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The effect of corporate brand reputation on brand attachment and brand loyalty: Automobile sector

Sandra Maria Correia Loureiro^{1*}, Eduardo Moraes Sarmento² and Goulwen Le Bellego¹

Abstract: The current study aims to analyze the effect of corporate brand reputation on brand attachment and brand loyalty considering the automotive sector and the brands Tesla, Toyota, and Volvo. A sample of 327 participants, members of car brand communities, collaborate in a survey. Overall findings reveal that the perception of corporate brand reputation is more effective on enhancing brand loyalty than brand attachment. However, the effect could depend on the car brand strategy. We may also claim that customer citizen helping others is one of the most important corporate attributes perceived by customers of the three brands. Limitations and suggestions for further research are also provided.

Subjects: Persuasion; Business, Management and Accounting; Industry & Industrial Studies

Keywords: corporate brand reputation; brand attachment; brand loyalty; automotive industry



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Cars are more than just goods that consumers use to move from one point to another. Cars may develop on consumers' mind emotions and bonds. This study analyzes the effect of corporate brand reputation on brand attachment and brand loyalty considering the brands: Tesla, Toyota, and Volvo. A sample of 327 participants, members of car brand communities, collaborate in a survey. Overall findings reveal that the perception of corporate brand reputation is more effective on enhancing brand loyalty than brand attachment. Yet, the effect could depend on the car brand strategy. We may also claim that customer citizen helping others is one of the most important corporate attributes perceived by the customers of the three brands.

1. Introduction

Attachment theory comes from the close relationship and the works done by Bowlby and colleagues, who claim that human beings tend to seek proximity to significant others when they need affection, accordance, or identification. Attachments can be understood beyond the person-person relationship context (Belk, 1988). Brand attachment is regarded as emotional feelings that consumers have toward a brand or product. Those feelings could become stronger to create true loyalty and passion for customers to the brand (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Loureiro, Ruediger, & Demetris, 2012).

Following Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, and Iacobucci (2010), the current study considers two dimensions to measure brand attachment: brand self-connection and brand prominence. The latter represents the extent to which positive feelings and memories about the attachment brand are perceived as at the top of mind. Prominence reflects “the salience of the cognitive and affective bond that connects the brand to the self” (Park et al., 2010, p. 2). The former involves the cognitive and emotional connection between the brand and the self (Chaplin & Roedder John, 2005; Escalas, 2004).

Creating emotional brand attachment is a key success for all of these companies, brands, and firms. This is motivated by the finding that such connections lead to higher level of consumer loyalty, which increases a company’s financial performance (Park et al., 2010).

Actually, brand loyalty is a variable persecuted by companies in order to assure profitability. Customers that are emotionally attached to a brand or a product can more likely have positive behavior toward this company. However, those positive behaviors toward the brand reflect a strong attachment but have different conceptualizations. A strong attachment needs time to be developed and it is often built on interactions between the person and the object of attachment (Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996). Those interactions are making sense for the customers and attract strong emotions toward the object of attachment. Behaviors (brand loyalty) are reflecting the evaluation that customer makes about a product. Those reactions can be developed even if the customer doesn’t have any direct contact with the product. Hence, customers can have positive behavior toward a product or a brand without having any contact with it. Moreover, customers can have positive behavior toward numerous random products, even toward products that are not really relevant and important in their daily life, whereas Ball and Tasaki (1992) argue that customers can only be attached to few number of products that have a strong and deep connection with them. This attachment may depend on the way customers and other publics think about the brand and the organization where the product/service is manufactured or delivered (brand reputation) (Loureiro & Kaufmann, 2016).

In this vein, brand loyalty and brand attachment have different roles and the way customers perceive brand reputation may influence brand attachment and brand loyalty differently. This study intends to analyze the effect of brand reputation on brand attachment and brand loyalty considering the automotive sector. Could brand loyalty be more depending on the perception of brand reputation (the way customers view the organization and interact with it) than the emotional bonds between a brand and a customer?

The current study gives insights about these issues, analyzing the context of automotive industry. Pollution and climate change problems have led many car brands to alter engines and other materials in ways that reduce emissions of CO, CO₂, and other harmful emissions and make cars safer. These concerns may be mirrored in the reputation of the brands. Thus, for the propose of our study, we select three brands with their origin in three different continents (Tesla from America, Volvo from Europe, and Toyota from Portugal) and concerns about safety and environmental issues to analyze the effect of customer perceptions of brand reputation on brand attachment and brand loyalty. The remainder of this article comprises the theoretical background, method, results, as well as conclusions and implications.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Brand attachment

Several researchers have studied attachment on different perspectives, from person–person attachment to person–object attachment, resulting in that individual, a customer, establishing true bonds to a brand or its product. Attachment leads to a strong commitment and may influence love and passion when the bonds are very strength; hence, that makes customers truly loyal and gives him passion for the brand (Loureiro et al., 2012).

