

Past, Present and Future of Brand Attachment Research: A Review and Research Agenda

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Abstract

Customers tend to form strong bonds with the brands and attach firmly to them, which may eventually impact purchasing intentions and enhance customer loyalty. This study intends to investigate the intellectual structure and existing performance trends of the extant literature on brand attachment. We accomplish this goal by employing a bibliometric analytical toolbox and visualization tools: VOSviewer and Bibliometrix-R. The relevant data were retrieved from the two most prominent and most significant abstract and citation databases, that is, Scopus and Web of Science. This study examines the dataset from several aspects. It identifies the most prominent authors, the most cited articles and the most relevant journals, hence deciphering the performance of the field. Then, a co-occurrence analysis was conducted, deciphering the field's intellectual structure. Further, we mention significant implications for practitioners and managers interested in the topic. Finally, we orchestrate future research lines from two aspects, first delineated from recent works and from thematic clusters generated using co-occurrence analysis.

Keywords

Brand attachment, systematic literature review, bibliometric analysis, customer involvement, brand experience

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Introduction

Brand attachment, a multidimensional construct reflecting the emotional and cognitive bond between consumers and brands, has been the subject of significant interest and investigation in consumer behavior and marketing (Ugalde et al., 2023). Lacoëuilhe (2000) posited that “attachment to the brand is a psychological variable that reveals a lasting and inalterable affective relationship (separation is painful) to the brand and expresses a relation of psychological closeness to it” (p. 66). Over the years, scholars and practitioners alike have recognized the profound impact of brand attachment on consumer preferences, loyalty, and, ultimately, organizational success (Liu et al., 2020). The concept of brand attachment stems from the realization that consumers can form powerful, enduring connections with brands, transcending mere functional benefits (Rajaobelina et al., 2021). This emotional connection, often referred to as brand love, passion, or loyalty, goes beyond the utilitarian aspect of products and services and engages consumers at a profoundly personal level (Shabani Nashtae et al., 2017). Understanding brand attachment mechanisms has become crucial for marketers seeking to forge lasting relationships with their customers and create enduring brand value (Arya et al., 2018).

Brand attachment is a concept that has garnered considerable attention in consumer behavior and marketing. Consumers often form emotional connections and strong bonds with certain brands beyond preference or loyalty (Fastoso & González-Jiménez, 2020). This deep and enduring connection between individuals and brands is known as a brand attachment (Aureliano-Silva et al., 2018). It encompasses a range of psychological, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that shape consumers’ attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making processes (Flight & Coker, 2022). Over the years, brand attachment has emerged as a vital area of research as scholars and marketers strive to understand this phenomenon’s underlying mechanisms and implications (Vredeveld, 2018). Researchers have delved into the psychological processes underpinning brand attachment formation, investigating factors such as self-identity, emotional bonding, nostalgia, and brand love (Li et al., 2019; Moussa, 2015; Moussa & Touzani, 2017; Shimul & Phau, 2023; Youn & Dadoo, 2021). Moreover, empirical studies have examined the role of various antecedents, such as brand personality (Malär et al., 2011), brand experiences (Zha et al., 2022), and self-congruity (Usakli et al., 2022), in shaping brand attachment (Aboulnasr & Tran 2019; Shimul & Phau, 2022). Several early investigations have laid the groundwork for subsequent studies and have contributed to our understanding of the intricacies of brand-consumer relationships (Fedorikhin et al., 2008; Park et al., 2006; Thomson et al., 2005).

In the present era, the study of brand attachment has evolved to incorporate new perspectives, methodologies, and contexts. Researchers have expanded their focus to explore the role of digital media (Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021), social networking platforms (Arya et al., 2018), and online communities (Wang et al., 2016) in fostering brand attachment. Technology has transformed how consumers engage with brands, necessitating a fresh examination of the dynamics between consumers, brands, and attachment (Lam & Shankar, 2014; Min et al., 2020; Read et al., 2011). Additionally, recent studies have explored cross-cultural variations in brand attachment, uncovering the influence of cultural

values (Chen et al., 2021), norms (S. et al., 2019), and practices on consumers' emotional bonds with brands (Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011).

