

# “Exploring the process of customer engagement, self-brand connections and loyalty”

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## Exploring the process of customer engagement, self-brand connections and loyalty

### Abstract

Traditional measures of customer loyalty have been criticized for being too static and one-dimensional in nature and as such, customer engagement, or CE, has surfaced as a more dynamic and interactive concept through which to understand the nature of the customer-brand relationship. Despite recent and increasing interest in the theoretical foundations of CE, attempts to capture its potential antecedents and consequences continue to lack empirical clarity. This study addresses this gap by empirically exploring the operation of CE through its proposed antecedents of: satisfaction, trust, affective commitment and rapport; and proposed consequences, being: self-brand connections and loyalty. The relationships between the antecedents and consequences of engagement are then examined across a range of service types. The results revealed affective commitment to be a strong driver of self-brand connections, whereas satisfaction held greater importance for the formation of customer loyalty. Surprisingly, trust was found to have a negative relationship to self-brand connections. The findings of this research enable managers to better understand how the outcomes of CE, namely loyalty and self-brand connections, can be driven across range of service types.

**Keywords:** customer engagement, self-brand connections, loyalty, satisfaction, trust, affective commitment, rapport, service contexts.

**JEL Classification:** M31.

### Introduction

This paper seeks to broaden the understanding of customer engagement, a term which has received increased attention within services marketing literature. Customer engagement, or CE, has been defined as a ‘...psychological process that models the underlying mechanisms by which customer loyalty forms, as well as the mechanisms by which loyalty may be maintained’ (Bowden, 2009a, p. 65). CE is considered to be a process, rather than an end state, because it maps the variety of customer behaviors and attitudes that result in positive brand-focused consequences, such as loyalty (Verhoef et al., 2010, Bowden, 2009b; Hollebeek, 2011a, 2012; Gummerus et al., 2012). In light of this, CE has emerged as a more dynamic and holistic concept through which to understand the building of strong, enduring and loyal customer relationships. Across marketing literature, customer-provider relationships have typically been explored through the various components of a customer’s connection with a brand, such as loyalty, satisfaction and participation. While these constructs may function as individual aspects of brand relationships, they do not describe the nature and depth of the how brand relationships form and the way in which they may be maintained. However, the concept of CE extends this individualistic perspective by providing marketers with an overarching process that encompasses the total set of brand-focused activities that motivate customers to form close, emotional and valued bonds with service providers (Bowden, 2009a; Gummerus et al., 2012).

Although CE is still in its infancy within marketing literature, a number of studies have highlighted its importance to understanding customer-provider relationships (e.g., Brodie et al. 2011a,b; Hollebeek, 2011a,b, 2012; Vivek et al., 2012). However, despite the number of theoretical conceptions of CE, empirical research regarding the process of CE, its antecedents, and its outcomes remains sparse (So et al., 2012; Gummerus et al., 2012). As such, studies aiming to empirically measure CE may need to utilize existing engagement literature; as well as general service marketing literature in order to identify constructs that are reflective of the potential antecedent and consequences of the CE process. Using such an approach, the current study has identified satisfaction, trust, affective commitment and rapport as possible drivers of CE; and self-brand connections and customer loyalty as potential CE outcomes. The relevant literature supporting these assertions will be provided in the following sections.

A secondary purpose of this study is to explore how these antecedents contribute jointly to the process of CE through the outcome of self-brand connections and loyalty across different service contexts. To the author’s knowledge, research has not yet empirically explored the way in which CE operates in the service sector across these service types, despite the suggested importance of contextual factors in shaping CE (e.g. Verhoef et al., 2010; Brodie et al., 2011a; Hollebeek, 2011a).

This study will therefore aim to provide an important contribution to the literature on engagement by examining the relationships between the drivers and outcomes of CE across a variety of service types. This in turn may increase the depth of

knowledge surrounding how CE within various service sectors can be formed, strengthen and maintained. The suggested outcomes of CE including self-brand connections and loyalty are discussed next. This is then followed by a discussion of the effect of satisfaction, trust, affective commitment and rapport on self-brand connections and loyalty.