Attachments can extend beyond the person–person relationship context (Belk, 1988). Indeed, researchers from different fields suggest that customers can develop attachment to gifts (Mick & DeMoss, 1990), places of residence (Hill & Stamey, 1990), brands (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), and other type of special favorite objects (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). The collection of characteristics, traits, and memberships that cognitively represent an individual in memory is generally described as the self-concept (Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984). Greenwald and Pratkanis (1984) claim that customers can be attached to a brand in a way that the brand confers strong feelings to its customers, like being part of his daily life, thus being an extension of the self. Brand attachment is characterized by strong linkage or connectedness between the brand and the self (Schultz, Kleine, & Kernan, 1989). The brand's connection to one's self, one's identity, or self-concept is central to the emotional attachment construct (Mikulincer, Hirschberger, Nachmias, & Gillath, 2001).

2.2. Brand reputation

The reputation of a brand's name has been described as an extrinsic cue, that is an attribute related to the product (Zeithaml, 1988) but not of the physical composition of the product. Brand reputation evolves all the time, and it is mainly created by the flow of information from one user to another (Herbig & Milewicz, 1993). Reputation embodies the general estimation in which a company is held by employees, customers, suppliers, distributors, competitors, and the public (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Thus, firms compete for brand reputation knowing that those with a strong reputation across their products can assume highest sales prices, thereby being more powerful than another competitor (Loureiro & Kaufmann, 2016).

In order to capture the perception of consumer about the reputation of a brand, Walsh and Beatty (2007, p. 129) propose

the customer's overall evaluation of a firm based on his or her reactions to the firm's goods, services, communication activities, interactions with the firm and/or its representatives or constituencies (such as employees, management, or other customers) and/or known corporate activities.

In this study, we consider four dimensions to measure corporate reputation: customer orientation, reliable and financially, product and service quality, and social and environmental responsibility. Reputation refers to the more general emotional response that an individual has toward an organization as a consequence of its action over a longer period of time (Amis, 2003). Thus, reputation can be seen as a driver to emotional brand attachment (Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2014).

H1: The perception of reputation is positively related to consumers' emotional car brand attachment.

2.3. Brand loyalty

The concept of brand loyalty has been pointed as an important construct in the marketing literature for at least four decades, and most researchers agree that brand loyalty can create benefits such as reduced marketing costs (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), positive word of mouth (Sutikno, 2011), business profitability (Kabiraj & Shanmugan, 2011), increased market share (Gounaris & Stathakopoulos, 2004), and a competitive advantage in the market (Iglesias, Singh, &

Batista-Foguet, 2011). Those positive outputs of brand loyalty mentioned above clearly show us how important the impact of loyalty onto brands can be. Therefore, Khan and Mahmood (2012, p. 33) suggested a definition that reflected these positive outputs by stating “Brand loyalty can be defined as the customer’s unconditional commitment and a strong relationship with the brand which is not likely to be affected under a normal circumstance.” Through literature review, most researchers and others marketing practitioners agree that brand loyalty can be either true (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003) or spurious (Iglesias et al., 2011). Spurious loyalty is driven by situational circumstances such as price and convenience (Iglesias et al., 2011), while true brand loyalty is driven by some indicators of previous psychological and affective attachment to the brand by the customer (Lin, 2010). Loyalty has been seen as an outcome of a positive perception of brand reputation in different fields (Groth, 2005; Loureiro & Kastenholtz, 2011; Walsh & Beatty, 2007). Therefore, we expected that car brand reputation will enhance car brand loyalty:

H2: The perception of reputation is positively related to consumers’ car brand loyalty.

3. Method

First, a questionnaire was created including the items of the constructs elicited by the previous studies and a section for socio-demographic variables. Then, the questionnaire (before launched) was pilot tested with the help of nine individuals, managers and members of the car brand communities, to ensure that the questions were well understood by the respondents and that there were no problems with the wording or measurement scales. Only a few adjustments were made.