Two significant review articles on brand attachment research have been published in elite journals. First, Shimul's (2022) review adopts a framework-based approach, highlighting and summarizing the theories employed, contexts explored, moderators and mediators examined, and antecedents & outcomes investigated in the domain of brand attachment research. Second, Hemsley-Brown's (2023) review is framework-based, focusing on identifying antecedents and consequences; their review is a first attempt to chart and synthesize the antecedents, mediators and consequences of brand attachment research. None of the existing reviews has focused on investigating and unrolling the brand attachment research's intellectual knowledge structure and performance trends. Hence, to address this gap, we perform a bibliometric assessment of the extant literature on brand attachment research. This bibliometric variant of systematic review delves into the trajectory of brand attachment research, providing a comprehensive synthesis of the past, present, and potential future directions within this vibrant domain. As we delve into the current state of brand attachment research, we highlight the most recent advancements and key emerging themes. This includes an examination of novel research methodologies, the impact of digitalization and social media, and the interplay of cultural, societal, and individual factors influencing brand attachment. By synthesizing the current state of knowledge, we aim to provide a comprehensive overview that reflects the contemporary landscape of brand attachment research.

Moreover, this systematic review looks forward to the future of brand attachment research, identifying potential avenues for exploration and addressing critical gaps in the existing literature. Understanding how brand attachment adapts and thrives becomes paramount with the ever-changing consumer landscape, characterized by evolving technologies, cultural shifts, and environmental concerns. We shed light on the potential challenges and opportunities that await researchers and marketers, presenting a roadmap for future investigations that can shape the trajectory of the field.

Therefore, In light of the above discussion and following state-of-the-art bibliometric reviews (Goel et al., 2022; Husain et al., 2021; Jayaswal & Parida, 2023; Kumar et al., 2022; Stocchi et al., 2022), we curate two research questions considered as the present study's final blueprint. They are as follows:

- RQ₁*: What is the current descriptive and academic profile regarding the most influential authors, articles and journals of brand attachment research?
- RQ₂*: What are the significant themes which characterize the intellectual structure of brand attachment research, and what insights can be drawn from the current literature to pursue future research?

The remainder of this article is structured in the following scheme: First, we present the methodology adopted in the study. Second, we report the results of the content and bibliometric analysis. Third, we offer key implications learnt from the study. Finally, we conclude with the cluster-oriented and recent works-oriented future research directions.

Methodology

A systematic literature review (SLR) intends to assemble, arrange and assess the existing literature on a particular domain in a scientific and replicable manner (Paul et al., 2021), ensuring to provide an audit trail which may help to give a clear picture of the decisions taken, procedures adopted and conclusions inferred (Mulrow et al., 1998). Bibliometric reviews are the sub-variants of SLRs (Lim et al., 2022; Sugla & Sen, 2023), often conducted in liaison (Behl et al., 2022; Donthu, Kumar, Pandey, et al., 2021; Jain & Dhingra, 2023).

Taking cues from the works of Tiwary et al. (2021) and Saini et al. (2022), this study adopts an iterative cycle approach, which begins with zeroing in on the relevant keywords, which is followed by the database selection and running the search queries and ends with the deployment of various bibliometric techniques on the resultant dataset. Figure 1 shows an overview of the methodological procedure.

Scheming the Search String and Data Collection

Following Kumar Kar and Harichandan (2022), we used previously established keywords from past literature reviews on the brand attachment concept (Hemsley-Brown, 2023; Shimul, 2022). Our search string was as follows: “brand attachment” OR “emotional attachment” OR “emotional brand attachment.” We searched this string in the two most extensive abstract and citation databases, that is, Scopus and Web of Science. Several accomplished branding researchers have employed these databases in their bibliometric reviews (Rojas-Lamorena et al., 2022; Sepulcri et al., 2020). Our initial search yielded 8,915 and 1,254 results on Scopus and Web of Science, respectively.

