

Exploring Brand Attachment in Conjunction with Attachment Styles and Need to Belong

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Abstract

This paper considered several constructs from both the marketing and psychology areas - brand attachment, attachment theory, and need-to-belong. Attachment theory, in turn, breaks down into secure and insecure attachments, and the latter, in turn, breaks down into anxious attachment and avoidant attachment. The core question addressed is discovering the relationship among these constructs. We developed a questionnaire using established scales of these constructs and took a survey in which a responder picked a brand and indicated his/her attachment to the brand; the other constructs were also measured through this questionnaire. The results indicated that there is a relationship among selected constructs developed for the psychology field, but that no relationship was able to be established between the marketing-area-developed construct of brand attachment and the plausibly related variety of psychology-area-developed constructs.

Keywords : brand attachment, need to belong, attachment theory, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment

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Businesses are concerned with brand loyalty, and therefore, brand attachment, in order to increase profits. Brand attachment has been studied in the marketing literature and is based upon the idea that consumers develop relationships with brands and, therefore, develop attachments to brands. This article explores some ideas of what could potentially determine the basis behind different brand attachments. If businesses can utilize the reasons behind different brand - attachment strengths, there is a possibility to further develop the brand attachments by utilizing the reasons behind the attachments.

One theory that may shed light on this emotional bond to brands is *attachment theory* from the psychology literature. Attachment theory is a conceptual framework that looks at how people form interpersonal relationships, and why people engage or disengage in close relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Although brand attachment and attachment *style* would seem to be theoretically related, no research has examined directly whether these constructs are actually correlated with (i.e., related to) each other. Further understanding of this relationship could be an important contribution to the marketing literature. In addition, *need to belong* (NTB) has been noted to potentially be a moderator of interpersonal behavior (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013), but has yet to be studied in connection with brand relationships and attachment theory.

This research will explore the relationships between brand attachment and (the two) insecure attachment styles, along with the NTB. Additionally, this research will explore the effects of insecure attachment using need to belong as a moderator to understand the underlying features of brand attachment.

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Literature Review

Consumers interact with thousands of brands throughout their lives, and yet, they develop strong emotional attachments only to a few of these brands. Brand attachment is a construct that describes the strength of the bond that connects a consumer with a brand (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). It is a concept that is being studied more frequently in the marketing literature. The more a consumer is attached to a brand, the more likely he/she is to stay with the brand (Park et al., 2010). Studies on brand attachment have shown that brand attachment is positively associated with brand loyalty and willingness to pay a price premium (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). The concept of brand attachment evolved from the theory in psychology on attachment styles (Bowlby, 1982).

Bowlby developed attachment theory by observing infants' reactions to primary-care givers (Bowlby, 1955, 1982). Individuals develop schemas and styles of attachment that persist throughout their lives (Bowlby, 1982). There are three main attachment styles developed by Ainsworth and colleagues (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). These three attachment styles are *secure*, *anxious*, and *avoidant* styles, which are the “working models” of the self, one's relationships and relationship partners. Avoidant attachment and anxious attachment are considered *insecure* attachments.

An insecure attachment style of anxious attachment is developed from an inadequately-available or inadequately-responsive attachment figure. In this case, the attachment figure is sometimes available/responsive and sometimes not. Thus, in seeking closeness to the attachment figure, the individual sometimes receives reinforcement and sometimes does not. The individual then must be more demanding, to force the attachment figure's attention, love, and support. This can create emotional distress and relationship conflict (Bowlby, 1982). An avoidant attachment style is developed when the attachment figure is very often unavailable and/or rejecting. The individual then learns to suppress or hide his/her needs. In the long run, this individual usually avoids having to rely on others.

