent with more recent conceptualizations of consumer-brand identification ([Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012](#)) as a consumer's perceived state of oneness with a brand.

Whereas identification is seen as a primarily cognitive affiliation based on the fulfillment of social identity-related needs, research on attachment in marketing has drawn on attachment theory ([Bowlby, 1977](#)) to conceptualize and measure that construct as a substantially more personal, emotional bond between consumers and marketplace entities such as companies and/or their products and brands, that helps fulfill consumers' core security-related needs ([Park et al., 2010](#); [Thomson, 2006](#); [Thomson & Johnson, 2006](#); [Thomson et al., 2005](#)). Such attachment arises over time, through sustained and affect-laden interactions with brands, so it is not surprising that a defining aspect of attachment – and importantly, one that is not so central to most other conceptualizations of consumer relationship strength – is that when consumers experience real or threatened separation from the brand they are attached to, distress can result. In other words, the relationship's strength is captured by the notion of separation distress, which has been found to be a valid and reliable indicator of attachment ([Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991](#); [Thomson, 2006](#)).

This basic distinction between attachment and identification makes sense in light of the fact that the theories of social identity and attachment were, in their original forms, developed to address different questions and to study different phenomena (e.g., Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Smith, Murphy, & Coats, 1999). Social identity theory was dedicated to understanding, with the goal of preventing from happening again, the senseless cruelty that was the German Holocaust. In contrast, the primary goal of attachment theory was the promotion of healthy and loving relationships, in response to the observed disruptions of those relationships during World War II. In other words, though the two theories were developed in the same era, they proceeded down very different paths. Social identity theory was developed after World War II to explain the occurrence of discrimination and genocide and, more generally, to describe intergroup processes such as in-group favoritism and prejudice against out-groups (e.g., Brewer, 2007). Original research that helped build the theory focused on group dynamics (Lewin, 1946) and included the famous Zimbardo (1971) “Stanford Prison Experiment” and Sherif’s (1966) “Robbers Cave Experiment.” That foundational research manipulated identity in a social setting and observed the behavioral results, and essentially spawned the entire field of social psychology (Hothersall, 1995).

In a parallel milieu, attachment theory was developed to explain observed problems with relationships experienced by children separated from their parents when they were sent to group shelters during the World War II bombings of London (Bowlby, 1977). Bonds with responsive and nurturing primary caregivers in early childhood were found to be necessary for the development of healthy attachment systems and positive relationships later in life. Original research in this theoretical tradition resulted in the development of the “Strange Situation Paradigm” (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) and of the “Attachment Styles” scheme to classify different patterns of children’s behavior. Those styles were found to predict many important outcomes and the theory was highly influential in the areas of developmental and personality psychology.

Over time, these theories have broadened. Attachment theory addresses the broad areas of interpersonal relationships and bonding, whereas social identity theory addresses relationships with groups and their interplay with self-definition (Smith et al., 1999). Importantly, though, the distinctions between these two constructs have been maintained even as their attendant theories have been integrated to provide a more comprehensive sense for the psychology of social relationships (Ashmore et al., 2004).

Due, at least in part, to their distinct conceptual roots, identification and attachment may appear to be competing conceptualizations of brand relationships. However, we argue that in real consumer-brand relationships, wherein the two can co-occur, they are not substitutes but rather complements. In other words, brands, as complex entities, can help consumers fulfill, simultaneously, their social as well as more personal, security-related needs. More specifically, consumers are likely to identify with a brand in the service of helping them manage the impressions of relevant others (Escalas & Bettman, 2005); the attraction of the brand comes from it being “meaningful” or symbolic in a specific social context. That is, the brand’s meaning and construed image are shared by important others. Such meaning may emanate, for instance, from the values espoused by the company (Brown & Dacin, 1997) or embodied by the brand (i.e., brand image; Peterson, 2005) and will form the basis for identification as part of consumers’ conscious efforts to negotiate and manage their social identities (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993).

Interestingly, the brands consumers identify with can naturally also, sometimes, be those that they have considerable personal experience with. Indeed, the social identity confirming or enhancing properties of a brand are often only apparent to consumers after significant interactions with that brand. Thus, consumers’ history with a brand, or their frequent experiences with it over time (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009), is likely to play at least some role in their identification with it (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). At the same time, however, to the extent that consumers’ experiences with a brand produce, over time, a sense of security and comfort (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Wong, 2009) and the concomitant mostly positive emotions (Brakus et al., 2009), consumers may also be attached to these brands. This theorized role of a long history involving the brand in attachment, resulting in high brand prominence for the consumer (Park et al., 2010), is consistent with the focus in the psychology literature on the role of long-term care giving relationships in attachment (Bowlby, 1977) and, to some extent, the idiosyncratic attachments to material possessions described in the marketing literature (Kleine & Baker, 2004). More specifically, one of the central tenets of attachment theory is that reliability and constancy, resulting in a feeling of security, is necessary for a strong relationship (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In other words, brand attachment hinges critically on sustained, affect-laden experiences with it. Together, this suggests that in situations where identification and attachment coexist, the contribution of personal brand history to a strong consumer-brand connection may, in fact, be more through

attachment rather than through identification. In other words, we expect that in contexts where a consumer-brand relationship is characterized by both identification and attachment, brand history and consumers' feelings of security are likely to be more strongly associated with the latter than with the former.

