

CUSTOMER-BRAND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL BRANDS

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Abstract This qualitative study investigates customer-brand relationships between customers and digital brands. This study aims to describe different digital brand relationship types, and their manifestations among young adult customers. The data collection was conducted in 2021 by interviewing fourteen Finnish adults aged 22-31 years. The findings categorize the customer-brand relationships into four relationship types, according to the relationship strength from weak to strong. *Brand liking* lacks emotions and is characterized by low commitment towards a digital brand. *Brand attachment* includes having a slight barrier of digital brand replacement, and emotions towards the brand are weak. *Brand loving* denotes that a beloved digital brand is favored in the long term, but the brand is not considered irreplaceable. *Brand addiction* occurs when a customer has an irreplaceable, intimate, and dependent relationship with the digital brand. All the found relationship types need further investigation in future research.

Keywords:

digital brands, customer-brand relationships, brand liking, brand attachment, brand love, brand addiction.

1 Introduction

Brands are significant to customers in their everyday lives (Fournier 1998) and are constantly encountered everywhere in the digitalized world. The use of information systems has increased in the past few years (Ågerfalk et al. 2020) and, in certain situations, digital interaction displaces physical encounters between customers and brands (Geiger et al. 2021). Digital encounters arise due to new service innovations and the evolution of traditional services. The online environment has many advantages over the physical world (Kemppainen et al. 2021), and digital platforms can have even societal power (Bonina et al. 2021). At the same time, today's brands have evolved into interactive entities, which are communicating and creating customer-brand relationships (Veloutsou & Guzmán 2017). Digital brand has an online presence (Rowley 2009) and is experienced through devices, platforms, and applications – often without any physical appearance. Hence, the question of how customers perceive their relationships with these intangible digital brands is of importance to companies and academics. The specific features and dimensions of these relationships, compared to the “traditional” brands with physical existence, are of particular interest.

This qualitative study investigates customer-brand relationships in the context of digital brands. Studies on the topic are scarce as previous research has mainly focused on relationships between customers and physical brands (Fournier 1998; Elhajjar et al. 2021; Kim & Kwon 2011; Park et al. 2010; Carroll & Ahuvia 2006). The digital aspect has been included as a context of relationship creation environment (Confos & Davis 2016), in online brand communities (Badrinarayanan et al. 2014; Dessart et al. 2015), and as a commercial platform (Roggeveen et al. 2021). The relationships between customers and digital brands have been investigated only in a few studies: In the context of search engine brands (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou 2013; Veloutsou & McAlonan 2012) and by exploring the relationships' quality aspect on social networks sites (Pentina et al. 2013). In this study, we investigate digital brands without concentrating on any specific brand or category but based on the digital brands which are perceived as most important by the study participants. This research contributes to the above noted gap in research on customer-digital brand relationships, their relationship types and manifestations of these relationships.

This paper first discusses previous studies on customer-brand relationship types in Section 2 below. Next, Section 3 reports the collection of data and analysis. The findings of the empirical study are presented in Section 4, and finally, Section 5 discusses the contributions and managerial implications of this study and provides suggestions for future research.

2 The relationship between a customer and digital brand

The customer-brand relationship is constructed in the customer's emotions, cognitions, and activities towards the brand (Strandvik & Heinonen 2013). This relationship is similar to a relationship between people (Fournier 1998), and thus it includes extensive emotional scales (Mrad 2018), from love to antipathy (Shimp & Madden 1988). These relationships can also evolve or decline in a process-like manner (Fournier 1998).

2.1 Relationship types between a customer and a brand

The literature does not provide a systematic and solid synthesis of customer-brand relationships (Khamitov et al. 2019), although various concepts have been used to depict these relationships. Used concepts include, for example, relationship *forms* (Fournier 1998), *metaphors* (Kim & Kwon 2011) and *types* (Fajer & Schouten 1995; Khamitov et al. 2019). In this study, we use the concept of types, which is in line with the descriptions provided by Fajer & Schouten (1995) and Khamitov et al. (2019).