A secure attachment is developed when the primary attachment figure is available, responsive, and sensitive to an individual's needs. These connections in times of need are key in determining if the attachment style of the individual will be secure (Bowlby, 1955). Individuals who are securely attached believe that connections with others will be rewarding, trust others in time of need, and perceive the world as generally safe. Low levels of anxious and avoidant attachment are often seen as a proxy for secure attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

Attachment style was primed (not measured) in a laboratory study by Swaminathan, Stilley, and Ahluwalia (2009). Results indicated that priming anxious and avoidant attachment styles moderated the influence of brand personality on outcomes, such as intent to purchase. Ahmad and Thyagaraj (2015) found that brand attachment was one factor having an indirect effect on the influence of brand personality on brand equity. In another laboratory study with college students, anxious and avoidant attachment styles negatively impacted the participants' perceptions of reciprocity (Thomson & Johnson, 2006). Yousaf, Arora, and Gupta (2015) found that emotional brand attachment was related to customer satisfaction. Emotional attachment to brands was also studied by Atulkar and Kesari (2016). They found that the customer shopping experience was positively influenced by emotional attachment (among other things). In their study, the emotional attachment was not to a specific brand, but, rather, to the hypermarket where the consumer was shopping, although the hypermarket could be viewed as a “brand.” In essence, those with anxious and avoidant attachments were less likely to feel that the brand gave them as much as they gave to it. Further, individuals who exhibited an avoidant attachment style were more likely to see the brand as focusing on financial motives. Paulssen (2009) found that an avoidant attachment style influenced the satisfaction, trust, and repurchase intent of consumers. In another study, it was found that individuals with low levels of anxious and avoidant attachment perceived a service firm and their employees more positively in relation to satisfaction, trust, and affective commitment than did those who exhibited anxious or avoidant attachment style.

Mende, Bolton, and Bitner (2013) found that attachment styles predicted consumer preferences for closeness,

which, in turn, influenced loyalty intentions. Cho and White (2013) found that highly avoidant people, who tend to be detached in their personal relationships, formed stronger attachments with exclusive brands than do consumers who are low in avoidance; however, no formal correlation values were provided to quantify the relationship.

Insecure attachment styles have also been found to be related to the *need to belong* (NTB). Baumeister and Leary (1995) noted that people possess a need to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of interpersonal relationships. People live with others, work with others, and often simply enjoy being with others. In other words, individuals desire to belong in social groups and to be accepted by others. However, the strength of motivation for obtaining and maintaining interpersonal relationships may differ among individuals (Leary et al., 2013). Individuals with a higher NTB have been found to have greater cooperation when working in groups (DeCremer & Leonardelli, 2003) and are more likely to perceive social situations in ways that maintain their sense of belonging (e.g., ignoring queues of discrimination against them) (Carvallo & Pelham, 2006). In fact, it has been suggested that the “desire for acceptance and belonging moderates interpersonal behavior in important ways” (Leary et al., 2013, p. 610). Chen, Hewitt, and Flett (2015) found a mediating effect of need to belong on the relationships between insecure attachment and interpersonal perfectionism.

Insecurely attached individuals have persistently unmet needs for belonging and acceptance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Even those with the avoidant attachment, or those who claim to be comfortable with no close relationships, have been found to have a fundamental desire to belong (Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006). Thomson, Whelan, and Johnson (2015) found that “fearful” consumers, those high on both attachment avoidance attachment anxiety, are most likely to complain about brands and obsess about harming the brand. However, again, no formal correlations values were examined.

Research Questions - Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, six hypotheses have been proposed :

- ↗ **H₁** : Brand attachment is positively related to anxious attachment style.
- ↗ **H₂** : Brand attachment is positively related to avoidant attachment style.
- ↗ **H₃** : Brand attachment is positively related to NTB.
- ↗ **H₄** : NTB is positively related to anxious attachment style.
- ↗ **H₅** : NTB is positively related to avoidant attachment style.
- ↗ **H₆** : There will be a significant (*F*) test of the overall model in multiple regression with dependent variable, *Y*= brand attachment, and the five independent variables :

- ↗ Anxious attachment
- ↗ Avoidant attachment
- ↗ NTB
- ↗ Interaction of NTB and anxious attachment
- ↗ Interaction of NTB and avoidant attachment

Methodology

(1) Participants : A survey was conducted in November 2016 through Amazon's MTurk. The respondents were required to have a 95% task approval rate. This means that for the tasks they complete, they must be approved 95% of the time. The respondents were limited to U.S. residents. This limits the inferences that can be made to only that

group, but it is a very large group, and helps to increase the likelihood that the respondents understood the survey's questions.