In sum, then, we expect that in contexts where identification and attachment coexist, the distinct motivators of each of these facets of consumer-brand connections will be manifested in the differential strength of their links to three key antecedents: impression management, brand history, and felt security. While attachment will be more strongly associated with brand history and felt security than will identification, identification will be more strongly associated with impression management than will attachment. We also expect these motives to, naturally, be manifested in the commonly documented outcomes associated with attachment and identification (Park et al., 2010; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Specifically, identification is more likely to be associated with those pro-brand outcomes that are expressed in the consumers' social milieu. A prime example of this is the promotion of the brand in a social context; in other words, its public endorsement. Doing so allows the consumer to most readily achieve their social identity goals in the eyes of others. On the other hand, loyal consumption of the brand is often a more private activity, focused on necessarily sustained and physical interactions with the brand that are likely to contribute to consumers' need for security and psychological safety. As a result, we expect public endorsement to be more strongly associated with identification and loyalty to be more strongly associated with attachment. Notably, such loyalty, conceptualized as consumers' motivated, volitional commitment to a brand is distinct from brand history, or consumers' past experiences with a brand, which can be volitional or otherwise. Fig. 1 summarizes our predictions.

Next, we investigate these predictions through a survey of consumers' relationships with real brands wherein attachment and identification can occur individually or simultaneously.

## METHOD

As we have said, brands and companies with which consumers identify are often likely to be those to which they are attached, and vice versa. Therefore our aim was to explore the similarities and differences between

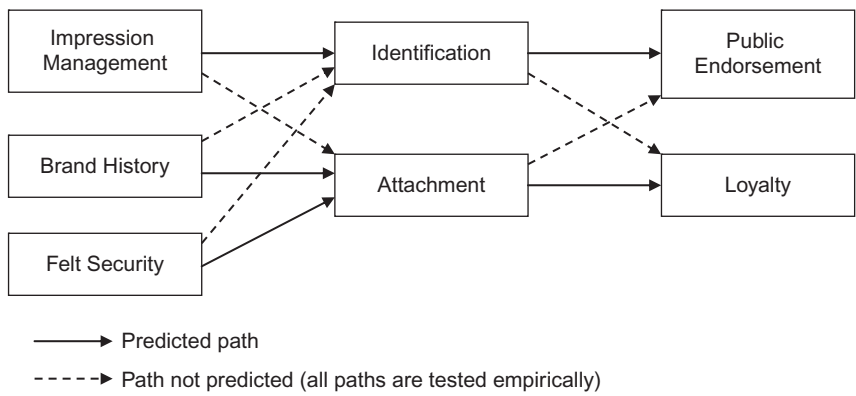


Fig. 1. Conceptual Model.

these two types of consumer-brand connections in a naturalistic setting, where neither was artificially suppressed through the design of the empirical context. Specifically, we used a survey methodology, allowing participants to choose a brand they were familiar with and then rating their sense of identification and feelings of attachment with that brand. Identification was operationalized as overlapping identity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) and attachment was operationalized as separation distress (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Thomson, 2006), respectively. Given this, our tests of the similarities and differences between our focal constructs are conducted in terms of five key antecedent and outcome correlates: impression management, brand history, felt security, public endorsement, and loyal purchase.

Two hundred and sixty-eight undergraduate respondents at a Canadian business school ( $M = 19.3$  years old, 51% male) completed the survey in exchange for partial course credit. At the beginning of the survey, respondents designated a brand of their choice, with the instruction that it must be “a brand you are familiar with,” and were then asked to complete the rest of the survey with that brand in mind. They proceeded to complete measures of loyalty and of public endorsement of the brand, the latter measure being represented by indicators of willingness to try brand extensions and to recommend and defend the brand (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007; Thomson, 2006). To minimize demand effects, these outcome variables were measured first, followed by the antecedent variables, and finally by the measures of identification and attachment (see Table 1 for a full listing of all items, factor loadings, and scale reliabilities).

Table 1. Item Wording, Reliabilities, and Factor Loadings.