From the previous customer-brand relationship literature, four main relationship types can be identified. These are, listed from the weakest to the strongest: *brand liking* (Fajer & Schouten 1995), *brand attachment* (Park et al. 2010), *brand love* (Rahman et al. 2021), and *brand addiction* (Mrad 2018).

Brand liking (or 'casual friends') is a relationship type where customers like the brand but do not feel more committed to it, if compared with other brands (Fajer & Schouten 1995). Fournier (1998) defined in her study a relationship form termed 'casual friends/buddies', which represented low affectivity, and in which customer expectations had only little reciprocity from the brand. Despite these considerations, the brand was considered as a friend. Kim & Kwon (2011) used a metaphor of

‘casual buddies’ to depict a low intensity relationship, following Fournier’s (1998) description. Earlier literature also explored the term brand liking in the context of measuring brand assets from a customer perspective (Anselmsson et al. 2008). To summarize, the term brand liking has been used quite scarcely in earlier studies.

Brand attachment is a relationship type characterized by loyalty (Khamitov et al. 2019). It is a construct manifesting the bond between a customer and a brand, and it is indicated through self-brand connection and prominence (Park et al. 2010). Further, Jatpura et al. (2014) link three dimensions, namely emotions, brand connection, and importance, to brand attachment. According to Khamitov et al. (2019), brand attachment arises from intensive emotional captures, and is of emotional nature, but of cognitive representation. Fajer and Schouten (1995) present a relationship type called ‘close friends’ (‘multi-brand resurgent loyalty’), which has many similarities with brand attachment. In their study, the brand is considered as a good friend with a customer. However, this comes without exclusive loyalty, and thus customers can use multiple brands at the same time. (Fajer & Schouten 1995.) Also, Fournier (1998) presented a relationship type ‘compartmentalized friendships’, in which customers strengthen their own identity with the help of multiple brands, and not being restricted to one brand.

Brand love means that a customer has long-term fulfilled emotional attachment towards a brand (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006). This relationship is constructed around love, affection and passion (Khamitov et al. 2019), and it is achieved through satisfaction, self-brand connection and personal experiences (Rahman 2021). The relationship form of Fournier (1998) called ‘committed partnerships’ also reflects brand love, in which a committed customer is horrified of even thinking of an illicit affair with some other brand. In their study, Kim & Kwon (2011) used ‘soulmates’ as a metaphor for high-intensity relationships, following the description of ‘committed partnerships’ by Fournier (1998). However, Rossiter (2012) criticizes earlier brand love literature. He claims that responses of brand liking should not be confused with brand love, as has been erroneously done in some previous studies. In these, colloquial expressions (e.g., ‘love’) were mistakenly understood to represent real love instead of like.

Brand addiction is the emotional dependence of a customer on a brand, and it goes beyond compulsive buying. In brand addiction, the brand gives pleasure to the compulsive urges, and the customer experiences various symptoms of dependence, if the customer is separated from the brand (Mrad 2018). A brand-addicted customer has a deep trust relationship with the brand, and the brand plays a critical role in the well-being of the customer’s daily life (Fajer & Schouten 1995). The brand is also irreplaceable compared to other brands, and the customer is obsessed with the brand (Fournier 1998). The four customer-brand relationship types all have their own characteristics and manifestations, which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the characteristics of the relationship types

