

Brand Attachment, Trust, and Loyalty Formation: An Integrative Theoretical Examination of Consumer–Brand Relationships in Contemporary Markets

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Abstract

The intensification of competition, the proliferation of brand choices, and the increasing symbolic saturation of consumer markets have elevated the strategic importance of understanding how durable consumer–brand relationships are formed, sustained, and transformed over time (Aaker 2009). Within this context, brand attachment, brand trust, and brand loyalty have emerged as interrelated yet theoretically distinct constructs that together shape the long-term value of brands from a consumer-based perspective (Belaid and Behi 2011; Atulkar 2020). Despite the extensive literature addressing these concepts individually, there remains a fragmented understanding of how they interact dynamically across utilitarian and symbolic consumption contexts, particularly in environments characterized by low involvement, service-dominant logics, and digitally mediated brand encounters (Dhikari 2019; Algharabat et al. 2020). This study develops an integrative theoretical and interpretive framework that synthesizes classical brand equity theory with contemporary relational and affective branding perspectives to examine how brand attachment and brand trust jointly contribute to the formation and stabilization of brand loyalty.

Grounded exclusively in established scholarly literature, this research adopts a qualitative-descriptive methodological orientation, emphasizing analytical reasoning, conceptual triangulation, and interpretive synthesis rather than statistical modeling (Baron and Kenny 1986; Aldás-Manzano 2013). The methodological approach is designed to bridge structural brand equity models with relational paradigms that foreground emotions, narratives, and symbolic meaning-making (Aaker and Aaker 2016; Bagozzi et al. 2017). By systematically analyzing patterns reported across prior empirical studies in retailing, hospitality, services, and consumer goods, the study identifies recurring relational mechanisms through which brand experiences and perceived quality evolve into trust-based attachments and, subsequently, behavioral and attitudinal loyalty (Caruana 2002; Hemsley-Brown and Alnawas 2016).

The findings suggest that brand attachment operates as a pivotal mediating construct that translates functional performance and symbolic resonance into emotionally grounded loyalty, while brand trust functions as a stabilizing force that mitigates perceived risk and reinforces relational continuity over time (Frasquet et al. 2017; Ahmadian et al. 2023). Furthermore, the analysis reveals that contextual factors such as service intensity, experiential richness, and brand authenticity significantly moderate these relationships, underscoring the need for context-sensitive branding strategies (Assiouras et al. 2015; Bahri-Ammari et al. 2016). The study contributes theoretically by offering a holistic relational branding model that integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, and managerially by articulating nuanced implications for building resilient brand relationships in contemporary markets characterized by volatility and consumer skepticism (Berthon et al. 2009; Green et al. 2015).

Keywords: Brand attachment; Brand trust; Brand loyalty; Consumer–brand relationships; Consumer-based brand equity; Relational branding.

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1. Introduction

The evolution of branding theory over the past several decades reflects a gradual but decisive shift from transactional interpretations of consumer behavior toward relational and symbolic understandings of how consumers engage with brands over time (Aaker 2009). Early brand management frameworks were primarily concerned with differentiation, recognition, and recall, emphasizing the role of consistent visual identity and functional superiority in shaping consumer choice (Ampuero and Vila 2006). While these perspectives laid the foundation for modern brand equity theory, they increasingly appeared insufficient to explain enduring consumer loyalty in markets characterized by functional parity and rapid imitation (Berthon et al. 2009). As a result, scholars began to conceptualize brands not merely as identifiers of origin but as repositories of meaning, emotion, and relational value embedded within consumers' everyday lives (Aaker and Aaker 2016).

Within this intellectual trajectory, consumer-based brand equity emerged as a dominant paradigm, emphasizing the differential response that brand knowledge produces in consumer behavior (Aaker 2009). This framework highlighted the importance of brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty as key dimensions through which brands generate value. However, subsequent research revealed that these dimensions are deeply intertwined with affective and relational processes that extend beyond cognitive evaluation, particularly in experiential and service contexts (Edvardsson et al. 2000; Hinson et al. 2011). The recognition that consumers often relate to brands in ways analogous to interpersonal relationships prompted the incorporation of psychological constructs such as attachment, trust, love, and passion into branding scholarship (Belaid and Behi 2011; Bagozzi et al. 2017).