The car brands considered in this study are Tesla, Toyota, and Volvo. The criteria for choosing such brands refer to the fact that the three brands are representative of three main concepts: Volvo (born in Sweden-Europe) and the safety and social responsibility programs; Toyota (born in Japan-ASIA) and quality, reliability, and carbon reduction and social responsibility programs; Tesla (born in United States of America) and electric sport car programs. In this vein, we ask authorization to online brand communities of the three brands to spread the questionnaire among their members and invite them to participate in an online survey during February and March 2016.

Tesla manufacturer got attention from customers following the production of their first fully electric sports car: The Tesla Roadster. On March 2016, Tesla company unveiled its last car creation, the Model III, full electric engine as their old sister. Although some negative news have been coming to the public due to the failure of the automatic-driven system, Tesla is still a very promising and innovative car brand devoted to safety systems and sustainable issues. Initially founded in 1927 in Sweden, Volvo brand has a long story on the automotive market. Now it is owned by Geely Group China since 2010.

Volvo is internationally connected to safety systems and concerns about environment and sustainability. The year 2015 was a big update for Volvo brand, mainly because the newly released XC90, new design that will inspire a whole range of products, showed us their new lines for the S90 Sedan and future V90 Estate Wagon models.

Toyota Motor Corporation was created in 1937 in Japan. In July 2015, Toyota reported the production of its 200-millionth vehicle. The brand is well known for their famous Hybrid Prius car; Toyota is a pioneer in the electric and hybrid vehicle for mass production, the range of products that the company is still leading today.

Regarding the measurements, we measured the constructs with multi-item scales (six-point Likert-type scale). Corporate brand reputation is assessed using a scale presented by Walsh and Beatty (2007) and Groth (2005) for customer–customer interactions and customer–company interactions. Actually, we consider six dimensions to measure brand reputation: customer orientation, product and service quality, reliable and financially, social and environmental responsibility,

customer citizen helping others, and customer citizen helping the company. Brand loyalty is based on Arnold and Reynolds (2003), and brand attachment is adapted from Park et al. (2010).

Of the overall participants (327), 93% are male which represents the proportionality of the total member of the communities contacted. Almost 60% (61.1%) range from 31 to 50 years of age. However, this is acceptable due to the type of product in question. The number of participants using each of the three brands is divided almost evenly.

4. Results

Multiple regression analysis was used to test if the corporate brand reputation personality significantly predicted participants' ratings of brand attachment and brand loyalty for three car brands Tesla, Volvo, and Toyota. The degree of multicollinearity among the indicators and autocorrelation were analyzed, and they do not pose problems.

The adequacy of the measurements is presented in Table 1. All variables show convergent validity (values of AVE higher than 0.5). All variables are reliable since the composite reliability values exceeded the 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978) and the values of alpha de Cronbach exceed 0.7.

The results of the regression for Tesla indicate the six predictors explained 22.7% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.23$, $F(6,96) = 4.71$, $p < .001$) in brand attachment. It is found that customer citizen helping others significantly predicted brand attachment ($\beta = 0.426$, $p < 0.05$), as does customer citizen helping the company ($\beta = -0.280$, $p < 0.05$). The results also point out the six predictors explained 79.8% of the variance in brand loyalty ($R^2 = 0.80$, $F(6,104) = 68.28$, $p < .001$). Actually, product and service quality ($\beta = 0.415$, $p < 0.001$), customer citizen helping the company ($\beta = 0.163$, $p < 0.01$), and social and environmental responsibility ($\beta = 0.121$, $p < 0.05$) are significant in predicting brand loyalty (see Table 2).

Regarding Volvo, the results of the regression indicate the six predictors explained 35.8% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.36$, $F(2,78) = 8.40$, $p < 0.001$) in brand attachment. It is found that customer citizen helping others significantly predicted brand attachment ($\beta = 0.373$, $p < 0.01$), as does customer