| Strength | Relationship type | Characteristics |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Weak | Brand liking (Fajer & Schouten 1995) (Casual friends/buddies; Fournier, 1998; Kim & Kwon 2011) | Fajer & Schouten (1995) - low commitment, easy substitution, liking the brand Fournier (1998) - lack of affectivity and engagement - few expectations on reciprocity - brand considered as a friend |
| Moderate | Brand attachment (Park et al. 2010; Khamitov et al. 2019) (Close friends; Fajer & Schouen 1995) (Compartmentalized friendships; Fournier 1998) | Park et al. (2010) - a bond between customer and brand - self-brand connection and prominence Khamitov et al. (2019) - intensive emotional captures, cognitive representation Fajer & Schouten (1995) - brand considered as good or close friend - no exclusive loyalty: multiple brands at the same time Fournier (1998) - identity strengthening through brand usage - multiple brands |
| Strong | Brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia 2016; Khamitov et al. 2019; Rahman et al. 2021) (Committed partnerships; Fournier | Carroll & Ahuvia (2006) - long-term relationship & fulfilled emotional attachment Khamitov et al. (2019) - love, affection, and passion Rahman et al. (2021) |

| | | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | 1998) (Soulmates; Kim & Kwon 2011) | - satisfaction, self-brand identification, personal experiences Fournier (1998) - horrified at illicit affairs |
| Very strong | Brand addiction (Fajer & Schouten 1995; Mrad 2018) (Dependencies; Fournier 1998) | Mrad (2018) - emotions, dependence - a pleasure to compulsive urges & addiction symptoms Fajer & Schouten (1995) - deep trust, a critical role in everyday life well-being Fournier (1998) - irreplaceability, obsession |

3 Data collection and analysis

As the aim was to understand the relationship between digital brands and customers, a qualitative research approach was chosen for this study. We targeted active users of digital brands with several years of experience, and thus interviewed young Finnish adults aged 22 to 31. The data collection was conducted with individual semi-structured interviews in 2021. Following Fusch and Ness (2015) instruction on determining the number of the interviews by saturation, we continued interviews as long as no new relevant information could be obtained. As a result, fourteen people, seven males and seven females, were interviewed, and these are referred to as participants P1-P14 of this study (for details, see Appendix 1). Thirteen interviews were conducted via the Zoom online video conferencing software and one interview took place face-to-face. The average duration of the interviews was 41 minutes. The citations in the next chapter are translated from Finnish to English.

The interviewees were asked to talk about their use of those digital brands which they perceive important. No specific brands or brand-relationship types were mentioned by the interviewer. The discussed themes included: How participants perceive themselves as a user of the brand, the digital brand usage habits, pricing and value of usage, and emotional aspects of digital brand usage. The semi-structured manner provided an opportunity to discuss the topic more freely and, for example, add additional questions (Myers & Newman 2007). The interviews were all

recorded and transcribed, as recommended by Myers & Newman (2007). In the analysis, the transcribed and coded data was analyzed iteratively. The data was first coded based on the customer-brand relationship types identified from the literature. All expressions in which participants described their brand relationships were extracted from the material and placed under the most appropriate relationship type. Based on these expressions, the main themes describing the different customer-brand relationship types were then identified after multiple rounds of analysis. Thus, the relationship types were created through analyzing the interviewees' responses. The found relationship types are discussed next.

4 Findings: digital customer-brand relationships

Our findings show that all four customer-brand relationship types identified from the literature appear also in the context of digital brands. Manifestations of the relationship types are discussed below in more detail.

4.1 Brand liking

Brand liking appeared in the responses as lack of emotions, low commitment, and high expectations. Digital brands were used for communication, entertainment, and problem-solving. The interviewees described their most important brands using positively mild expressions such as 'nice', and without emotional aspects. The participants' commitment to the brand was rather mild. For example, naming a favorite brand was difficult for some participants, which represented a weak strength relationship between the brand and the interviewee.

"I don't know which one is my favorite, maybe it could be WhatsApp. [...] They are just nice services to have access to, better to have them than not to have them." – Male, 28 (P14)

The interviewees were willing to spend a reasonable amount of money on using digital brands, but only if these provided some entertainment, such as movies for the evening or solved some of their problems, including communicating with friends. Some participants valued great a 'price-quality ratio' or 'net benefit'. Brands were found extremely easy to be replaced, as the participants emphasized the ease of substitution.