### 1. Self-brand connections as an outcome of CE

The concept of self-brand connections has received increased attention within services marketing literature as an important outcome of strong customer-brand relationships (Escalas, 2004; Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Self-brand connections, hereby referred to as SBC, occur when consumers utilize a brand's symbolic properties to communicate their actual or desired self-image to themselves or to others. The degree to which consumers aspire for their self-concept to be congruent with a brand's symbolic properties will motivate their willingness to form and maintain SBC (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Within marketing literature, strong SBC have been found to enhance both brand attitudes and behavioral intentions (Escalas, 2004). This is because consumers who form strong affiliations with favored brands are more likely to maintain an active commitment to that brand through repeat patronage, price insensitivity, purchase postponement if the brand is unavailable, and active participation in brand communities (Park et al., 2007).

Within CE literature, SBC have featured as a way to understand how engaged customers use brands to construct their self-identities (e.g. Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006). According to Goldsmith et al. (2011, p. 104) 'Brand engagement describes a strong focus on brands, their meanings, and using brands to shape and to enhance self-concept.' Research on customer and brand engagement has claimed that levels of brand/self-image congruence are likely to be higher for consumers who regularly use brands as a means of self-expression or enhancement (Spratt et al., 2009). In order to measure this propensity, Spratt et al. (2009) developed the construct of 'brand engagement in self-concept', or BESC, which reflects a customer's generalized tendency to incorporate brands into their self-identities. Customers with high levels of BESC are argued to be more engaged with those brand-related activities that further cements a brand into a consumer's self-concept such as shopping, advertising and brand communities (Goldsmith et al., 2011). These activities are relevant to the notion of CE, as engagement transcends purely transactional exchanges to encompass the wider range of brand behaviors (van Doorn et al., 2010). Recently, So et

al. (2012) empirically tested CE as a second order construct using – among other constructs – 'identification', which reflected the degree to which customers used brands to satisfy self-definitional needs.

Although SBC has been positioned as a relevant concept to CE, no studies have empirically tested how SBC may fit within an engagement framework. However, a number of CE studies have suggested that concept of SBC may serve as an outcome of the process of CE (Brodie et al., 2011a; Brodie and Hollebeek, 2011). Based on these assumptions, and in light of the above review of both marketing and CE literature, it appears logical to position SBC as a consequence of CE, as the concept of SBC considers how various factors motivate customers to establish strong, meaningful and personal connections to favored brands. This paper will therefore provide important theoretical as well as managerial implications; as it will be the first of its kind to explore SBC as an outcome of CE. Specifically, this study will bridge this gap in the literature by examining how the antecedents of; satisfaction, trust, affective commitment and rapport; drive the formation of SBC across various service contexts (Brodie et al., 2011a).

### 2. Customer loyalty as an outcome of CE

Customer loyalty has been defined as a customer's '...deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, *despite* situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior' (Oliver, 1999, p. 34). Consumers who are both behaviorally and attitudinally loyal play a crucial role in the success of a brand through: repeat purchase, reduced search motivation for alternatives, resistance to counter persuasion and positive word of mouth recommendation (Dick and Basu, 1994).

Within CE literature, various studies have positioned loyalty as a focal outcome of engagement (Brodie et al., 2011a, 2011b; Bowden, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; van Doorn et al., 2010; Becker-Olsen, 2006). This is because the interactive and co-creative processes involved in CE motivate customers to form attachments to their service providers that are maintained through behavioral and attitudinal loyalty (Brodie et al., 2011a; Hollebeek, 2012). Recent CE studies by Gummerous et al. (2012) and So et al. (2012) empirically tested loyalty as a consequence of CE. The current study will extend the aforementioned research by exploring how loyalty is driven within different service contexts through the proposed CE

antecedents of: satisfaction, trust, affective commitment and rapport. Given the importance of SBC and customer loyalty to the formation of customer-brand relationships, having a clearer understanding of how these constructs operate as outcomes within a CE framework is an important research issue (Brodie et al., 2011a). This study will examine several selected antecedents in the process

of CE based on recent conceptual literature. As the number of studies empirically testing CE remains slight, having an understanding of how the potential antecedents operate within the process of CE across different service contexts serves as an important contribution to existing CE literature. The research model and hypotheses are presented next. The research model is shown in Figure 1.