Brand attachment, defined as the emotional bond connecting a consumer to a brand, has been positioned as a central mechanism through which brands acquire

personal relevance and enduring significance (Bairrada et al. 2018). Drawing on attachment theory from psychology, scholars argue that brands can serve as symbolic attachment figures that provide comfort, self-expression, and continuity, particularly in contexts where identity construction is salient (Assiouras et al. 2015). Empirical studies across diverse industries suggest that strong brand attachment is associated with increased resistance to negative information, greater willingness to pay price premiums, and higher levels of advocacy and loyalty (Bahri-Ammari et al. 2016). Nevertheless, debates persist regarding whether attachment alone is sufficient to sustain loyalty, especially in high-risk or service-intensive contexts where trust plays a critical role (Caruana 2002; Fernandes and Solimun 2018).

Brand trust, conceptualized as the consumer's confidence in a brand's reliability and integrity, has been extensively examined within relationship marketing and service quality literature (Atulkar 2020). Trust reduces perceived risk and uncertainty, particularly in intangible offerings where consumers cannot fully evaluate quality prior to consumption (Hemsley-Brown and Alnawas 2016). In multichannel and service-dominant environments, trust has been shown to function as both a direct antecedent of loyalty and an indirect facilitator of deeper emotional bonds with brands (Frasquet et al. 2017). Yet, the precise interplay between trust and attachment remains theoretically underdeveloped, with some scholars suggesting a sequential relationship and others proposing reciprocal or parallel effects (Baron and Kenny 1986; Belaid and Behi 2011).

The literature on brand loyalty further complicates this picture by distinguishing between behavioral loyalty, reflected in repeat purchase patterns, and attitudinal loyalty, characterized by psychological commitment and preference (Caruana 2002). While early studies often equated loyalty with habitual repurchase, later research emphasized the importance of affective commitment and self-brand connection in sustaining loyalty over time (Hemsley-Brown and Alnawas 2016). In low-

involvement product categories, loyalty may arise from inertia rather than attachment, raising questions about the stability and strategic value of such loyalty forms (Dhikari 2019). Conversely, in high-involvement or symbolic categories, loyalty is often deeply intertwined with identity and emotion, rendering it more resilient but also more complex to manage (Bagozzi et al. 2017).

Despite the richness of existing research, several gaps remain evident. First, much of the literature examines brand attachment, trust, and loyalty in isolation or within narrowly defined empirical models, limiting the development of integrative theoretical perspectives (Ahmadian et al. 2023). Second, there is insufficient attention to the contextual contingencies that shape these relationships, such as industry characteristics, consumption motives, and the balance between utilitarian and symbolic brand qualities (Bairrada et al. 2018). Third, methodological fragmentation has led to inconsistent findings regarding mediation and moderation effects, partly due to variations in measurement invariance and analytical approaches (Aldás-Manzano 2013; Baron and Kenny 1986).

In response to these limitations, the present study seeks to develop a comprehensive, literature-grounded analysis of how brand attachment and brand trust jointly contribute to the formation of brand loyalty across contemporary consumption contexts. Rather than proposing new empirical data, the study synthesizes and interprets existing findings through a coherent relational branding lens, emphasizing theoretical integration and critical discussion (Green et al. 2015; Algharabat et al. 2020). By doing so, it aims to advance scholarly understanding of consumer-brand relationships while offering nuanced insights for practitioners seeking to cultivate sustainable brand equity in increasingly complex markets (Aaker 2009; Berthon et al. 2009).

2. Methodology

The methodological orientation of this research is rooted in qualitative-descriptive and interpretive scholarship, reflecting the study's objective of theoretical integration rather than empirical generalization (Baron and Kenny 1986). Given the extensive and conceptually rich body of literature on brand attachment, trust, and loyalty, a text-based analytical methodology is particularly appropriate for elucidating underlying mechanisms, resolving conceptual ambiguities, and articulating nuanced relationships among constructs (Aldás-Manzano 2013).

This approach aligns with prior branding research that emphasizes theory development and synthesis as essential complements to quantitative modeling (Aaker 2009; Aaker and Aaker 2016).

The study relies exclusively on peer-reviewed academic sources and authoritative institutional materials provided in the reference list, ensuring conceptual consistency and scholarly rigor (Algharabat et al. 2020). Each source was examined for its theoretical assumptions, contextual focus, and reported relationships among key branding constructs. Rather than aggregating findings through meta-analytic techniques, the analysis adopts a comparative interpretive strategy, identifying recurring themes, convergent arguments, and points of contention across studies (Green et al. 2015). This strategy allows for the exploration of relational dynamics that may be obscured by purely statistical aggregation, particularly in areas where constructs are operationalized differently across contexts (Ahmadian et al. 2023).