“I would immediately take another service. It’s just an application [...] You can find a similar service elsewhere.” – Male, 25 (P7)

4.2 Brand attachment

Brand attachment was reflected in a bond between the interviewee and a brand. Digital brands were used, for example, for communication, entertainment, as a part of daily routine, and as a storage for one’s digital content, such as photos or music. The interviewees described their most important brands with positive expressions such as ‘important’, ‘safe’ and ‘favorite’, but without using clear emotional words. For example, attachment was described by the words ‘I’m attached’, but without any stronger affection related expressions. Brand attachment was also explained by a participant’s historical connection to a brand.

“Well, maybe of some sort of [attachment]. I have had a social media account since 2010 with old pictures [...] it’s a photo album of my youth and my history.” – Female, 29 (P2)

The participants described brands to be replaceable with small effort, and a substitute was easy to be imagined. However, removal of personally created content was considered inconvenient and thus created a threshold to change to another brand. Accepted brands were also characterized by familiarity and easiness to use.

“Picky. That may be the correct word. I don’t like to own multiple services. If I find a good service, I favor that one. I won’t go looking for [similar] services. [...] It’s just a service, and I pay to get service features, but I don’t have any emotional bond.” – Male, 25 (P9)

4.3 Brand love

Brand love emerged as an emotional bond between a participant and a brand. The digital brands that were loved were used as an important part of daily routines, entertainment, communication, content creation, and information seeking. Brand love was expressed by strong emotional words such as ‘I can’t live without it’, ‘it has a big role in my life’ or, ‘very important part of my life’. However, the interviewees did not mention the word ‘love’ but described their attachment to brands directly, as ‘pretty committed, active relationship’. Digital brands were even given human representations by, for example, equaling a digital brand relationship with brotherhood.

“YouTube is [important] because if you can’t do something then it will help. It is like a big brother from who one can always ask how this or that could be done, and it will help.” – Male, 22 (P1)

Brand lovers also expressed their willingness to long-term commitment with their beloved brand. For example, the development of a currently used brands’ services increased engagement and prevented a participant from changing from one brand to another. This brand relationship was not broken, even if similar brands would have had favorable new features. Brand lovers considered the replacement of the brand painful but possible.

“I’m not resisting change, but I’m such a committed user of Spotify or Instagram that even if you would provide me a new competing and, very similar service, I would still have a big threshold to switch.” – Female, 31 (P13)

“It [the end of service] would annoy me a lot, but they are not irreplaceable. [...] It has become such an entrenched habit that one opens Instagram and browses what has happened and so on. So yes, it would be annoying, but it would not be the end of the world” – Female, 26 (P3)

4.4 Brand addiction

In brand addiction, a digital brand is considered critically important in everyday life. The services provided by digital brands were used as a critical part of daily routines, entertainment, communication, content creation, and information search. The brand-addicted participants usually admitted their addiction, but, however, some also denied it. Brand addiction was expressed, for example, by describing addictive symptoms, which emerged if the usage of the brand was not possible. The service or application of a digital brand could be deleted from the device for a couple of hours, but then it was immediately downloaded back again. Expressions revealing addictive symptoms of the participants were, for example, ‘nervousness’, ‘first thought in the morning’, and ‘loss of concentration’.

“Well, I could say that I’m [addicted] to at least Netflix and if someone took Netflix away from me, yes, I’d try to replace that evening routine [watching Netflix] with something else. [...] It is a kind of a symptom of addiction when you can’t give up on unnecessary need. [...] The same goes with music. I would get withdrawal symptoms at work, and my concentration would be disrupted, the pace of work would deteriorate, and my mood would be poor. [...] But one can’t consider this as a harmful addiction, like coffee, no one has yet died because of drinking coffee.” – Male, 31 (P8)

“[It is] an addiction. I feel that way. I’m not saying it’s problematic, but it’s a big part of life. When I wake up in the morning, I first check my messages, I check Instagram, everything”
– Female, 26 (P6)

Strong trust toward the brand was a typical embodiment of brand addiction. It, for example, led to forgiveness in problematic situations. Furthermore, some were not even aware of the prices of the services they used, but they were mainly willing to pay for the services they trusted. The importance of a digital brand for a participant was described also as ‘unconditional love’, ‘significant role in daily life’, ‘irreplaceable’ and ‘intimate relationship’.