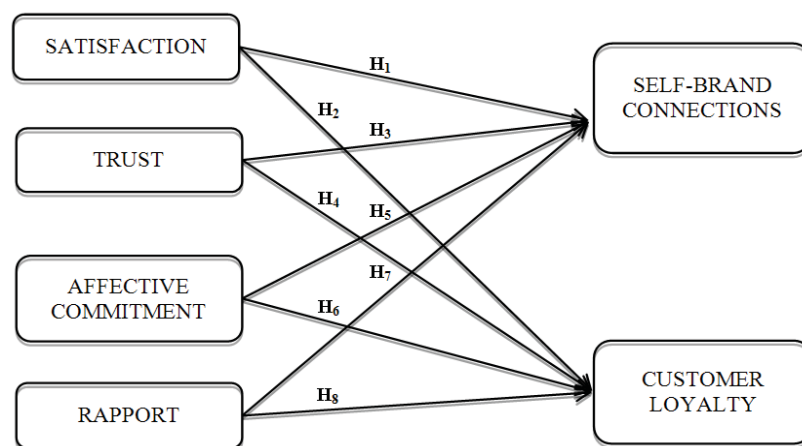


Fig. 1. Research model

### 3. Hypotheses development

**3.1. Satisfaction as a driver of SBC and customer loyalty.** Customer satisfaction is conceptualized as a post-purchase outcome achieved when a brand's offering succeeds in meeting a customer's expectation (Fornell, 1992). Achieving customer satisfaction through service delivery is of crucial importance to service brands aiming to build enduring long-term customer-brand relationships (Oliver, 1997).

Within CE literature, satisfaction has been empirically tested as antecedent of CE (Gao and Chen, 2013; Sashi, 2012). The current paper aims to extend the research on the role of satisfaction in driving CE through the outcomes of SBC and loyalty.

In order for consumers to form strong and enduring SBC, they must be satisfied throughout all stages of the brand evaluation process (Oliver, 1980; Escalas, 2004). Firstly, consumers need to expect that a service brand will be able create a desirable self-identity (Park et al., 2007; McCracken, 1989); as these expectations allow consumers to connect brand consumption with the attainment of a desired self-image (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). The degree to which a customer's initial expectations are exceeded during a service encounter will determine their level of satisfaction (Oliver, 1980); which in turn may affect their willingness to integrate that brand into their lives for the self-enhancement purposes (Swaminathan et al., 2007). Within

marketing literature, a handful of studies provide more concrete links between satisfaction; and customer-brand connections and identification. For example, research by Bhattacharya et al. (1995) found customers who are satisfied with an organization's offerings will have stronger bonds of identification with that firm. This was supported by Kuenzel and Halliday (2008), who revealed satisfaction to be a strong determinant of a customer's brand identification. In light of this, this study proposes:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Satisfaction will positively influence SBC.*

Within marketing literature, satisfaction is generally regarded as an important driver of both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Oliver, 1999; Kumar, 2011). This is because brands that consistently satisfy their customers are likely to be rewarded with high rates of customer retention and profitability (Reicheld, 2003); frequency of service usage and positive recommendation and word-of-mouth behavior (Engel et al., 1969).

Studies on CE continue to advocate satisfaction as a driver of loyalty (e.g., Bowden, 2009b; Bowden et al., 2013). Recently, Janh and Kunz (2011) proposed customer satisfaction to positively influence loyalty through increased brand involvement. Whilst the current study does not explore involvement as a moderator of loyalty, the findings of Janh and Kunz's (2011) study serve as a useful indication of the role of satisfaction as a driver of loyalty within an engagement framework. Satisfaction is therefore



conceptualized in this study as an important antecedent to the outcome of loyalty through the process of CE. It is proposed that:

*H<sub>2</sub>: Satisfaction will positively influence customer loyalty.*

**3.2. Trust as a driver of SBC and customer loyalty.** Another relational construct associated with SBC and customer loyalty is trust (Escalas, 2011); which is defined as ‘...the expectations held by the consumer that the service provider is dependable and can be relied on to deliver on its promises’ (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002, p. 17). When trust is established within a customer-provider relationship, feelings of vulnerability, uncertainty and risk are diminished (Bowden, 2009b). Trust is therefore particularly salient within a service context where customers are required to consume a service before its quality can be evaluated (Berry, 1995).

As stated by Sashi (2012, p. 259) ‘Customer engagement requires the establishment of trust and commitment in buyer-seller relationships.’ Given the importance that trust has for the success of service relationships (Sekhon et al., 2013), it indeed appears logical to consider this construct as a potential antecedent within the process of CE (Bowden, 2009a). Although trust has been considered an important antecedent to engagement outcomes within the nonprofit sector (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006) its role in the creation of CE within commercial services remains less clear. Our study therefore contributes to this research by directly examining trust as a driver of CE outcomes of SBC and loyalty.