Construct	Item Wording	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5
Impression management	I use this brand to communicate who I am to other people.	.861	.738				
	This brand helps me look good in the eyes of people I care about.		.746				
	This brand gives an impression of my personality to others.		.760				
	To what extent does this brand communicate something specific about the person who uses it?		.821				
	How much does this brand symbolize what kind of person uses it?		.813				
Brand history	I have used this brand for some time.	.841		.861			
	This brand has been with me through many experiences.			.839			
	I have gotten used to this brand.			.818			
Felt security	This brand calms me.	.889			.763		
	This brand makes me feel secure and relaxed.				.738		
	When I'm feeling a bit down, I sometimes use this brand to make myself feel better.				.883		
	This brand can help me take my mind off things, if I'm frustrated or anxious.				.851		
Public endorsement	I often talk favorably about this brand to friends and family.	.878				.747	
	I try to get people I know to buy this brand's products.					.750	
	How likely are you to recommend this brand to a friend or a colleague?					.825	
	How likely are you to defend the brand by saying positive things about it?					.812	
Loyalty	I am loyal to this brand.	.909					.732
	When I am in the market for the types of products this brand sells, I almost always choose this brand over others.						.679

Three scales were included to measure the antecedent variables: impression management (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), brand history, and fulfillment of need for security (see Table 1). A principle components factor analysis accounting for 70% of variance, which included all the items used to measure the antecedent and outcome variables, indicated five distinct factors corresponding to the five construct variables measured. In addition to the discriminant validity indicated for these constructs, this analysis argues against common method variance as an alternate explanation for our findings (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Finally, participants rated their identification with and attachment to the company/brand. Three measures were included, two of identification and one of attachment. For identification, we used selected self-brand connection items used by Escalas and Bettman (2005) and identification items used by Einwiller et al. (2006). For attachment, the measure used by Thomson (2006) was included.<sup>1</sup> A principal components factor analysis was conducted on all the items, and items were selected based on a factor loading greater than .4 on a single factor, with those that loaded on multiple factors or did not load on any factors eliminated from the analysis. This resulted in a two-factor solution, accounting for 77% of variance, indicating separate factor for identification and for attachment (see Table 2). Though these variables are moderately correlated ( $r = .50, p < .01$ ), they are statistically separable.

**Table 2.** Item Wording, Reliabilities, and Factor Loadings for Identification and Attachment.

Construct	Item Wording	$\alpha$	1	2
Identification	Being a consumer of this brand is related to my sense of who I am.	.862	.851	
	This brand connects with a part of me that really makes me tick.		.758	
	This brand reflects who I am.		.893	
	I can identify with this brand.		.872	
Attachment	I feel better when I am not away from or without this brand for long periods of time.	.877		.810
	I miss this brand when it is not around.			.846
	If this brand were permanently gone from my life, I'd be upset.			.900
	Losing this brand forever would be distressing to me.			.866

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Overall, the results demonstrate that there is sufficient variation in the sample to justify analysis and to fairly represent a range of consumer brands, both product and corporate, in the marketplace. Participants came up with a wide range of companies and brands. The most frequently chosen were Nike ( $n=52$ ), Apple ( $n=32$ ), Coca-Cola ( $n=27$ ), Lululemon ( $n=14$ ), Abercrombie and Fitch ( $n=11$ ), McDonald's ( $n=10$ ), Lacoste ( $n=10$ ), Sony ( $n=10$ ), and Starbucks ( $n=10$ ). All other brands identified – 105 of them in all, including BMW, Heinz, Dell, Molson, and Whiskas – were chosen by fewer than 10 participants each.

Participants' relationships with these brands also varied widely, as indicated by the measures of identification (Einwiller et al., 2006; Escalas & Bettman, 2005;  $M=3.84$ ,  $SD=1.51$ ) and attachment (Thomson, 2006;  $M=3.81$ ,  $SD=1.64$ ). The distributions of these variables in the sample were normal and clustered around the scale midpoint: both means were statistically indistinguishable from 4.0 on a 7-point scale. Therefore it was deemed appropriate to classify participants into four groups – Low attachment, low identification (Low-Low), Low attachment, high identification (Low-High), High attachment, low identification (High-Low), and High attachment, high identification (High-High) – based on whether they rated their identification and attachment as above or below the midpoint of the respective measures. The  $2 \times 2$  matrix (see Table 3), created thus, reveals a clear correlation between the two relationship indicators; the majority of respondents fall on the diagonal (High-High:  $N=93$ ; Low-Low:  $N=89$ ). At the same time, however, a substantial group of respondents seem to be primarily identified (Low-High:  $N=45$ ) or attached (High-Low:  $N=41$ ), indicating that identification and attachment can also occur independently of each other.