“I don’t even know any other [brands] than Spotify. It’s the only option I see to be able to fulfill my needs in my daily life in different situations. It’s accompanying me.”
– Male, 24 (P10)

Brand addicted participants could also consider brand replacement as impossible. For example, co-created memories and superiority over other brands caused that no substitutes for the brand were not considered possible.

“Netflix and Spotify, I have long history with those. They know my usage history from so many years, especially Spotify. [...] Sometimes it suggests ‘Hey, you listened this in the summer 2005’ [...] [Those] have so much valuable good data with memories to throw me back into these powerful emotional experiences.” – Male, 31 (P8)

Despite of being aware of an addiction, brand addiction was not perceived as harmful by the participants. Instead, for the brand addicted, digital brands’ services ‘provided pleasure’ and ‘improved state of mind’.

5 Summary of the findings and concluding remarks

This study investigated relationships between customers and digital brands. The findings depict the four different relationship types and how they appear among the interviewed young Finnish adults. Table 2 below lists the findings of this study similar to previous research (reported in detail in Section 2), and summarizes the novel findings of this study.

Table 2: The characteristics of the relationships between customers and digital brands

| Type | Findings similar with previous research | Novel findings of this study |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Brand liking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the brand is very easily replaced (Fajer & Schouten 1995) - low commitment (Fajer & Schouten 1995) - very low affectivity (Fournier 1998) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - low or reasonable investments, such as time or paying for a brand - high expectations for the brand - mild positive descriptions of brands |
| Brand attachment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a bond between customer and brand with loyalty (Park et al. 2010) - no exclusive loyalty (Fajer & Schouten 1995) - multiple brands at the same time (Fournier 1998; Fajer & Schouten 1995) - brand connection (Jatpura et al. 2014) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the brand is replaceable with small effort - positive descriptions of brands with little affective expressions - low affectivity - attachment concerns history |
| Brand love | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the brand is replaceable with inconveniences and 'illicit affairs' are avoided (Fournier 1998) - strong long-term emotional attachment relationship (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006) - affection (Khamitov et al. 2019) - satisfaction (Rahman et al. 2021) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the brand is important part of daily routines - affective descriptions, even with human representations |
| Brand addiction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the brand is irreplaceable (Fournier 1998) - strong affective commitment and attachment (Mrad 2018) - dependence (Fournier 1998; Mrad 2018) - a pleasure to compulsive urges (Mrad 2018) - addiction symptoms (Mrad 2018) - criticality in everyday life (Fajer & Schouten 1995) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - descriptions with affectivity, intense expressions, human representations, or forbidding - addiction was not perceived as harmful - no price sensitivity, not even knowing prices - daily life improvement due to the brand |

As can be seen from Table 2, the results on the *brand liking* relationship type are partly in line with previous research. Low commitment a brand (Fajer & Schouten 1995) is presented in the results in the form of 'easy replacement'. The participant's expressions regarding digital brands emerged mild and positive, having thus similarities with the 'casual friend' category described by Fournier (1998), and '*brand liking*' reported by Fajer & Schouten (1995). Also, in line with previous studies of

Fajer & Schouten (1995) and Fournier (1998), an emotional aspect was noted to be low or lacking. On the other hand, the findings of this study diverged from previous research in the characteristics 'high expectations to brands' and 'possibilities to invest time and money'. The results of this research support Rossiter's (2012) criticism on interpreting emotional expressions too strongly, which leads to misunderstanding.