Table 1. Measurement results

Variable	Tesla				Volvo				Toyota			
	Mean	AVE	CR	α	Mean	AVE	CR	α	Mean	AVE	CR	α
Customer orientation	5.3	0.877	0.955	0.927	5.3	0.900	0.964	0.942	5.3	0.871	0.953	0.913
Product and service quality	5.2	0.754	0.902	0.832	5.2	0.775	0.912	0.850	5.2	0.726	0.888	0.805
Reliable and financially	5.4	0.711	0.880	0.782	5.2	0.730	0.890	0.806	5.2	0.719	0.885	0.800
Social and environmental responsibility	5.0	0.702	0.876	0.762	4.4	0.718	0.884	0.797	4.4	0.692	0.871	0.768
Customer citizen helping others	5.5	0.792	0.889	0.734	5.4	0.773	0.865	0.782	5.4	0.784	0.899	0.876
Customer citizen helping the company	5.8	0.575	0.726	0.894	5.2	0.522	0.715	0.885	4.9	0.504	0.705	0.856
Brand attachment	4.5	0.676	0.949	0.935	4.5	0.689	0.952	0.943	4.3	0.750	0.964	0.956
Brand loyalty	5.3	0.867	0.952	0.919	5.2	0.869	0.962	0.992	5.0	0.869	0.971	0.898

Notes: CR: Composite reliability; AVE: Average variance extracted; α : Alpha the Cronbach.

Table 2. Summary of multi-regression analysis (N = 119) for Tesla

Variable	B	Std. error	β	t	B	Std. error	β	t
(Constant)	-0.573	1.471		-0.389	-2.138	0.672		-3.181
Reliable and financially	-0.140	0.258	-.103	-0.544	0.221	0.122	0.175	1.822
Customer orientation	-0.261	0.190	-.243	-1.375	0.032	0.091	0.031	0.357
Product and service quality	0.087	0.186	0.080	0.470	0.428	0.088	0.415***	4.858
Customer citizen helping others	0.475	0.220	0.426*	2.166	0.185	0.105	0.173	1.755
Customer citizen helping the company	0.709	0.285	0.280*	2.493	0.392	0.134	0.163**	2.917
Social and environmental responsibility	0.025	0.117	0.023	0.211	0.118	0.055	0.121*	2.142
R ²	0.227				0.798			
Dependent variable	Brand attachment				Brand loyalty			

* $p < 0.05$.
 ** $p < 0.01$.
 *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Summary of multi-regression analysis (N = 103) for Volvo

Variable	B	Std. error	β	t	B	Std. error	β	t
(Constant)	0.621	0.675		0.921	-0.767	0.370		-2.076
Reliable and financially	-0.123	0.228	-0.099	-0.541	0.188	0.124	0.155	1.511
Customer orientation	-0.084	0.176	-0.080	-0.480	0.197	0.096	0.190*	2.051
Product and service quality	0.154	0.192	0.147	0.800	0.233	0.103	0.226**	2.253
Customer citizen helping others	0.438	0.179	0.373**	2.443	0.289	0.097	0.252**	2.968
Customer citizen helping the company	0.351	0.117	0.370**	3.006	0.152	0.063	0.165*	2.418
Social and environmental responsibility	-0.011	0.120	-.013	-0.090	0.074	0.065	0.090	1.143
R ²	0.358				0.789			
Dependent variable	Brand attachment				Brand loyalty			

* $p < 0.05$.
 ** $p < 0.01$.

citizen helping the company ($\beta = -0.370$, $p < 0.01$). Customer orientation ($\beta = 0.190$, $p < 0.05$), product and service quality ($\beta = 0.226$, $p < 0.01$), customer citizen helping others ($\beta = 0.252$, $p < 0.01$), and customer citizen helping the company ($\beta = 0.165$, $p < 0.05$) are significant in predicting brand loyalty ($R^2 = 0.79$, $F(6,82) = 51.069$, $p < 0.001$) (see Table 3).

Considering Toyota, the results of the regression indicate the six predictors explained 54.8% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.55$, $F(6,70) = 14.123$, $p < 0.001$) in brand attachment. We found that customer citizen helping others significantly predicted brand attachment ($\beta = 0.433$, $p < 0.001$), as does customer citizen helping the company ($\beta = -0.399$, $p < 0.001$). Customer orientation ($\beta = 0.190$, $p < 0.05$), product and service quality ($\beta = 0.226$, $p < 0.01$), customer citizen helping others ($\beta = 0.252$, $p < 0.01$), and customer citizen helping the company ($\beta = 0.165$, $p < 0.05$) ($R^2 = 0.82$, $F(6,70) = 14.123$, $p < .001$) (see Table 4) are significant in predicting brand loyalty.