There were 100 respondents who answered the survey. However, one response was removed because the results were suspicious. The respondent answered 10 questions in a row with the same response. Some of these questions were reverse-scaled, so it seemed clear that the respondent was not accurately responding to the questions. Therefore, 99 responses were analyzed in this study.

(2) Measures : The survey consisted of several different sets of questions in order to measure attachment style, brand attachment, and need to belong. The scale to measure brand attachment was developed by Thomson et al. (2005). The scale asked the respondents to “Identify a brand to which you are strongly emotionally attached.” The respondents then identified the level to which 10 different adjectives described the strength of feelings the respondent had for the brand. Some of these adjectives were : affectionate, friendly, loved, bonded, among others (Thomson et al., 2005). For each adjective, there was a 7-point scale ranging from “*not at all*” to “*very well*” . The 10 values were averaged to measure the level of brand attachment the respondent had for the brand he/she chose.

The scale to measure attachment styles was developed by Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) and consisted of 36 questions in what they referred to as an *Experiences in Close Relationships* Questionnaire (ECR). This scale identifies the two types of insecure attachments, anxious and avoidant. Securely attached individuals have been shown to score low on both the anxious and avoidant scales. This scale asked respondents, “Select your level of agreement with each of the following statements.” This scale is a 7-point scale and ranges from “*strongly agree*” to “*strongly disagree*.” An example of a question measuring *anxious attachment* is : “I worry about being abandoned.” An example of a question measuring *avoidant attachment* is “Just when my partner starts to get close to me, I find myself pulling away” (Brennan et al., 1998).

The need to belong (NTB) scale was developed by Leary et al. (2012). It consisted of 10 statements to which the respondent was asked to “Please indicate the degree to which each statement is true or characteristic of you.” This scale is a 5-point scale and ranged from “*not at all*” to “*extremely*” . Some examples of the statements include, “If other people don't seem to accept me, I don't let it bother me” and “I do not like being alone.”

Analysis and Discussion of Results

The first analysis performed was to determine descriptive statistics for the variables included in the hypotheses. These are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Relevant Variables

	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Brand Attachment	99	1.00	7.00	4.91	1.18
Avoidant	99	1.00	7.00	2.67	1.29
Anxious	99	1.00	7.00	2.93	1.21
Need to Belong-NTB	99	1.00	5.00	2.54	1.69
NTB*Avoidant	99	1.00	28.72	7.11	4.66
NTB*Anxious	99	1.00	22.98	8.04	4.80
Valid <i>N</i> (Listwise)	99				

Recall that the scale for the first three variables in Table 1 has range 1 - 7, and the scale for the NTB has range 1 - 5. We constructed the interaction variables (between NTB and avoidant, and NTB and anxious, in the traditional way,

Table 2. Regression-Analysis Results between Brand Attachment and Anxious Attachment Style

Model Summary				
Model	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> Square	Adjusted <i>R</i> Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.101 ^a	.010	.000	1.17585

a. Predictors: (Constant), Anxious

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1.391	1	1.391	1.006	.318 ^b
	Residual	134.114	97	1.383		
	Total	135.505	98			

a. Dependent Variable: BrandAttachment

b. Predictors: (Constant), Anxious

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.622	.312		14.815	.000
	Anxious	.099	.098	.101	1.003	.318

a. Dependent Variable: BrandAttachment

by multiplying the two variables together. The possible minimum and maximum value for each interaction variable is 1 - 35 (= 5 x 7). The next analysis to be performed is a set of regression analyses to test the six aforementioned hypotheses.

🔗 **H₁: Brand attachment is positively related to anxious attachment style.**

The Table 2 shows the results of a simple regression analysis with dependent variable : brand attachment and independent variable: anxious attachment style. As can be seen from the Table 2, the results are not significant ($p = .318$) and do not support H₁. This indicates that we cannot conclude any (linear) relationship (positive or not) between level of brand attachment, a scale developed in the marketing literature, and the level of anxious attachment, a scale developed in the psychology literature.