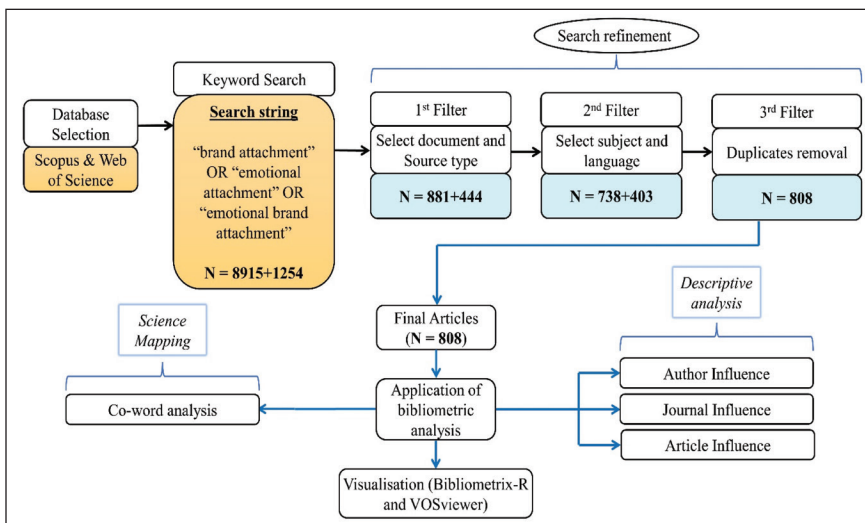


Figure 1. Snapshot of the Review Methods and Material Employed.

Refining the Dataset

In line with the filtration approach adopted by Tiwary et al. (2021), we applied several filters to purify our data. First, we considered only “articles” and “reviews” published in peer-reviewed academic journals, as they are the true indicators of “certified knowledge” (Ramos-Rodríguez & Ruiz-Navarro, 2004). Second, we kept the subject filter limited to business, management, and economics to keep our search results academically relevant. Also, to address comprehension limitations, we only considered “English-language” articles (Husain et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2023). Further, as we searched and downloaded our dataset from two databases, We used R software (Team, 2013) to merge and remove the duplicates from the dataset using the procedure suggested and employed by Kasaraneni and Rosaline (2022). The final curated sample contained 808 articles.

Bibliometric Analysis

Bibliometric analysis is an application of quantitative methods to bibliographic data (Pritchard, 1969) to investigate the theoretical and conceptual roots and probable research trajectories (Wang & Liu, 2023). This article employs bibliometric techniques selected from the bibliometric toolbox (Donthu, Kumar, Mukherjee, et al., 2021) for managing and analysing the exponentially increasing corpus of literature in the domain of brand attachment research. Bibliometric tools have been used in branding research (Oh et al., 2020; Veloutsou & Ruiz Mafe, 2020) and other fields (Anas et al., 2023; Khan & Khan, 2022; Mas-Tur et al., 2020; Migliavacca et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023) for quantitatively analysing the relationship between the articles, keywords, and authors in a domain and identifying and deciphering the significant themes which characterize the intellectual structure of a domain (Mukherjee et al., 2022). We conducted the descriptive analysis [also known as performance analysis (See Donthu, Kumar & Pandey, 2021) using R software’s “bibliometrix” package (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017) and co-word analysis using VOSviewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

Analysis, Findings and Discussion

Descriptive Analysis

Our filtered literature dataset on brand attachment research comprised 808 articles published in 344 peer-reviewed Journals from 1999 to 2003, with an annual growth rate of 18.6%. The total citations received by the domain of brand attachment is 28,258 citations, whereas the total references used in the domain were 48,016. Figure 2 shows the annual publication trend of brand attachment research, suggesting an upsurge in article publications from 2011 onwards.