The findings on the *brand attachment* relationship type show brand bonding (Park et al. 2010) and brand connection (Jatpura et al. 2014). Despite this, affectivity and emotions were not as strong as described by Khamitov et al. (2019) and Jatpura et al. (2014), and further, a self-brand connection noted by Park et al. (2010) did not appear at all in the results. However, the manifestations in the brand attachment type are clearly stronger if compared to the manifestations of brand liking type, and there evidently exists clear favoring of an attached brand. The loyalty towards a brand was found to be stronger than in the corresponding categories by Fajer and Schouten (1995) and Fournier (1998). The results also indicated some attachment to a brand, but it could be changed with minor inconvenience, if it wasn't pleasing anymore.

The results of *brand love* typology were mainly in the line with the results of previous studies. For example, long-term emotional attachment (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006), commitment to one brand (Fournier 1998), satisfaction to services (Rahman et al. 2021), and passion (Khamitov et al. 2019), are presented within the expressions of the participants. Examples of such expressions include substitution reluctance, and these differed from the brand addiction type by including a possibility for brand replacement. Additionally, the participants did not literally indicate 'love' but a love-like affection such as in the 'big brother' metaphor.

Also, the findings of the *brand addiction* typology are in line with previous research. For example, a dependence relationship, including addiction symptoms (Mrad 2018), criticality in daily life (Fajer & Schouten 1995), and irreplaceability (Fournier 1998), was indicated by the participants. In addition to supporting these findings of earlier studies, brand relationship was described as an addiction with symptoms, but however, not negatively. Instead, the addicted relationship to a brand was mentioned to have positive and critical effects on the participants' daily routines.

The findings of this study suggest that the four customer-brand relationship types - brand liking, brand attachment, brand love and brand attachment - can be identified within digital brands. Customers create similar relationships with all kinds of brands, including digital and physical brands. However, when compared to physical brands, digital brands are more easily integrated into all events in everyday life, for example through a mobile phone. The use of digital brands is not tied to time or place when the brand is used with portable devices. Digital brands bring valuable online content into physical everyday life events, and thus unite the digital and physical worlds of the customer. For example, the correct music list was experienced to improve effectivity during work by the *brand addicted*. In addition, these customer-brand relationships can evolve in a process-like manner (Fournier 1998). Thus, various customer engagement activities carried out by brand management could strengthen the relationship evolution. These actions should always be adjusted to fit the relationship type. This could mean, for example, highlighting problem-solving and net profit to *brand likers*, or co-created emotional memories to *brand lovers*.

As this study is qualitative, the presented findings are descriptive. The findings are based on the observations of individual participants' experiences on the topic. Further, results are limited by the demographics of the data, as only 22-31-year-old young Finnish adults were interviewed. Hence, future studies should investigate the customer-brand relationships with other methods and customer segments. Studies could also focus on specific brands and their relationships. Furthermore, future studies could investigate intangible digital brands' links to the physical world – how online and offline contexts and channels merge in customers' world as stressed by Kemppainen et al. (2019). Also, as digital brands and customers always have an intermediary between them, such as a device, the intermediary's effect on digital customer-brand relationships is also a great research possibility for the future. Finally, to conclude, all the customer-brand relationship types, their characteristics, and manifestations should be further explored.

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Appendix 1: Details of the participants of the study

| | Age | Gender | Status | Interview duration (min) |
|-----|------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| P1 | 22 | Male | Student | 42 |
| P2 | 29 | Female | Employee | 38 |
| P3 | 26 | Female | Student | 41 |
| P4 | 30 | Female | Student | 52 |
| P5 | 27 | Female | Employee | 51 |
| P6 | 26 | Female | Employee | 40 |
| P7 | 25 | Male | Student | 23 |
| P8 | 31 | Male | Employee | 57 |
| P9 | 25 | Male | Student | 34 |
| P10 | 24 | Male | Student | 42 |
| P11 | 23 | Female | Employee | 35 |
| P12 | 26 | Male | Entrepreneur | 31 |
| P13 | 31 | Female | Student | 37 |
| P14 | 28 | Male | Employee | 53 |