🔗 **H₂: Brand attachment is positively related to avoidant attachment style.**

The Table 3 shows the results of a simple regression analysis with dependent variable : brand attachment and independent variable: avoidant attachment style. As can be seen, the results concerning avoidant attachment are very similar to those for anxious attachment. The results are not significant ($p = .804$) and do not support H₂. This indicates that we cannot conclude any (linear) relationship (positive or not) between level of brand attachment, a scale developed in the marketing literature, and the level of avoidant attachment, a scale developed in the psychology literature.

🔗 **H₃: Brand attachment is positively related to NTB.**

The Table 4 shows the results of a simple regression analysis with dependent variable : Brand attachment, and independent variable : need to belong (NTB).

Table 3. Regression-Analysis Results between Brand Attachment and Avoidant Attachment Style

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.025 ^a	.001	-.010	1.18156

a. Predictors: (Constant), Avoidant

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.086	1	.086	.062	.804 ^b
	Residual	135.419	97	1.396		
	Total	135.505	98			

a. Dependent Variable: BrandAttachment

b. Predictors: (Constant), Avoidant

		Coefficients ^a				
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.974	.274		18.155	.000
	Avoidant	-.023	.093	-.025	-.249	.804

a. Dependent Variable: BrandAttachment

Table 4. Regression-Analysis Results between Brand Attachment and Need to Belong (NTB)

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.030 ^a	.001	-.009	1.18141

a. Predictors: (Constant), NeedToBelong

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.119	1	.119	.085	.771 ^b
	Residual	135.386	97	1.396		
	Total	135.505	98			

a. Dependent Variable: BrandAttachment

b. Predictors: (Constant), NeedToBelong

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.803	.392		12.243	.000
	NeedToBelong	.043	.146	.030	.292	.771

a. Dependent Variable: BrandAttachment

More or less, we see the “same story” once again (Table 4). As can be seen, the results are not significant ($p = .771$) and do not support H_3 . This indicates that we cannot conclude any (linear) relationship (positive or not) between level of brand attachment, a scale developed in the marketing literature, and need to belong (NTB), a scale developed in the psychology literature.

Table 5. Regression-Analysis Results between NTB and Anxious Attachment Style

Model Summary				
Model	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> Square	Adjusted <i>R</i> Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.522 ^a	.273	.265	.70243

a. Predictors: (Constant), Anxious

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	17.956	1	17.956	36.393	.000 ^b
	Residual	47.860	97	.493		
	Total	65.817	98			

a. Dependent Variable: NeedToBelong

b. Predictors: (Constant), Anxious

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.527	.186		8.192	.000
	Anxious	.355	.059	.522	6.033	.000

a. Dependent Variable: NeedToBelong

✎ **H₄: NTB is positively related to anxious attachment style.**

The Table 5 shows the results of a simple regression analysis with dependent variable: NTB and independent variable: anxious attachment style. As Table 5 indicates, H₄ is supported ; the results are significant, with *p* - value = .000 (rounded to 3 digits). The coefficient of the regression line is positive : .355. The correlation is .522, and *R*-sq = .273. Our data indicates that we can reject the hypothesis of no linear relationship between NTB and anxious attachment, and thus, conclude that there is a positive linear relationship between NTB and anxious attachment, both scales developed in the psychology literature.

✎ **H₅: NTB is positively related to avoidant attachment style.**

The Table 6 shows the results of a simple regression analysis with dependent variable: NTB and independent variable: anxious attachment style. As the Table 6 indicates, H₅ is supported, the results are significant, with *p* - value = .013. The coefficient of the regression line is positive : .158. The correlation is .249, and *R*-sq = .062. Our data indicates that we can reject the hypothesis of no linear relationship between NTB and avoidant attachment, and thus, conclude that there is a positive linear relationship between NTB and avoidant attachment, both scales developed in the psychology literature. The relationship is not as strong as the one between NTB and anxious attachment, but is still highly significant.