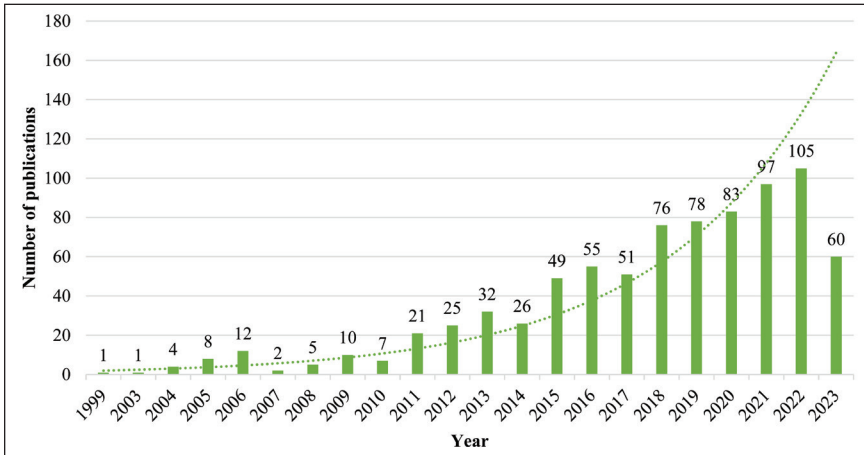


Figure 2. Annual Scientific Production.

Author Influence

In Table 1, we present the 10 most influential authors in the domain of brand attachment research as per the citation impact. The most cited author was C. Whan Park, who was cited 3,178 times for 8 articles with an h-index of 7, followed by Deborah J. Macinnis, who published 8 articles garnering 2,950 citations, making her h-index 6. Bernd Schmitt, the third highest cited scholar in the domain, published 2 articles, making her h-index 2.

Journal Influence

In Table 2, we show the most influential journals in the brand attachment research domain regarding citation impact. We found that the Journal of Marketing has garnered the most citations, that is, 4,409, publishing 5 articles on brand attachment. The second most highly influenced journal was the Journal of Consumer Psychology, garnering 2,936 citations with 10 articles, followed by the Journal of Business Research, which published 33 articles and garnered 1,671 citations.

Article Influence

In Table 3, we present the most influential articles in the domain of brand attachment research as per citations impact. We observed that the article titled “Brand Experience: What is It? How is it Measured? Does it Affect Loyalty?” by Brakus et al. (2009) is the most highly cited work, garnering 1,843 citations, meeting a yearly average of 122.87. This article is followed by the work of Thomson et al. (2005) titled “The Ties That Bind: Measuring the Strength of Consumers’ Emotional Attachments to Brands,” garnering a total of 1,485 citations with a yearly citation average of 78.16. Whan Park et al. (2010) authored the third most cited work titled “Brand Attachment and Brand Attitude Strength: Conceptual and Empirical Differentiation of Two Critical Brand Equity Drivers,” which has garnered 1,058 citations.

Table 1. Most Influential Authors.

Author (s)	TC	NP	h
C. Whan Park	3178	8	7
Deborah J. Macinnis	2950	8	6
Bernd Schmitt	2089	2	2
Aaron Ahuvia	1986	3	3
J. Joško Brakus	1843	1	1
Lia Zarantonello	1843	1	1
Matthew Thomson	1768	3	3
Andreas B. Eisingerich	1364	7	6
Joseph Priester	1148	3	3
Dawn Iacobucci	1058	1	1

Notes: TC- Total citations; NP- No. of publications; h- h index.

Table 2. Most Influential Journals.

Journals	TC	NP
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	4409	5
<i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i>	2936	10
<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	1671	33
<i>Marketing Letters</i>	1117	3
<i>Journal of Product and Brand Management</i>	860	31
<i>Journal of Consumer Research</i>	803	8
<i>European Journal of Marketing</i>	774	21
<i>Journal of Brand Management</i>	709	20
<i>Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services</i>	625	21
<i>Psychology & Marketing</i>	598	17

Notes: TC- Total citations; NP- No. of publications.

Table 3. Most Influential Articles.

Article Title	Author Citation	TC	TC/Y
“Brand experience: What is it? How is it measured? Does it affect loyalty?”	Brakus et al. (2009)	1843	122.87
“The ties that bind: Measuring the strength of consumers’ emotional attachments to brands”	Thomson et al. (2005)	1485	78.16
“Brand attachment and brand attitude strength: Conceptual and empirical differentiation of two critical brand equity drivers”	Whan Park et al. (2010)	1058	75.57
“Some antecedents and outcomes of brand love”	Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)	982	54.56
“Brand love”	Batra et al. (2012)	882	73.50
“Emotional brand attachment and brand personality: The relative importance of the actual and the ideal self”	Malär et al. (2011)	622	47.85

(Table 3 continued)