A central methodological consideration involves the treatment of mediation and moderation effects, which have been widely discussed but inconsistently applied in branding research (Baron and Kenny 1986). Instead of re-estimating statistical models, the study interprets reported mediation patterns conceptually, examining how authors theorize the intervening roles of attachment and trust between antecedents such as perceived quality, brand experience, and brand loyalty (Fernandes and Solimun 2018). This interpretive mediation analysis facilitates a deeper understanding of causal logic while avoiding the limitations associated with cross-sectional survey designs (Hemsley-Brown and Alnawas 2016).

The methodological framework also acknowledges the importance of contextual sensitivity, recognizing that branding phenomena manifest differently across product categories, service settings, and cultural environments (Awang et al. 2008). By juxtaposing studies from retailing, hospitality, food, and service industries, the analysis highlights both universal relational mechanisms and context-specific variations (Bahri-Ammari et al. 2016; Assiouras et al. 2015). This comparative perspective enhances the robustness of theoretical conclusions while respecting the diversity of consumption experiences documented in the literature (Berthon et al. 2009).

Despite its strengths, the methodology is subject to inherent limitations. The exclusive reliance on secondary

literature restricts the ability to assess emergent phenomena or rapidly evolving digital branding practices beyond those already documented (Algharabat et al. 2020). Additionally, interpretive synthesis may introduce subjective bias, as theoretical integration depends on the researcher's judgment in reconciling divergent findings (Aaker 2009). These limitations are addressed through transparent citation practices, systematic comparison of sources, and explicit acknowledgment of alternative interpretations where relevant (Aldás-Manzano 2013).

3. Results

The interpretive analysis of the literature reveals several consistent patterns regarding the relationships among brand attachment, brand trust, and brand loyalty. Across diverse consumption contexts, brand attachment emerges as a critical emotional mechanism that deepens consumer commitment beyond functional satisfaction, transforming brands into personally meaningful entities (Belaid and Behi 2011). Studies consistently report that consumers who experience strong emotional bonds with brands demonstrate higher levels of attitudinal loyalty, characterized by preference, advocacy, and resistance to competitive offerings (Bairrada et al. 2018).

Brand trust is repeatedly identified as a foundational antecedent of both attachment and loyalty, particularly in service-dominant contexts where uncertainty and perceived risk are salient (Atulkar 2020). Empirical findings suggest that trust enhances consumers' willingness to rely on a brand, thereby facilitating repeated interactions that enable emotional attachment to develop over time (Frasquet et al. 2017). In this sense, trust functions not only as a direct predictor of loyalty but also as an enabling condition for deeper relational bonds (Caruana 2002).

The literature further indicates that the relative importance of attachment and trust varies across consumption contexts. In symbolic and experiential categories, such as luxury services and hospitality, attachment plays a more pronounced role in shaping loyalty outcomes, reflecting the centrality of identity expression and emotional resonance (Bahri-Ammari et al. 2016; Hemsley-Brown and Alnawas 2016). Conversely, in utilitarian and low-involvement categories, trust and perceived quality exert stronger influences on loyalty, with attachment playing a more

limited or indirect role (Dhikari 2019; Belaid and Behi 2011).

Another recurring result concerns the mediating role of attachment between brand-related perceptions and loyalty outcomes. Multiple studies report that brand experience, perceived value, and brand image influence loyalty primarily through their impact on attachment, rather than exerting strong direct effects (Ahmadian et al. 2023; Assiouras et al. 2015). This pattern underscores the centrality of emotional bonds in translating cognitive evaluations into enduring behavioral intentions (Bagozzi et al. 2017).

4. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing scholarly debates by reinforcing the view that brand loyalty is best understood as a multidimensional relational outcome shaped by the interplay of cognitive, affective, and trust-based mechanisms (Aaker 2009). The consistent association between brand attachment and attitudinal loyalty supports relational branding theories that conceptualize consumers as active meaning-makers rather than passive evaluators of functional attributes (Aaker and Aaker 2016). At the same time, the stabilizing role of trust highlights the enduring relevance of relationship marketing principles in mitigating risk and uncertainty, particularly in service contexts (Caruana 2002).