We examined variations in the product categories/industries the respondents reported across these four types of brand relationships (see Table 3) by comparing the incidence of the brands mentioned in each cell to that which would be expected based on the number of participants in each cell (i.e., roughly half the incidence of brands from any given product categories or industries in the off-diagonal cells as compared to the diagonal ones). As initial support for our hypotheses, we found several instructive patterns in the types of brands to which participants reported being attached to, identified with, or both. For instance, the personal hygiene category – which includes brands of cosmetics, toiletries (e.g., soap,

**Table 3.** Brands and Product Categories<sup>a</sup> Organized by Relationship Indicator Groups.

<i>N</i> = 268	Low Attachment	High Attachment
Low identification	<i>n</i> = 89 Brands: Nike (23), Coca-Cola (12), McDonald's (6), Dell (5), Lululemon (5), American Eagle (3), Apple (3), Gap (3), Lacoste (3), Sony (3), Bell (2), Heinz (2), Kraft (2), Molson (2) Product Categories: Apparel (37), Food Service and Packaged Foods (29), Electronics and TeleCom (13), Automobiles (3), Personal Hygiene (1)	<i>n</i> = 41 Brands: Coca-Cola (5), Pepsi (4), Abercrombie & Fitch (2), Apple (2), Gap (2), Hollister (2), McDonald's (2), Tide (2), Tim Horton's (2) Product Categories: <b>Food Service and Packaged Foods (20)</b> , <i>Apparel (6)</i> , Electronics and TeleCom (6), <b>Personal Hygiene (6)</b> , Automobiles (1)
High identification	<i>n</i> = 45 Brands: Nike (10), Apple (4), Abercrombie & Fitch (3), Lacoste (3), Coca-Cola (3), Lululemon (2) Product Categories: <b>Apparel (25)</b> , Electronics and TeleCom (6), <i>Food Service and Packaged Foods – includes Alcohol (6)</i> , <b>Personal Hygiene (6)</b> , Automobiles (1)	<i>n</i> = 91 Brands: Apple (12), Nike (6), Starbucks (6), Coca-Cola (4), Sony (4), Abercrombie & Fitch (3), Guess (3), Lululemon (3), Dove (3), BMW (2), Burton (2), Gap (2), Lacoste (2), MAC (2), McDonald's (2), Mercedes Benz (2), Toyota (2) Product Categories: Apparel (30), Food Service and Packaged Foods – includes Alcohol (23), <b>Electronics and TeleCom (19)</b> , <b>Automobiles (9)</b> , Personal Hygiene (5), <b>Sports (3)</b>

<sup>a</sup>Industries and/or product categories in bold type seem to be disproportionately **overrepresented** in that quadrant, using the Low-Low cell as the baseline point of comparison. Italicized type indicates industries and/or product categories that seem to be disproportionately *underrepresented* in that quadrant.

shampoo), and shaving products – was mentioned only once in the Low-Low condition in comparison to 17 occurrences in the other three cells (Low-High = 6, High-Low = 6, and High-High = 5). This suggests that personal hygiene brands may be likely to inspire brand relationships, possibly

because they can involve intimate experience or personal history (which we predict to engender attachment) and, at the same time, help manage impressions in important social relationships (which we believe leads to identification).

Apparel brands (e.g., Nike, Lululemon) were the most common product category overall at 98 mentions. In the Low attachment-High identification cell, brands in the apparel industry seem to be overrepresented at 25 mentions (out of 45 participants, or 56%); in comparison to the High-Low cell, where apparel brands seem to be underrepresented at only 6 mentions (out of 41 participants, or 15%). Together these numbers suggest that apparel brands are more likely to be associated with identification due to their usefulness in impression management, but less likely to be associated with attachment, due perhaps to the fact that such brands often fall in and out of fashion, precluding the build-up of substantial and meaningful brand history.

The food service and packaged foods category (e.g., Coca-Cola, McDonald's) was almost equally popular (a total of 78 mentions). However, this category was overrepresented in the High attachment-Low identification cell at 20 mentions (i.e., 49%) as compared to the Low-High cell at only 6 mentions (i.e., 13%). These findings are consistent with our contention that attachment is more tied to personal brand history and felt security because food-related brands are not only prime sources of comfort, but also have, unlike fashion brands, long histories.

Finally, the product categories of electronics and telecommunications (e.g., Apple, Dell), automobiles (e.g., Toyota, Mercedes Benz), and sports (e.g., Toronto Maple Leafs, Titleist) were disproportionately represented in the High-High condition relative to all the other conditions. Specifically, sports-related brands were only ever mentioned (3 times) in the High-High cell. Electronics and telecommunication brands were mentioned more in the High-High cell (19 mentions, or 21%) than in any of the other three cells (Low-High: 6 mentions, or 13%; High-Low: 6 mentions, or 15%; Low-Low: 13 mentions, or 15%). The same pattern held for the automobile category (High-High: 9 mentions or 10%; High-Low: 1 mention or 2%; Low-High: 1 mention, or 2%; Low-Low: 3 occurrences, or 3%). In other words, brands in these three product categories seem to be ones consumers both attach to and identify with. This makes some sense given that brands such as Apple, Titleist, and Mercedes Benz are likely to be ones that can be used to manage social impressions, as well as ones with which consumers have a history. Obviously these results are simply illustrative, and so we turn next to our statistical analyses.