(Table 3 continued)

Article Title	Author Citation	TC	TC/Y
"Too engaged? A conservation of resources view of the relationship between work engagement and work interference with family"	Halbesleben et al. (2009)	396	26.40
"Brand authenticity: An integrative framework and measurement scale"	Morhart et al. (2015)	347	38.56
"Strategic divestments in family firms: Role of family structure and community culture"	Sharma and Manikutty (2005)	283	14.89
"The mediating effect of place attachment on the relationship between festival satisfaction and loyalty to the festival hosting destination"	Lee et al. (2012)	274	22.83

Notes: TC- Total citations; TC/Y- Total citations per year.

Keyword Analysis

For identifying and analysing the most prominent keywords in the domain of brand attachment, we built a treemap using author keywords on the Bibliometrix-R software. The treemap displaying relevant keywords is shown in Figure 3; it reveals that "brand attachment" is the most recurring keyword (24%), followed by "emotional attachment" (11%) and "brand loyalty" (08%). The existence of keywords such as "emotional brand attachment" (04%), "brand love" (03%), "brand trust" (03%), and "brand experience" (03%) portrays that branding is the central foci of the retrieved dataset.

Furthermore, Table 4 displays results similar to the treemap above, showing 30 highly recurring keywords in the brand attachment dataset retrieved from two databases.

Co-word Analysis

Co-word analysis is a bibliometric tool which is used to unravel the "relationships among author listed or natural language processing (NLP) extracted keywords (periodical or present topics), wherein keywords converging into a cluster represent a common theme" (Mukherjee et al., 2022, p. 105). Co-word analysis is primarily employed to unroll and decipher the intellectual structure of the domain (Donthu, Kumar, Mukherjee, et al., 2021); hence, we employ this tool for delineating thematic knowledge clusters. Following the sensemaking approach that Lim and Kumar (2023) propounded, we develop, design and elaborate on the clusters generated from the co-word analysis. In line with the approach employed by Donthu, Kumar, Pandey, et al. (2021), we kept the minimum threshold of 10 occurrences, which led to the generation of 5 thematic clusters. Those clusters are as follows:

Thematic Cluster 1 (Red): This cluster is named "emotional brand attachment." The highest recurring keywords in this cluster are "emotional brand attachment," "consumer," "consumption," "word-of-mouth," and "personality." These keywords

relationship with consumer engagement; also, the mediating relationship of brand communication has been established between the two (Arya et al., 2018). Researchers have also established that variables like customer trust and brand attachment fully mediate the influence of customer engagement on brand loyalty (Li et al., 2020). Further, In non-conventional consumer contexts like non-brand owner community members, studies have proven the relationship between consumer engagement and brand attachment (Kumar & Nayak, 2019).

Thematic Cluster 4 (Yellow): This cluster is titled “brand loyalty.” The highest recurring keywords in this cluster are “customer experience,” “customer loyalty,” “customer satisfaction,” “brand experience,” and “behavioural intentions.” This cluster emphasizes the loyalty of the customers towards brands and products. Scholars have examined and concluded that celebrity attachment positively and significantly impacts brand attachment along with variables like brand quality, actual self-congruence and ideal self-congruence (Özer et al., 2022). Further, Research has explored myriad antecedent and outcome variables along with the three components of brand attachment (i.e., brand affection, brand passion, and self-brand connection) (Hemsley-Brown & Alnawas, 2016). Moreover, from the generational cohort perspective, researchers have also examined the influence of emotional brand attachment on the brand loyalty of smartphone users belonging to Gen-Y (Rathnayake, 2021).

Thematic Cluster 5 (Violet): This cluster is named “Emotional attachment.” The highest recurring keywords in this cluster are “marketing,” “place attachment,” “self-congruence,” “tourism,” “tourist destination,” “placement,” “emotional attachment,” and “consumer.” This cluster signifies the relevance of emotional attachment in the extant literature. Scholars have investigated how emotional attachment to the marketed brand is influenced by customers’ perceptions of their self-congruence concepts with the dancing image used in internet commercials (Manyiwa*, 2020). Furthermore, Wang et al. (2016) examined the antecedents of emotional attachment in social media users in the specific context of users and website personality traits. Moreover, researchers have also developed scales related to emotional attachment, such as Dwyer et al. (2015), who developed an emotional attachment to a sports team scale by taking cues from attachment theory.