Scholarly disagreements regarding the sequencing of trust and attachment can be reconciled by adopting a dynamic relational perspective. Rather than viewing trust and attachment as strictly antecedent or consequent constructs, the literature suggests a recursive relationship in which trust facilitates attachment formation, while attachment reinforces trust through repeated positive experiences (Frasquet et al. 2017; Fernandes and Solimun 2018). This interpretation aligns with psychological theories of attachment, which emphasize ongoing interaction and reinforcement as foundations of stable bonds (Belaid and Behi 2011).

The discussion also highlights the importance of contextual moderation. The stronger influence of attachment in symbolic categories underscores the need for brand managers to invest in storytelling, authenticity, and experiential design as means of fostering emotional resonance (Assiouras et al. 2015; Berthon et al. 2009). In contrast, the prominence of trust in utilitarian contexts

suggests that consistency, reliability, and service quality remain indispensable foundations of loyalty (Atulkar 2020; Hinson et al. 2011).

Limitations identified in the literature, including measurement invariance issues and cross-sectional designs, point to opportunities for future research to adopt longitudinal and mixed-method approaches that capture the evolution of consumer–brand relationships over time (Aldás-Manzano 2013). Further exploration of digital and social media environments is also warranted, as online engagement introduces new pathways through which trust and attachment are constructed and contested (Algharabat et al. 2020; Ardiansyah and Sarwoko 2020).

Extended Theoretical Implications and Conceptual Integration

The cumulative insights derived from the analysis of brand attachment, brand trust, and brand loyalty invite a broader theoretical integration that transcends linear causal modeling and instead embraces a relational systems perspective on consumer–brand interactions (Aaker 2009). Traditional branding frameworks often assume a unidirectional flow from brand-related stimuli to consumer responses, yet the convergence of relational, affective, and experiential theories suggests that consumer–brand relationships function as evolving systems characterized by feedback loops, symbolic reinforcement, and temporal depth (Belaïd and Behi 2011). From this standpoint, brand attachment and trust are not merely intermediate variables but structural pillars that sustain the continuity of brand meaning across consumption episodes, social contexts, and life stages (Bagozzi et al. 2017).

A central theoretical implication emerging from this integrative view concerns the reconceptualization of brand equity as a relational asset rather than a static stock of associations (Aaker 2009). While early equity models emphasized awareness, perceived quality, and loyalty as separable dimensions, subsequent research indicates that emotional attachment and trust fundamentally reshape how these dimensions interact and endure over time (Bairrada et al. 2018). Attachment intensifies the subjective salience of brand associations, rendering them more resistant to competitive interference, while trust stabilizes these associations by reducing cognitive dissonance and perceived risk (Atulkar 2020). Together, they transform brand equity into a relational memory structure embedded in consumers' identity narratives

rather than a set of evaluative beliefs alone (Aaker and Aaker 2016).

This relational reconceptualization also contributes to ongoing debates regarding the distinction between behavioral and attitudinal loyalty (Caruana 2002). Behavioral loyalty, often observed in repeat purchase data, may reflect habit or convenience rather than genuine commitment, particularly in low-involvement categories (Dhikari 2019). However, when loyalty is grounded in attachment and trust, it acquires an attitudinal dimension characterized by emotional preference, psychological ownership, and moral obligation toward the brand (Hemsley-Brown and Alnawas 2016). This distinction has profound theoretical implications, as it suggests that not all loyalty is equally valuable or stable, and that relational loyalty is more likely to generate long-term brand resilience (Frasquet et al. 2017).

The integration of attachment theory into branding scholarship further enriches understanding of how consumers use brands as symbolic resources for self-construction and emotional regulation (Assiouras et al. 2015). Brands that succeed in fostering attachment often function as extensions of the self, enabling consumers to express identity, maintain continuity, and navigate social belonging (Bagozzi et al. 2017). This symbolic function is particularly salient in experiential and service-dominant contexts, where the intangible nature of offerings amplifies the role of emotions and meaning-making (Edvardsson et al. 2000). Consequently, attachment-based loyalty cannot be fully explained through rational choice models, underscoring the need for interdisciplinary theoretical borrowing from psychology and sociology (Belaïd and Behi 2011).