*Continuous Data Analysis*

We analyzed the continuous data using a partial least squares (PLS) structural equation modeling (Chin, 1998; Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012) to test the hypothesized relationships, followed by MANOVA to examine further the distinct dynamics underlying the two focal constructs. PLS analysis is a powerful multivariate causal modeling technique for relations between multiple dependent and independent latent construct variables (Iacobucci, 2010). PLS has less restrictive distributional assumptions of latent variables (Barclay, Higgins, & Thompson, 1995) and is considered better suited for theory development where the predictive ability of the model is of primary importance (Fornell & Bookstein, 1982; Nelson, 2004), as in our context. In addition, the magnitudes of the coefficients in PLS are standardized, allowing conclusions to be drawn regarding the relative strength of the relationships between constructs (Chin, 1998). A larger significant path coefficient indicates meaningfully greater influence than another smaller coefficient on any given endogenous variable. This is a standardized indicator, and as such, comparisons indicate the significance of differences in the size of the effects involved. In other words, as compared to any other antecedent variable with a smaller coefficient, a larger PLS coefficient for an antecedent indicates a greater effect of it on the predicted variable (Chin, 1998). These comparisons can be said to be statistically significant, but as with any effect size, the meaningfulness of the difference is based on substantive interpretation.

In preparation for the PLS analysis, confirmatory measurement models were assessed, and these also provided evidence of reliability as well as convergent and discriminant validity in the constructs. Item reliability consistently indicated that greater than 50% of variance in the observed variable is accounted for by the construct: all values of AVE (average variance extracted) for the composite measures are greater than .50, which indicates strong reliability; and  $R^2$  values are all between .30 and .62, indicating that the model accounts for substantial variance in the endogenous constructs. Discriminant validity was also supported in that there are no significant item cross-loadings (i.e., no item loading is greater than its loading on the theorized construct), and the square-root of the average variance (SRAV) extracted for each construct is substantially higher than its corresponding correlation with any other construct (see Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2012). Significance is estimated in PLS by bootstrapping (resampling with replacement; Chin, 1998); here we use 5,000 bootstrap samples in order to have more stable estimates.

Table 4. PLS Path Coefficients.

Path	Path Coefficients	Standard Deviation	t-Value	p-Value
Impression management→Attachment	.136	.095	1.43	.15
Impression management→Identification	.597	.069	8.64	<.01
Brand history→Attachment	.279	.076	3.65	<.01
Brand history→Identification	.211	.077	2.73	<.01
Felt security→Attachment	.473	.088	5.40	<.01
Felt security→Identification	.251	.081	3.10	<.01
Attachment→Public endorsement	.312	.103	3.01	<.01
Attachment→Loyalty	.412	.090	4.60	<.01
Identification→Public endorsement	.374	.101	3.72	<.01
Identification→Loyalty	.197	.103	1.92	.06

The results of the structural path model support our basic predictions regarding the antecedents of identification and attachment (see Table 4). Impression management is a unique antecedent of identification ( $\beta = .60$ ,  $p < .01$ ); in contrast, the path predicting attachment is nonsignificant ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p = .15$ ). Interestingly, both brand history ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and felt security ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $p < .01$ ) are significant antecedents of identification. However, as expected, both have a greater influence on attachment (brand history:  $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ; felt security:  $\beta = .47$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

MANOVA Analysis

To test for differences among the four relationship indicator groups (i.e., classified based on high and low ratings on the two relationship variables as in Table 3), we used a MANOVA followed by Tamhane’s multiple comparisons, which are robust to unequal sample sizes. Impression management, brand history, felt security, public endorsement, and loyalty were included as continuous variables (see Table 5 for means and SD). All four multivariate tests (Wilks’ Lambda = .464, Pillai’s Trace = .590, Hotelling’s Trace = 1.043, and Roy’s Largest Root = .924) suggest that the overall model is significant ( $p < .001$ ). Adjusting for the risk of inflated type I error, given there are five dependent variable tests (critical  $p = .01$ , obtained dividing .05 by 5), the means vary significantly across the four groups (see Table 6).

Results indicate that the antecedent variables vary significantly across levels of identification ( $F(5, 263) = 30.02$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and attachment ( $F(5, 263) = 18.72$ ,  $p < .01$ ); the main effects of identification ( $F(1, 267) > 8.58$ ,  $p < .01$ )