Implications

In light of the methodological approach employed, our bibliometric variant of systematic review offers several implications to managers and practitioners.

First, Marketing strategists may use this study’s inputs to formulate positioning strategies for products and brands (Ugalde et al., 2023). Second, In addition to this, marketers need to emphasize developing and delivering brand experiences, particularly sensory experiences (Japutra et al., 2018b). These encounters could tempt or attract the customer (Japutra et al., 2018b). Third, Firms should use friend-like language and connect with customers as caring friends in intelligent interaction since consumers’ emotional attachment to a focused brand depends on

their view of the brand's warmth and competence (Wu et al., 2017). It's possible that solution creators and consumers would need to work together closely to support such an engagement style (Wu et al., 2017).

Conclusion

To this end, this bibliometric review revealed significant insights related to the intellectual structure and performance of the domain of brand attachment research. Addressing the research questions set for the study, we first identified the most influential authors, most cited articles and most productive journals of brand attachment research (RQ1). Second, we performed a co-word analysis to decipher the intellectual structure, which led to unpacking the domain's thematic knowledge clusters (RQ2). In concordance with the burgeoning scholarly interest, quite many research-related gaps exist which may be addressed to help deepen the understanding of realms of brand attachment research, which may be crafted and presented in three ways: For future explorations, we offer (a) Thematic clusters directed research lines, (b) Recent academic works directed research lines, and (c) Recommendations to overcome the limitations of this study.

Future Research Lines Delineated from Thematic Clusters

Discussion in the form of elaboration and elucidation on thematic knowledge clusters revealed several noteworthy and relevant future research pathways.

First, Several studies have recommended that upcoming studies could delve deeper into the temporal dynamics of brand attachment, investigating the stability and changes in attachment over time (Pedeliento et al., 2016). Furthermore, there is a need to explore the implications of brand attachment on consumer decision-making, brand advocacy, and the overall well-being of individuals (Goi et al., 2023). Second, Future studies may focus on exploring the usage of psychometrically more robust measurement scales, such as Paulssen's scale of brand attachment styles (Japutra et al., 2018a). Third, In the context of the Hospitality industry, Future research should compare and concentrate on specific product categories since consumers may have distinct emotional connections to various hotel types. (Liu et al., 2020). Fourth, Several opportunities exist to investigate the relationship between consumer identity and emotional intelligence as the drivers of emotional brand attachment (Vredeveld, 2018).

Future Research Lines Delineated from Recent Academic Works

Taking relevant cues from recent articles on brand attachment, we consider that a few additional future pathways for research may be availed.

First, Future Research may explore the causality of myriad relationships aligned with emotional brand attachment, such as subcultural and popular brand coolness, using non-conventional research methods such as experimental and

quasi-experimental (Koskie & Locander, 2023). Also, several other dimensions of brand coolness may be explored using experimental methods (Koskie & Locander, 2023). Second, Research in the future might look at how individuals in other Asia-Pacific nations respond emotionally to micro-celebrities and how they feel about companies due to cultural and religious differences (Chen et al., 2023). Third, Future research may consider testing the mediation effects of several psychological constructs (i.e., perceptions, preferences and intentions) between brand attachment and avoidance of similarity (Goi et al., 2023).

Limitation-overcoming Recommendations for Future Explorations

Despite the relevant and seminal insights presented here, this review carries inherent limitations due to the focus on bibliometric data. Hence, future reviews can focus on extending the thematic insights by using alternative analyses from the bibliometric toolbox, such as using triangulation by employing bibliographic coupling and PageRank Analysis (Mukherjee et al., 2022). Also, future researchers can take cues from the works of Lim et al. (2022) and Kraus et al. (2022) and focus on expanding on the “what,” “why,” and “how” of the literature on brand attachment research, which framework-based reviews (such as, when, who, what, why, where and how [5W1H] framework and Theory, Context, Characteristics and Methods [TCCM] frameworks) and structured reviews may cover.

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