✎ **H₆:** There will be a significant (*F*) test of the overall model in multiple regression with dependent variable, *Y*= brand attachment, and the five independent variables :

- ✎ Anxious attachment,
- ✎ Avoidant attachment,
- ✎ NTB,
- ✎ Interaction of NTB and anxious attachment,

Table 6. Regression - Analysis Results between NTB and Avoidant Attachment Style

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.249 ^a	.062	.053	.79767

a. Predictors: (Constant), Avoidant

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4.097	1	4.097	6.439	.013 ^b
	Residual	61.719	97	.636		
	Total	65.817	98			

a. Dependent Variable: NeedToBelong

b. Predictors: (Constant), Avoidant

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.145	.185		11.597	.000
	Avoidant	.158	.062	.249	2.538	.013

a. Dependent Variable: NeedToBelong

Table 7. Regression - Analysis Results between Brand Attachment and Five Independent Variables

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.140 ^a	.020	-.033	1.19523

a. Predictors: (Constant), NTBAvoidant, Anxious, NeedToBelong, Avoidant, NTBAnxious

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2.649	5	.530	.371	.867 ^b
	Residual	132.856	93	1.429		
	Total	135.505	98			

a. Dependent Variable: BrandAttachment

b. Predictors: (Constant), NTBAvoidant, Anxious, NeedToBelong, Avoidant, NTBAnxious

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	5.174	1.002		5.163	.000
	Avoidant	-.154	.312	-.169	-.493	.623
	Anxious	.085	.372	.087	.228	.821
	NeedToBelong	-.205	.426	-.143	-.482	.631
	NTBAnxious	.030	.145	.124	.210	.834
	NTBAvoidant	.026	.111	.102	.232	.817

a. Dependent Variable: BrandAttachment

The Table 7 shows the results of a multiple regression analysis with dependent variable: brand attachment and the aforementioned independent variables. As we can infer from the Table 7, the p -value of the F -test is not significant ($p = .867$) ; indeed, all five variables combined yield a R -square value of only .02 (with indeed, a negative adjusted- R -square value), so that H_6 is not supported. This is no major surprise, given the earlier results of the simple regressions. However, there was a possibility that the two interaction variables (potential moderators of the main effects) could have increased the R -square substantially, but that clearly is not the case.

Conclusion and Implications

This study investigated the relationship among brand attachment, an individual's attachment style, as well as his/her need to belong. Contrary to expectations, brand attachment is not related to anxious attachment style or to avoidant attachment style. Although the concept of brand attachment is based upon attachment theory, it appears that the constructs are different and unrelated. In fact, some determinants of brand attachment have been found to be experience, responsiveness, quality, reputation, and trust (Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2014).

Thus, a key, perhaps *the key* implication is that emotional attachment to a brand may not be dependent on one's attachment style. It appears that marketers will not be able to achieve an advantage in enhancing brand attachment by taking cognizance of an individual's or market segment's attachment style.

However, as predicted, since insecurely attached individuals are those who need others' approval in order to maintain positive self-regard (Bartholomew, 1990), our regression analyses did show that need-to-belong (NTB) is positively related to anxious attachment style and also to avoidant attachment style. Ultimately, we found relationships, as predicted, between constructs that both came from the psychology literature, but did not find the predicted connection between the constructs of the two different fields, marketing and psychology.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

One possible limitation of our study is that the brand attachment measure we used did not fully capture the concept of brand attachment as used in other studies (see, for example, Thomson et al., 2005). As suggested by Thomson et al. (2005), perhaps using particular types of brands may result in stronger attachment. In other words, our measure might not be effectively assessing emotional brand attachment. Another potential limitation to the study is that the measures were all self-reported. Thus, individuals may be reluctant to self-report their insecure attachments or a high level of need to belong. Additional data collections methods (perhaps projective methods) might be needed to overcome this possibility.

Future research should focus on the need to belong (NTB) and brand attachment levels for specific groups of brands. Previous findings have shown that consumers purchase brands to develop their self constructs and form brand relationships (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Certain brands are associated with in-groups and certain brands are associated with out-groups, and this affects consumer/brand relationships (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Thus, future research should focus on brand attachment and the need to belong related to anxious attachment styles and brands associated with in-groups.

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