**Table 5.** Group Means<sup>1</sup> (Standard Deviations) for MANOVA.

	Hi Attach/Lo Id ( <i>n</i> = 41)	Hi Id/Lo Attach ( <i>n</i> = 45)	Hi Id/Hi Attach ( <i>n</i> = 93)	Lo Id/Lo Attach ( <i>n</i> = 89)
Impression management	3.24 <sup>a</sup> (1.15)	4.44 <sup>a,b</sup> (1.22)	4.94 <sup>a,b</sup> (.97)	3.24 <sup>b</sup> (1.21)
Brand history	6.08 <sup>a</sup> (.77)	5.69 <sup>a</sup> (1.16)	6.16 (.85)	5.22 <sup>a</sup> (1.33)
Felt security	3.58 <sup>a</sup> (1.37)	3.32 <sup>b</sup> (1.43)	4.73 <sup>a,b</sup> (1.47)	2.64 <sup>a,b</sup> (1.22)
Public endorsement	4.65 <sup>a</sup> (1.28)	4.86 <sup>b</sup> (1.16)	5.56 <sup>a,b</sup> (.88)	4.06 <sup>b</sup> (1.37)
Loyalty	5.59 <sup>a</sup> (1.13)	5.28 <sup>b</sup> (1.42)	5.88 <sup>c</sup> (1.00)	4.35 <sup>a,b,c</sup> (1.75)

<sup>1</sup>Means sharing a superscript *by row* are significantly different at  $p < .05$  through Tamhane's multiple comparisons (see also Table 7).

**Table 6.** Tests of Equality of Group Means.

	Wilks' Lambda	<i>F</i> -Statistic	df1	df2
Impression management	.669	43.562*	3	264
Brand history	.871	13.062*	3	264
Felt security	.709	36.128*	3	264
Loyalty	.815	19.932*	3	264
Public endorsement	.776	25.431*	3	264

\* $p < .001$ .

and attachment ( $F(1, 267) > 6.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were significant for each of the antecedent variables. Interestingly, the interaction between identification and attachment was not significant: neither overall ( $F(5, 263) = 1.02$ ,  $p > .10$ ) nor in the case of any of the individual antecedents ( $F(1, 267) < 1.70$ ,  $p > .10$ ). Next, we examine between-group comparisons to better understand identification and attachment-specific differences in these antecedent variables.

Compared to the mean rating of impression management in the low identification, low attachment group, impression management is greater when identification is higher (i.e., the high identification, low attachment group;  $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not when attachment is higher (i.e., the low identification, high attachment group;  $M_{\text{difference}} = 0.00$ , N.S.). Given this, the greater impression management in the high identification, high attachment group ( $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.70$   $p < .05$ ) can be attributed almost

entirely to the greater identification rather than the greater attachment characterizing this group. In the case of brand history, however, comparisons with the low identification, low attachment group suggest that it increases with increases in attachment (i.e., low identification, high attachment group;  $M_{\text{difference}} = .86$ ,  $p < .001$ ) rather than identification (i.e., the high identification, low attachment group;  $M_{\text{difference}} = .47$ , N.S.). Given this, the greater brand history rating in the high identification, high attachment group ( $M_{\text{difference}} = .94$ ,  $p < .001$ ) can be attributed almost entirely to the greater attachment rather than the greater identification within this group.

Finally, unlike impression management and brand history, in this analysis felt security seems to be tied to both identification and attachment; compared to that in the low identification, low attachment group, felt security is greater in both the high identification, low attachment group ( $M_{\text{difference}} = .68$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and the low identification, high attachment group ( $M_{\text{difference}} = .95$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Interestingly, as with the other antecedents, there seem to be no synergies between attachment and identification; felt security in the high identification, high attachment group ( $M_{\text{difference}} = 2.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ) is approximately the sum of both identification and attachment's individual contributions. Overall, these results are consistent with our PLS analysis; even in situations where both can coexist, identification is more closely tied with impression management, whereas attachment is more closely tied to brand history. Interestingly, felt security seems to span both types of connections; it is tied to both identification and attachment.

### *Outcome Data Analysis*

The PLS analysis indicates that identification and attachment also vary predictably in terms of their relationships to the two outcome variables. While both are related significantly to both public endorsement and loyalty, identification predicts public endorsement ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $p < .01$ ) to a greater extent than does attachment ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Conversely, attachment predicts loyalty ( $\beta = .41$ ,  $p < .01$ ) to a greater extent than does identification ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p = .06$ ). Together with the antecedent findings, these outcome results tell a reasonably coherent story about the relationship between attachment and identification in contexts where they might both co-occur. Specifically, public endorsement is conceptually related to impression management, which is more strongly associated with identification. As well, loyalty stems from a degree of personal history with the brand (and would predict the continuation of such through future behavior), which is consistent with the

antecedents of attachment (Brakus et al., 2009). In sum, identification seems to emanate from and serve more social goals whereas attachment is more personal, both in antecedents and outcomes.

The results of the MANOVA and between-group comparisons shed further light on these behavioral outcomes as they relate to identification and attachment (see Tables 5–7). There is a main effect of identification on both loyalty and public endorsement ( $F(1, 267) > 11.04, p < .01$ ). On the other hand, the main effect of attachment is significant for loyalty ( $F(1, 267) = 35.55, p < .01$ ), but not public endorsement ( $F(1, 267) = 1.03, p > .10$ ). Again, as in the case of the antecedent variables, the interactions between identification and attachment in predicting these outcomes are not significant ( $F(1, 267) < 1.49, p > .10$ ).