Consumers often form SBC with brands that convey traits that are desirable to their actual and aspired self-image (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012); such as trustworthiness, integrity and benevolence (Hess and Story, 2005). In light of this, trust has been pinned as a motivator behind SBC (Dukerich et al., 2002). While SBC may be driven by a variety of factors, such as passion and delight, the formation of trust within a service relationship can result in stronger and more enduring brand connections compared to high arousal constructs (Park et al., 2007). In addition, research has revealed altruism – a concept closely associated with trust (Hess and Story, 2005) – to motivate consumers’ engagement in online brand communities for the purpose of self-identification and enhancement goals (Lee et al., 2011). As CE is a holistic concept that encompasses a consumer’s total set of brand related activities, such as WOM and blogging (van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010), the link between trust and consumer’s participation in brand communities

serves as a useful indication of the role of trust in creating the CE outcome of SBC.

*H<sub>3</sub>: Trust will positively influence SBC.*

Trusted brands are highly valued by customers and as such, the development of trust has been noted as a crucial factor in the formation of loyal customer-provider relationships. Consumers are more likely to reward trusted brand with higher share of wallet, repeat purchase behavior and positive WOM (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). Trust can also drive loyalty by increasing a customer’s confidence regarding a provider’s immediate and long-term competence and intentions which, in turn, facilitates the development of commitment service relationships (Bowden, 2009b; Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). Trust is also considered to preserve customer brand relationships as it can facilitate cooperation interaction and collaboration between exchange partners (Gundlach and Cannon, 2011). Recent research on CE within the restaurant industry found trust to be a direct driver of loyalty within an engagement framework (Bowden et al., 2013b). It is proposed that:

*H<sub>4</sub>: Trust will positively influence customer loyalty.*

**3.3. Affective commitment as a driver of SBC and customer loyalty.** Affective commitment is defined as the emotional attachment formed when the attributes of a product or service, extrinsic from its functional qualities, motivate consumers to develop strong positive feelings towards a brand (Park et al., 2007). Affective commitment is argued to create enduring customer relationships as it infers a consumer’s desire to maintain continuity with a valued product or service (Escalas, 2011; Evanschitzky et al., 2006). The concept of affective commitment is regarded as pertinent to CE, with Mollen and Wilson (2010, p. 923) defining online engagement as a customer’s ‘cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship’. Affective commitment has been positioned as a potential antecedent of CE by a number of focal engagement researchers (e.g. Sashi, 2012; Bowden, 2009a,b). However, further research is needed to empirically test affective commitment as a driver of SBC and loyalty within an engagement framework.

The literature regarding affective commitment’s role in creating self-brand connections remains sparse, and as such this study aims to bridge the gap regarding how emotional brand attachments may drive consumers to use brand for self-enhancement purposes. When a customer becomes affectively committed to a product or services, they develop both behavioral and emotional brand attachments (Guèvremont and Grohmann, 2012). In order to sustain these connections, customers may subse-

quently utilize a favored brand to communicate their actual or ideal self to themselves or to others (Escalas, 2011; Park et al., 2007). The degree to which a customer is affectively committed to a brand can therefore influence their willingness to use that brand to meet self-definitional or enhancement goals (Swaminathan et al., 2007). Recently, Stokburger-Sauer et al. (2012) discovered that customers were more likely to form identity-related brand meanings with brands in which they had established highly affective and emotional bonds. This study expects that affective commitment will drive SBC within the process of CE.

*H<sub>5</sub>: Affective Commitment will positively influence SBC.*

Affective commitment is also considered crucial to the development of customer loyalty, as it can directly influence a customer's attitudinal and behavioral intentions to remain in a customer-provider relationship (Mattila, 2004; Evanschitzky et al., 2006). Within services marketing literature, affective commitment is suggested to contribute to customer loyalty through: increased customer retention and share of wallet; positive word of mouth; customer referrals; and customer price insensitivity (Verhoef, 2002). Furthermore, emotionally committed customers are less likely to switching providers when faced with alternatives (Fullerton, 2003); and more likely to demonstrate loyalty post-service failures (Mattila, 2004). Within engagement literature, affective commitment has been found to be an important driver of CE with an educational service context (Bowden, 2013a). It is proposed that:

*H<sub>6</sub>: Affective Commitment will positively influence customer loyalty.*

**3.4. Rapport as a drive of SBC and customer loyalty.** The intangible nature of services can make them difficult for customers to assess and as such, customers often rely on the level of rapport experienced with employees as a tool for evaluating the quality of a service offering (Berry, 1995). Rapport is defined as the personal, enjoyable and harmonious connections that are formed within customer-to-provider interactions (Gremler and Gwinner, 2000). Rapport is considered to be important to the study of CE, as it reflects the interactive nature of service relationships (Brodie et al., 2011a). Across CE literature, the construct of rapport has been considered as an antecedent to engagement (So et al., 2012; Hollebeek, 2011b); as it represents the relational and interactive dimensions of service quality that can subsequently determine loyalty outcomes.

Research suggests that consumers' self-concepts are largely driven by the types of people they interact with and the nature of those interactions (Jamal and Adelwore, 2008; Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Rapport has thus been positioned as relevant concept to SBC because it encapsulates how the sharing of relational and interactive experiences between consumers and employees can motivate the formation and endurance of strong brand affiliations (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). For example Ahearne et al. (2005) revealed that favorable service interactions can increase a customer's likeliness of using that brand as a source of self-identification. This is because enjoyable service encounters are more likely to be stored in consumer's memory as positive, self-relevant information that is easily retrieved when forming SBC (Aheame et al., 2005). In addition, a study by Chun (2010) demonstrated that customers' self-image congruence was best predicted by their perceptions of empathy, reassurance and sympathy involved in their service exchanges. In light of this brief review, the authors propose that:

*H<sub>7</sub>: Rapport will positively influence SBC.*

Within service literature, rapport has also revealed itself to be a driver of customer loyalty (Haghighi, 2013). When rapport is built through highly interactive exchanges, it can positively influence a customer's satisfaction, likelihood of purchase, positive word-of-mouth and loyalty behaviors and intentions (Price and Arnould, 1999). Through the building of rapport, consumer preferences become more known to providers, thus facilitating a service brand's ability to provide customized offerings which in turn increases customer retention (Berry, 1995). In addition, rapport motivates consumers to demonstrate loyalty by creating and maintaining strong, emotional bonds with a service brand (Gremler and Brown, 1996). It is proposed that:

*H<sub>8</sub>: Rapport will positively influence customer loyalty.*

**3.5. Research context.** In their definition of CE, Brodie et al. (2011a) conceptualized engagement as a contextually contingent process that can vary in cognitive, emotional and behavioral intensity. A number of studies prompt future research to explore how CE operates across a variety of different contexts (Brodie et al., 2011a; Vivek, 2009; Wirtz, 2013). A hedonic and utilitarian service typology may provide such a variety, as it encompasses a range of services that differ in their core consumption purposes (Ng et al., 2007). Hedonic services are defined as '...those consumed primarily for affective or sensory gratification purposes'

(Kempf, 1999, p. 38). In contrast, utilitarian services focus on delivering core, generic and standardized products and are often regarded by consumers as means-to-an-end (Batra and Olli, 1990). In line with the typology developed by Ng et al. (2007), this article posits fine dining restaurants and five star leisure stay hotels as hedonic services; and consumer banks and telecommunication providers as utilitarian services. In light of the need for CE to be examined across a variety of services, this study will use these hedonic and utilitarian contexts to explore how the interactive and co-creative experiences involved in CE manifest across different service types. This in turn will hopefully increase the depth of knowledge surrounding how engagement can be formed, strengthen and maintained. The research method is discussed next.

#### 4. Method

**4.1. Research method.** A cross-sectional design was employed in order to examine the effects of service context on our research model. An online, self-administered voluntary survey was distributed to Australian service consumers. A sample of 500 participants was achieved and the respondent criteria were as follows: equal numbers male and female, aged between 30 and 59, Australian born with a white-collar, professional occupational background. Equal quotas were achieved for the four service types, being fine dining restaurants, leisure stay five star hotels, consumer banking services and telecommunication services.