Table 4. Summary of multi-regression analysis (N = 105) for Toyota

Variable	B	Std. error	β	t	B	Std. error	β	t
(Constant)	-0.799	0.762		-1.049	-0.939	0.209		-4.485
Reliable and financially	0.074	0.191	0.052	0.389	0.208	0.068	0.168**	3.061
Customer orientation	-0.056	0.144	-.044	-0.391	0.178	0.052	0.167**	3.451
Product and service quality	0.039	0.171	0.030	0.226	0.253	0.055	0.240***	4.572
Customer citizen helping others	0.649	0.165	0.437***	3.935	0.314	0.053	0.276***	5.903
Customer citizen helping the company	0.348	0.092	0.399***	3.776	0.125	0.033	0.128**	3.766
Social and environmental responsibility	-0.059	0.111	-.062	-0.529	0.089	0.035	0.104*	2.569
R^2	0.548				0.820			
Dependent variable	Brand attachment				Brand loyalty			

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

5. Conclusions and implications

The aim of the current study is to analyze the effect of corporate brand reputation on brand attachment and brand loyalty considering the automotive sector. Data collected in online brand communities of owners of three car brands (Tesla, Volvo, and Toyota) allow us to understand that brand reputation tends to be more effective in enhancing brand loyalty than brand attachment. Only the dimensions of customer citizen helping others and customer citizen helping the company (Groth, 2005) exercise a positive and significant influence on brand attachment. This finding highlights the importance of interactions in establishing and developing emotional bonds.

Particularly, customers enjoy interacting with each other, talking about the brand, their products/services, and explaining to other customers some knowledge they don't have about products/services. Customers also do not mind providing helpful feedback to customer services or inform the company about the live experience with the products/services. Therefore, more than reliability of the car or perceived quality of the same, customers need to be involved with the car characteristics and share it with others to be attached to a certain car brand.

When considering brand loyalty, other dimensions of brand reputation emerge as significant. For Toyota, all six dimensions have significant effects on brand loyalty. Customers give particular importance to customer-customer or customer-company interactions and appreciate the product and service quality. In fact, Toyota has a huge reputation in what concerns the quality of its products. For Volvo brand, the dimensions of reliable and financially and social and environmental responsibility are not significant to influence brand loyalty. For Tesla, product and service quality and the interactions with customer-company are the most important to enhance brand loyalty. The dimension reliable and financially is only important to Toyota brand. Therefore, H1 and H2 are partially supported.

The reason for such findings may lie in the way customers see the brands. Toyota and Volvo are more concerned about communicating the reliability of the cars (in the case of Toyota) and vehicle safety (Volvo) than Tesla. Tesla Motors is the only one of the three brands founded in the twenty-first century. Therefore, they do not have yet a tradition on communicating brand reputation in a way others do.

The quality of the direct interaction between the company and the customers becomes very important in creating reputation about a car brand. Product and service quality become one of the most important dimensions of brand reputation to contribute to loyalty. This dimension deals with offering high-quality products and services, stands behind the services that company offers, and develops innovative services. The last contribution comes from social and environmental Responsibility. This is noticeable since the three car brands are committed to social and environmental issues, but customers tend to mostly value the quality of the relationship and the quality and innovation of goods/services.

This bond between a car brand and customers (Belk, 1988; Loureiro & Kaufmann, 2016; Park et al., 2010) represents more than positive emotions and feelings; it is about to share the same “soul.” Following Park et al. (2010), this happens when the connections between the brand and the customer self become close and also when brand-related thoughts and memories become more prominent. Therefore, the way customers evaluate the “truth” of a car brand, or even the more the evaluation of genuinity of the car as a product of the identity system of the car brand, the greater the attachment between the car and the customer. Tesla seems to be more effective in transferring the essence of the brand to the product (car). The reason could lie in the fact that Tesla has its production located in the same country and place as its origin (United States of America). The other two brands (Toyota and Volvo) relocated the production of some car models to other countries. According to what was possible to get from participants of this research, customers are informed of this situation and so could have a perception of a lack of essence of the brand in the products. In this last case, the reputation of a brand can gain relief to attract customers.

The findings of this study could be important for those who manage car brands. A brand like Tesla should focus more on the originality and the essence of the brand to involve customers on attachment bonds. The brands with a long-term relationship with customers should reinforce such relationship providing more interactions and new experiences with them.

As any other research, the current one has limitations that could be inspirations for further research. First, other car brands could be considered to get a better understanding this phenomenon. Second, future research could also consider the corporate reputation dimension of good employer proposed by Walsh and Beatty (2007). Third, it will be interesting to explore how the authenticity and attachment could influence brand equity. Finally, it will also be interesting to analyze the model regarding situations when relationships between car brands and customers are problematic.

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