

Abstract of the Dissertation

Contemporary research in marketing is increasingly using the self perspective as well as considering the role of social groups in an individual's environment to understand individual-brand relationships. Taking cognizance of this view, this research has tried to strengthen the literature pertaining to such relationships by taking into account the effect of *primary reference groups* on individual-brand attachment. Two types of reference groups, i.e., *normative* and *comparative* reference groups, have been studied in this research, where the primary categories of reference groups studied include *family*, *friendship groups* and *coworker groups*. The effect of these primary reference groups on the strength of individual-brand attachment has not been explicitly studied till date. The motivation for the current study is further supported by concerns raised by contemporary scholars who say that potential research on individual-brand attachment should consider other factors that affect the potency of such attachments, and the conditions under which the attachments are significantly affected.

We specifically show that the strength of an individual's attachment to a particular brand is influenced by (a) the individual's self-definition (particularly relational self-definition), (b) strength of tie between the individual and the primary group from which he or she is seeking reference, (c) the degree of attachment with the primary reference group, and (d) inclusion of resources (e.g., brand knowledge), experiences and perspectives from the three categories of primary reference groups through the process of self-expansion. We argue that the relational self-definition is likely to be more salient in social contexts, because such a self-definition is based on the principles of attachment and the motivation to maintain a close relationship with others. Further the relational self framework involves vivid representations of a significant other, a primary reference group in this research, and typically includes knowledge and information pertaining to thoughts, feelings and behavioral aspects of the reference group. The activation of the reference group representations leads to activation of the associated relational self. In the context of (d) above we specifically examine how resource inclusion pertaining to utilitarian and symbolic brand types affect the relationship between the reference group type and individual- brand attachment.

A motivation for the current study also hinges on research in social media, wherein it has been suggested that people use social networks to accomplish self-related needs, wherein such networks are characterized by the strength of users' connections to other members in the network referred to as *tie strength*. The strength of tie between two individuals or between an individual and a group also affects the transmittal of quality information between them. Using the *self-expansion* theory to address these relationship issues, we argue that an expansion of the self through the inclusion of brand-related resources only may not be enough to strengthen the individual-brand attachment; the inclusion of the relevant resources, available with close primary reference groups (i.e., family, friendship groups and coworker groups), into the self is crucial. Additionally, we argue that the inclusion of the others' resources, perspectives and identities into the self will be affected by the strength of tie between the individual and the respective reference group. Such an inclusion reorganizes the initial relational schema the individual has of the brand leading to an enhancement of the attachment to the brand.

Study 1 demonstrates how tie-strength mediates the relationship between the type of reference group (i.e., normative and comparative) and individual-brand attachment, especially when relational self-definition is predominant. Study 2 looks into the influences of the tie-strength and three reference group categories- family, friendship groups and coworker groups, on individual-brand attachment. In this study, we specifically examine the relative effects of brand-self connection and brand prominence- two components of individual-brand attachment- with respect to the primary reference group categories. Study 3 demonstrates how the brand type influences the relationship between the type of reference group (i.e., normative vs. comparative) and individual-brand attachment, through the inclusion of resources as a result of self-expansion.