Satisfaction was measured using the scales developed by Gustafsson et al. (2005). These scales examine the extent to which a service exceeds, or fails to exceed, in meeting customer expectations. The scales measuring trust were taken from Verhoef et al. (2002). These scales measure trust based on a brands benevolence and reliability and dependability to consistently provide good service. Affective commitment was measured using scales developed by Mattila (2006), which capture consumer's reported emotional attachment, personal meaning and self-identification with a brand. Rapport was

examined through Gremler and Gwinner's (2000) scales, which measure the level of enjoyable interaction and personal connections experienced within customer and service-representative relationships. The scales measuring SBC were taken from Escalas (2004) and compare brand congruency with consumer's actual and desired self-image. Finally customer loyalty was measured using seven Likert-Scale items taken from studies by Zeithmal et al. (1996) and Plank and Newell (2007). The scale items are contained within Appendix.

**4.2. Validation of measures.** All measures were subjected to exploratory factor analysis, which was conducted in SPSS 21.0. Cronbach's alpha was examined (Hair et al., 2006) as was average variance extracted. The measures were tested for discriminant validity and all construct pairs passed these tests. Data analysis followed the two-step procedure recommended by Anderson, Gerbing and Hunter (1987) including estimation of the measurement model followed by estimation of the structural model. Additional confirmatory factory analysis was undertaken in AMOS prior to testing the structural model. The measurement model indicated good fit and all items retained served as strong measures for their respective constructs ( $\chi^2 = 308$ ,  $df = 62$ ,  $P.000$ ,  $RSMEA = 0.089$ ,  $GFI = 0.918$ ,  $CFI = 0.971$ ,  $TLI = 0.958$ ,  $IFI = 0.972$ ). An  $RSMEA$  of 0.08 is considered to be a fair fit by Steiger (1989) and Browne and Cudeck (1993). As the sample size was greater than 250, and the model tested had multiple observed variables, this study deemed the  $RMSEA$  as relatively acceptable, due to the remaining absolute and incremental fit indices meeting acceptable levels of fit.

#### 5. Results

The hypothesized relationships from the research model were tested using Structural Equation Modeling. The goodness of fit statistics indicated that an acceptable level of model fit was established for the structural model ( $GFI = 0.914$ ,  $TLI = 0.957$ ,  $CFI = 0.970$ ,  $IFI = 0.970$ ). The results of the structural path coefficients are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Standardized path estimates for research model

| Relationship   | Total Sample $N = 501$ |        |                      |
|--|------------------------|--------|----------------------|
|  | $\beta$                | $CR$   | Hypothesis supported |
| H1 Satisfaction $\rightarrow$ Self-brand connections         | 0.452                  | 6.696  | Yes                  |
| H2 Satisfaction $\rightarrow$ Loyalty                        | 0.457                  | 5.148  | Yes                  |
| H3 Trust $\rightarrow$ Self-brand connections                | -0.360                 | -3.608 | No                   |
| H4 Trust $\rightarrow$ Loyalty                               | 0.280                  | 3.601  | Yes                  |
| H5 Affective commitment $\rightarrow$ Self-brand connections | 0.667                  | 12.919 | Yes                  |
| H6 Affective commitment $\rightarrow$ Loyalty                | 0.141                  | 3.625  | Yes                  |
| H7 Rapport $\rightarrow$ Self-brand connections              | 0.177                  | 3.187  | Yes                  |
| H8 Rapport $\rightarrow$ Loyalty                             | 0.095                  | 2.127  | Yes                  |



Affective commitment was found to have a strong, positive and significant effect on SBC ( $\beta = 0.667$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), which in turn supported Hypothesis 5. This was the most significant relationship within the research model. Satisfaction was demonstrated to have a moderate, positive and significant effect on SBC ( $\beta = 0.452$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), therefore supporting Hypothesis 1. Rapport was revealed to have a weak, positive and significant effect on SBC ( $\beta = 0.177$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), thus supporting Hypothesis 7. Trust was discovered to have a moderate, negative and significant effect on SBC ( $\beta = -0.360$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This supported the rejection of Hypothesis 3. The hypotheses regarding the relationships between: satisfaction, trust, affective commitment and rapport, and loyalty followed different patterns. Significant and positive relationships were found between satisfaction and loyalty ( $\beta = 0.475$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and trust and loyalty ( $\beta = 0.280$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), thus supporting the non-rejection of Hypotheses 2 and 4 respectively. The effects of affective commitment on loyalty ( $\beta = 0.141$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and rapport on loyalty ( $\beta = 0.95$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) albeit slightly weaker, were also found to be positive and significant, therefore supporting Hypotheses 6 and 8 respectively.