Tamhane's multiple comparison tests of the mean differences between groups help shed further light on the effects. Compared to the low identification, low attachment group, public endorsement behavior increases with increased identification (i.e., the high identification, low attachment group;  $M_{\text{difference}} = .80, p < .05$ ) but does not increase with increased attachment (i.e., the high attachment, low identification group:  $M_{\text{difference}} = -.59, p > .10$ ). Thus, the higher public endorsement behavior in the high identification, high attachment group ( $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.51, p < .001$ ) is most likely due to the greater identification than the greater attachment within this group. In the case of loyalty, both higher identification ( $M_{\text{difference}} = .93, p < .05$ ) and higher attachment ( $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.24, p < .001$ ) are associated with higher levels of loyalty compared to the low identification, low attachment group. Again, there seem to be no synergies between the two in producing even greater loyalty in the high identification, high attachment group ( $M_{\text{difference}} = 1.53, p < .001$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Brands are complex entities. Thus, it is not unreasonable to expect that the bonds consumers form with brands are complex and potentially multidimensional as well. However, while conceptual investigations of these bonds have yielded tremendously useful insights regarding what brands mean to consumers and why consumers connect with them, the bonds themselves continue to be characterized as largely unidimensional. In particular, two rich streams of research have, through largely parallel trajectories, construed the consumer-brand bond as one of either identification or

Table 7. Tamhane’s Multiple Comparisons.

	Comparison <sup>a</sup>	Mean Difference (Standard Error)
Impression management	Hi Id–Lo Id (Lo Att)	1.19 (.22)***
	Lo Id–Hi Id (Hi Att)	–1.70 (.21)***
	Hi Att–Lo Att (Lo Id)	–.00 (.22)
	Lo Att–Hi Att (Hi Id)	–.51 (.21)
	Hi Att/Lo Id–Hi Id/Lo Att	–1.20 (.26)***
	Hi Att/Hi Id–Lo Id/Lo Att	1.70 (.16)***
Brand history	Hi Id–Lo Id (Lo Att)	.47 (.22)
	Lo Id–Hi Id (Hi Att)	–.08 (.15)
	Hi Att–Lo Att (Lo Id)	.86 (.19)***
	Lo Att–Hi Att (Hi Id)	–.47 (.19)
	Hi Att/Lo Id–Hi Id/Lo Att	.39 (.21)
	Hi Att/Hi Id–Lo Id/Lo Att	.94 (.17)***
Felt security	Hi Id–Lo Id (Lo Att)	.68 (.25)**
	Lo Id–Hi Id (Hi Att)	–1.15 (.26)***
	Hi Att–Lo Att (Lo Id)	.94 (.25)**
	Lo Att–Hi Att (Hi Id)	–1.40 (.26)***
	Hi Att/Lo Id–Hi Id/Lo Att	.26 (.30)
	Hi Att/Hi Id–Lo Id/Lo Att	2.09 (.20)***
Public endorsement	Hi Id–Lo Id (Lo Att)	.80 (.23)**
	Lo Id–Hi Id (Hi Att)	–.91 (.22)**
	Hi Att–Lo Att (Lo Id)	–.59 (.25)
	Lo Att–Hi Att (Hi Id)	–.71 (.20)**
	Hi Att/Lo Id–Hi Id/Lo Att	–.21 (.26)
	Hi Att/Hi Id–Lo Id/Lo Att	1.51 (.17)***
Loyalty	Hi Id–Lo Id (Lo Att)	.93 (.28)**
	Lo Id–Hi Id (Hi Att)	–.29 (.20)
	Hi Att–Lo Att (Lo Id)	1.24 (.26)***
	Lo Att–Hi Att (Hi Id)	–.60 (.24)*
	Hi Att/Lo Id–Hi Id/Lo Att	.31 (.28)
	Hi Att/Hi Id–Lo Id/Lo Att	1.53 (.21)***

<sup>a</sup>The comparison specifies the direction and dimension compared: the level of the alternate dimension in parentheses is constant across the comparison. The final two comparisons in each block involve changes in both dimensions, so no dimension can be said to be constant.

\* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

attachment, with attendant insight into not just their unique natures but also their antecedents and consequences. Scant attention, however, has been paid to the possibility that identification and attachment may actually co-characterize a consumer’s bond with a brand, pointing to the need to understand the relationship between the two in such contexts.