Brand trust, in contrast, aligns more closely with theories of risk reduction and relational exchange, particularly within service marketing literature (Caruana 2002). Trust operates as a cognitive-emotional hybrid construct, combining beliefs about reliability with affective expectations of benevolence and integrity (Atulkar 2020). The theoretical integration of trust and attachment reveals that while trust may initially precede attachment by enabling repeated interactions, attachment subsequently reinforces trust through emotional commitment and selective information processing (Frasquet et al. 2017). This reciprocal relationship challenges simplistic mediation models and supports

dynamic, cyclical conceptualizations of consumer–brand relationships (Baron and Kenny 1986).

Theoretical integration also necessitates consideration of contextual contingencies that shape the relative salience of attachment and trust (Awang et al. 2008). In utilitarian and low-involvement categories, functional performance and consistency dominate consumer evaluations, rendering trust a primary driver of loyalty (Dhikari 2019). Conversely, in symbolic, experiential, or luxury contexts, attachment assumes greater prominence as consumers seek emotional resonance and self-expression through brands (Berthon et al. 2009; Bahri-Ammari et al. 2016). This contextual differentiation underscores the inadequacy of universal branding models and highlights the importance of situational and category-specific theorizing (Bairrada et al. 2018).

Another critical theoretical implication concerns the role of authenticity and narrative coherence in sustaining attachment-based loyalty (Assiouras et al. 2015). Brands that consistently communicate authentic values and coherent stories are more likely to be perceived as trustworthy and emotionally engaging, thereby strengthening attachment (Aaker and Aaker 2016). Narrative-based branding theories suggest that consumers evaluate brands not only on performance but on their perceived moral and symbolic integrity, which influences trust judgments and attachment intensity (Berthon et al. 2009). This narrative perspective integrates cognitive, affective, and moral dimensions of consumer–brand relationships, offering a more holistic theoretical framework (Bagozzi et al. 2017).

The growing prominence of social and digital media environments further extends the theoretical implications of attachment and trust (Algharabat et al. 2020). In these contexts, consumers engage with brands through interactive, socially visible platforms that amplify emotional expression and relational signaling (Ardiansyah and Sarwoko 2020). Trust becomes increasingly contingent on transparency, responsiveness, and peer validation, while attachment is reinforced through participatory experiences and co-created meanings (Hinson et al. 2011). This evolution challenges traditional firm-controlled branding models and calls for relational theories that account for distributed agency and networked trust (Green et al. 2015).

The integration of sustainability and ethical orientation into branding theory also intersects with attachment and

trust (Green et al. 2015). Consumers increasingly evaluate brands based on environmental and social responsibility, which influences trust perceptions and emotional alignment (Awang et al. 2008). Brands perceived as ethically authentic are more likely to elicit attachment, as they resonate with consumers' values and moral identities (Assiouras et al. 2015). This alignment reinforces loyalty not merely as a consumption preference but as a value-consistent choice, expanding the theoretical scope of brand loyalty beyond economic rationality (Aaker 2009).

From a methodological-theoretical standpoint, the integration of attachment and trust highlights limitations in prevailing measurement approaches (Aldás-Manzano 2013). Variations in scale operationalization and cultural interpretation complicate cross-study comparisons, raising concerns about construct equivalence and theoretical generalizability (Baron and Kenny 1986). These challenges suggest that future theoretical development must be accompanied by greater methodological rigor and reflexivity, particularly in cross-cultural branding research (Awang et al. 2008). Such efforts would enhance the cumulative validity of relational branding theories (Ahmadian et al. 2023).

Finally, the extended theoretical integration presented here underscores the necessity of viewing consumer–brand relationships as evolving narratives rather than static outcomes (Aaker and Aaker 2016). Attachment, trust, and loyalty are not endpoints but processes that unfold through repeated interactions, symbolic reinforcement, and contextual adaptation (Belaid and Behi 2011). This processual perspective aligns branding theory with contemporary views of consumption as an ongoing project of identity and meaning-making, offering a richer and more resilient foundation for future scholarship (Bagozzi et al. 2017).

5. Conclusion

This study advances branding scholarship by offering an integrative theoretical examination of brand attachment, trust, and loyalty grounded exclusively in established literature. By synthesizing relational, affective, and cognitive perspectives, the research demonstrates that sustainable brand loyalty emerges from the dynamic interplay of emotional bonds and trust-based confidence. The findings underscore the necessity of context-sensitive branding strategies and provide a foundation for future theoretical and empirical inquiry into the evolving

nature of consumer–brand relationships (Aaker 2009; Bagozzi et al. 2017).

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