## 6. Discussion

Affective commitment was found to be the strongest determinant of the CE outcome of SBC. This result supports previous research by Mattila (2004) and Park et al. (2007), who claimed that consumers are motivated by emotional attachments when using valued brands as tools for self-enhancement purposes.

Satisfaction was the second strongest driver of SBC across the four services. This finding empirically supports the link found between satisfaction and customer-brand image congruence within the hotel (Chon, 1990) and restaurant (Ekinci and Riley, 2003) industry. Theoretically this provides SBC literature with much needed evidence regarding the determinants of SBC and the effect of these determinants on the process of CE and hence the outcome of SBC across different service contexts.

Rapport was found to have a weak relationship to SBC and was thus considered to play a minor role in the formation of brand connections. This finding conflicts with existing rapport and SBC literature (Jamal and Adelowore, 2008; Escalas and Bettman, 2003). This result suggests that rapport may be harder to establish within services that feature brief and discontinuous encounters or have minimal face-to-face interaction between employees and customers. In light of this, the importance of rapport for building SBC across services such as banks, telecommunications providers, hotels and to a degree, restaurants, is reduced.

Trust was revealed to have a moderate, negative and significant effect on SBC. This finding is consistent with research by Crosby et al. (1990) who found no relationship between trust and customer-brand similarity. Although trust is important for establishing strong brand connections in the early stages of a service relationship, a customer's perceived risk is likely to be diminished as a relationship develops and customers gain knowledge through repeated service encounters. Therefore, the effect of trust on relational outcomes such as SBC may also diminish over time.

The results for the second CE outcome, customer loyalty, differed from the findings for SBC. Satisfaction was the strongest determinant of loyalty across both service contexts, supporting the suggestions made within marketing (e.g. Shankar et al., 2003); and CE literature (Janh and Kunz, 2011). Trust was found to be the second strongest driver of loyalty. Due to the intangible nature of services, the level of brand-choice risk surrounding service exchanges is heightened and as such, consumers look for signal of provider trustworthiness and reliability when forming loyalty intentions. The existence of brand trust therefore acts as motivation for purchase, commitment and hence loyalty within a service context.

Both rapport and affective commitment were found to be weaker drivers of customer loyalty. This finding could be attributed to the types of services used within this study, which appeared to emphasize the more functional constructs of satisfaction and trust; as opposed to the more relational construct of rapport and affective commitment. The weak link between affective commitment and loyalty is noticeably divergent from existing literature, which argues a stronger relationship between affective commitment and loyalty outcomes (Mattila, 2004; Fullerton, 2003). One explanation for this conflicting result is the potential hesitance customers may have towards advocating a service on the merit of their emotional attachments with that brand. Instead, consumers may perceive less social risk, and hence be more willing, to recommend a service based on more functional attributes regarding a brand's reliability and competence in meeting customer expectations. Furthermore, the services in this study are mass-type services that rarely offer repeated personal interaction to customers. In light of this, the creation of personal bonds and rapport, as well as emotional attachments may not be a strong driver of the specific CE outcome of loyalty within the context of such services.

The results of this study also revealed the operation of CE to be the same across the variety of service



types used. This implies that the relationships between the constructs of the research model may be generalizable across a range of services that differ in their purpose for consumption. This research therefore contributes to the gaps identified by a number of engagement researchers who prompt future studies to examine the process of CE across various service contexts.

## 7. Managerial implications

The authors of this study had two major aims: to explore how the process of customer engagement could be conceptualized; and to determine the salience of satisfaction, trust, affective commitment and rapport in determining SBC, loyalty and the process of CE across multiple service contexts. By addressing these research issues, this study has provided an important contribution to CE literature, as the concept itself offers the potential to move beyond conceptualizations of loyalty as a simple, preference based attitude by advocating an approach that is more sensitive to the factors that influence the strength of customer-brand relationships over time (Fournier and Yao, 1997). In addition, by examining the process of CE across the contexts of hedonic and utilitarian services, this study provides management with a better understanding of how the determinants of CE operate across multiple service contexts. Affective commitment and satisfaction were found to be the strongest drivers of SBC whereas satisfaction and trust were the strongest drivers of loyalty. Therefore, the importance of CE determinants will vary across different CE outcomes. The managerial implications of these findings are discussed next in order of importance to the outcomes of SBC and loyalty respectively.