In this paper, we draw on the distinct evolutions of the brand identification and attachment literatures to provide evidence for certain key similarities and differences pertaining to these two brand relationship constructs when they are allowed to co-occur. In doing so, this paper makes several conceptual contributions. First, and most fundamentally, we find that when the co-occurrence of identification and attachment is assessed empirically, a substantial portion of consumers who have some connection with a brand are actually both identified *and* attached to it (91/177 or 52%). Interestingly, however, we do not find any evidence of a synergistic effect of identification and attachment on two key outcome variables: consumers' willingness to promote the brand publicly and their loyalty to the brand when it comes to purchase. However, it is entirely conceivable that such synergistic effects do manifest under certain conditions, which would be important for future research to unearth.

Second, we propose and find that identification serves a more social purpose than does attachment, with both stronger ties to consumers' impression management motives, and an integral role in their social parlance involving brands. Attachment, on the other hand, seems to have a more personal flavor, with stronger links to consumers' security motives and their more private behaviors relating to the brand. While the social nature of identification is consistent with prior theorizing about this construct (e.g., Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012 establish the social benefits provided by a brand as a key antecedent of consumer-brand identification; see also Escalas & Bettman, 2005), our study is the first, to the best of our knowledge, to establish it as a distinguishing characteristic of identification relative to attachment. An interesting implication of this difference is the possibility that identification may be more controllable by marketers than attachment. For example, brand managers can choose to align their brand with particularly appealing values, or portray a specific image that they know will appeal to consumers because it is useful in impression management among important reference groups. In comparison, attachment is more idiosyncratic in that it is related to variables that are less under the control of managers, such as a long personal history and feelings of security that might be in part a result of that history. That said, a more precise investigation of the types of managerial actions that might produce identification versus attachment remains an important direction for future research.

Third, and perhaps even more interesting, are the previously unexplored similarities between identification and attachment. While impression management seems to pertain to the sole domain of identification, both brand

history and, to some extent, felt security are tied to identification and attachment alike. This is not entirely surprising in the case of brand history given that any kind of brand relationship is contingent on consumers' history with a brand, something not just research on attachment (e.g., brand prominence in [Park et al., 2010](#)) but also recent research on identification (e.g., memorable brand experiences in [Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012](#)) acknowledges. Felt security, on the other hand, has thus far been relegated to the domain of attachment and its link, albeit weaker, to identification is more of a revelation. Specifically, while identification has typically been posited to stem from higher-level, social identity-related motives (e.g., distinctiveness and prestige; [Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003](#)), our findings points to its potential roots in the more basic needs consumers might have. An interesting possibility, given the more social nature of identification is that its link to felt security is through the relief of social rather than personal anxieties. For instance, an identified-with brand might make consumers "feel secure and relaxed" because it helps them successfully negotiate their social uncertainties. More generally, expanding our social identity-based conceptualization of identification to encompass those consumption-defined or -enhanced aspects of personal identity that are used to self-signal rather than communicate to and with others is likely to produce interesting predictions that build on our arguably rudimentary identification-attachment distinction.

This study represents a first, exploratory step in our understanding of the interplay between attachment and identification in consumers' connections with real brands. Consequently, its numerous limitations point to avenues for fruitful future research. For instance, the correlational nature of our findings beg for more valid confirmations through manipulations of not only the antecedent variables examined in our study but, more generally, other valid ones as well to establish their relative effects on the two focal relationship constructs. In this study we only examined a subset of the potential antecedents and consequences of consumer-brand relationships; investigating a broader set would help better establish the nomological network characterizing the forces at work here. The respondents in our study were restricted to college students, thus limiting the external validity of our findings. Research that expands the sample frame to the general population or specific populations of interest is clearly an important future step.

More generally, a key direction for future research would be to establish the contingencies that determine whether consumers' brand relationships are identification-based, attachment-based, or both. For example, actual

physical interaction with the brand may be more central to attachment, which may be more or less likely based on the precise relationship target. Specifically, because a product brand is more tangible and the consumer is likely to have more opportunity for more immediate and intimate contact with it (e.g., in their family home growing up), attachment may be more likely with product brands than with corporate or service brands. On the other hand, corporate brands may be able to achieve identification more readily because they can convey an intangible image more easily, such as communicating values based on the actions or qualities of individual members of the company (e.g., the charitable actions of the CEO). As well, would a brand that becomes associated with one's friends (vs. one's family) be more likely to lead to identification than to attachment (and vice versa)? Or, would a brand that is positioned based on a statement of values or a commitment to CSR, such as the anti-animal-testing position of The Body Shop, be more likely to lead to identification than attachment (or vice versa)? And might this depend on one or more consumer-specific moderators as well? Finally, an expansion of our empirical context to include yet other conceptualizations of consumer-brand connections, such as brand love (Batra et al., 2012), would, while challenging, help to clarify how these come together as different facets of consumers' undoubtedly complex bonds with brands.

## NOTE

1. The Thomson, Park, and MacInnis (2005) measure of attachment-related emotions was also considered: however, it was found to load on factors independent of all other identification and attachment measures and was eliminated for parsimony. At the time of this study, the Park et al. (2010) brand attachment measure and the Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) CBI measures were not yet available.

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