Prior to the current study, the concept of SBC had not been closely examined within an engagement framework. As such, the results of this study provide a new contribution by broadening the depth of knowledge about how SBC can be driven within the process of CE. These findings carry important implication for management given the range of benefits that the creation of SBC can bring. Service managers should therefore recognise the value in facilitating customers to develop strong and positive symbolic associations with their brands.

Considering the strong impact of affective commitment on SBC, service managers should focus on enhancing interpersonal brand traits such as likeability, friendliness, warmth and familiarity during service encounters. While plausible to assume that hedonic services are more capable in highlighting such non-functional brand attributes, as service encounters are often more interactive and experiential in nature;

utilitarian services should also strive for affective brand attributes. For example, banks and telecommunication providers can incorporate personable language into their advertising, and center their branding campaigns on how the service offering makes customer feel as opposed to the utility it provides.

The results of this study also showed satisfaction to be a strong driver of SBC. Managerially, this implies the need for services to construct a brand image that is highly congruent with the self-image of their target market. This can be achieved through extensive and ongoing market research on how customers perceive themselves, the brand, and how this perception manifests into brand usage behavior. This will allow managers to create strategies that align brand image with the self-image of their target market; and enable customers to portray an actual or desired social image.

Interestingly, this study showed trust was considerably less influential in the creation of SBC across the service contexts. Managerially, this implies that service brands should focus their marketing efforts on enhancing customers' affective commitment and satisfaction, as these antecedents were found to be strong motivators of SBC.

Satisfaction was the strongest determinant of loyalty. In light of this, managers should ensure that their service continually succeeds in providing offerings that not only meet, but exceed customer expectations in order to harbor customer loyalty. Service managers could achieve by modifying their service offering to suit the goals of their customers as discovered through preliminary market research. Alternatively, service managers may moderate their customer's expectations to a level that is more obtainable by their brand by informing consumers on what to expect from service encounters prior to consumption. This will assist in creating more realistic and achievable expectations.

Given trust was another important driver of loyalty, service brands should also seek to enhance customers' perception of their competency, reliability and consistency and benevolence, in order to foster trust and hence create customer loyalty. Utilitarian services could achieve this by routinising their most frequent service offerings to ensure a standard of quality. Hedonic services can also implement quality control procedures for the more tangible service attributes, in order to counteract the increased potential for brand-divergent behavior from front-line staff. Managers across both service contexts can utilize technology and innovation to increase customers' perceptions of the promptness and competence of their service encounters. In order

to convey brand benevolence and altruism, service brand managers should view all service encounters, particularly customer complaints, as opportunities for the brand to demonstrate a genuine regard for customers' needs and welfare.

Similar to the results for SBC, rapport and affective commitment were also found to be weaker drivers of the outcome of loyalty across both service contexts. Considering this, brands hoping to achieve customer loyalty would benefit from focusing on strategies that accentuated a service's functional qualities as opposed to its emotional attributes. However, rapport and affective commitment should not be labeled as entirely futile, and it would be prudent for service-brand managers to still consider rapport and affective commitment as antecedents to customer loyalty.

## Conclusion

There are several directions for future studies arising from this study. Firstly, the negative effect of the construct of trust on relations outcomes such as SBC warrants a more thorough investigation. Further research should also examine whether the salience of CE antecedents differs with frequency and duration

of service usage within these service contexts. In addition, future studies should also include other relational variables within a model of engagement. This will extend the empirical evidence provided by this study on the antecedents and consequences involved in the CE process. By exploring how different constructs combine to form the engagement process, researchers will be closer to discovering an optimum CE model that can be applied in a diverse range of service contexts (Brodie et al., 2011a). Future studies may also adopt a longitudinal approach and measure customers' behavioral manifestations of engagement; in addition to their attitudinal engagement towards their service providers over time. In addition, future studies may explore the negative aspect of engagement, or disengagement, by conceptualizing the way in which brand relationships deteriorate and dissolve; and exploring the relationship between the positive and negative aspects of engagement within brand relationships. Finally, the process of CE should also be examined within different service contexts and across different cultures to define how the more relationally based constructs of rapport, affective commitment and SBC operate within the CE process.

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