

Brand Attachment in the Digital Age: A Qualitative Study of Online Shopping Experiences

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ABSTRACT

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In the context of a rapidly expanding digital marketplace, the relationship between consumers and brands is undergoing profound transformation. This study explores how online shopping experiences influence brand attachment, a key emotional bond that fosters long-term consumer-brand relationships. While previous research has largely focused on transactional aspects of e-commerce, few studies have examined the emotional and experiential dimensions that shape brand attachment in digital environments. Adopting a qualitative approach, this research draws on semi-structured interviews to capture consumers' narratives and subjective interpretations of their online purchasing experiences. The findings reveal that personalization, perceived value, ease of use, and emotional resonance play a central role in strengthening or weakening brand attachment. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of brand-consumer relationships in the digital age and provides valuable insights for marketers seeking to foster emotional loyalty through enriched online experiences.

Keywords: Brand Attachment, Online Shopping, Digital Experience, Qualitative Study, Consumer Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, e-commerce has experienced exponential growth, profoundly reshaping market dynamics and consumer behavior. This transformation has been accompanied by an increased digitalization of the customer-brand relationship, leading to the dematerialization of traditional points of contact. In this new digital context, the customer experience is no longer limited to the act of purchase; it encompasses a wide range of online interactions—website navigation, personalization, after-sales service, customer reviews, and more. These dimensions directly influence how consumers perceive brands, engage with them, and develop emotional attachment. Whereas customer relationships were once built through direct in-store interactions, they now rely on technological interfaces where the user experience has become a key strategic lever for differentiation.

In a digitalized environment where offerings are abundant and switching brands requires just a simple click, how can brands retain their customers and foster lasting attachment? More specifically, how do consumers' online shopping experiences influence their attachment to brands? This question is crucial for both researchers and practitioners, as it raises important issues related to digital experience, perceived value, emotional engagement, and loyalty in a contactless environment.

OBJECTIVES

This article aims to:

- ✓ Explore the dimensions of the online shopping experience that influence brand attachment.
- ✓ Understand how consumers perceive and interpret these digital experiences.
- ✓ Identify experiential drivers that foster the development of a strong emotional bond between the consumer and the brand in a digital context.

- ✓ Contribute to the literature by offering a qualitative, consumer-narrative-based perspective on the relationship between online shopping experiences and brand attachment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Attachment: A Lasting Emotional Relationship

Brand attachment is defined as a lasting emotional bond that a consumer develops toward a specific brand (Thomson, MacInnis & Park, 2005). It is a multidimensional construct, encompassing emotional dimensions (affection, passion), cognitive aspects (identification, memories), and behavioral components (commitment, loyalty). Unlike mere satisfaction or transactional loyalty, attachment involves a personal and symbolic connection with the brand, which influences long-term purchase intentions and consumer behaviors (Park et al., 2010).

This attachment is often associated with brands that are perceived as aligned with the consumer's identity or that provide positive and memorable experiences. In this sense, brand attachment can be seen as the result of a relational process, in which each interaction between the consumer and the brand contributes to strengthening—or weakening—the bond.

Online Shopping Experience: Toward an Experiential Approach to E-commerce

With the rise of e-commerce, interactions between consumers and brands are increasingly shifting to digital channels. The online shopping experience is now recognized as a key driver of brand performance in digital environments. It encompasses a set of perceptions, emotions, and cognitive evaluations generated throughout the online journey—from product search to post-purchase service (Rose et al., 2012).

According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), the digital customer experience goes beyond the technical quality of the platform (usability, speed, security) and also includes hedonic and emotional aspects: browsing pleasure, personalization, sense of control, and interactivity. These dimensions are particularly important given that digital environments tend to be impersonal and standardized, pushing brands to find alternative ways to create closeness and engagement.

From Online Experience to Brand Attachment: A Link to Explore

Several studies have shown that the quality of the customer experience influences brand perception, particularly in terms of trust, satisfaction, and loyalty (Verhoef et al., 2009; Bilgihan, 2016). However, the relationship between online shopping experience and brand attachment remains underexplored from a qualitative perspective. Most existing research adopts a quantitative approach and focuses on rational indicators (perceived usefulness, perceived value, repurchase intention), often overlooking the emotional and narrative dimensions of the experience.

Yet in a competitive digital environment—where switching brands is made easier—emotional attachment becomes a key differentiator for companies. Understanding how consumers build this emotional bond based on their digital experiences—whether positive or negative—is therefore essential for brands seeking to establish meaningful and lasting relationships.

By adopting a qualitative approach, this study seeks to fill this gap by exploring, through consumer narratives, the underlying mechanisms between online shopping experience and brand attachment, taking into account the emotions, subjective perceptions, and meanings attributed by individuals.

METHODS

Research Methodology

Although quantitative research relies on large samples (Yin, 1991), qualitative studies offer significant advantages in terms of depth, flexibility, and creativity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Pratt, 2009). They allow for the exploration of complex phenomena and a nuanced understanding of human behavior (Charmaz, 2006), making them particularly well-suited to investigating the emotional and symbolic connections between consumers and brands, especially within digital or virtual contexts.

In this study, a qualitative approach was adopted due to its relevance for deeply exploring consumer perceptions and behaviors (Evrard et al., 1993; Thiétart, 2007). Specifically, we employed semi-structured individual interviews to better understand the mechanisms of brand attachment in the context of online shopping. This method offers a

degree of flexibility in conducting interviews, thus encouraging spontaneity, richness of discourse, and the free expression of respondents, elements that are essential for capturing consumer attachment in an online purchasing environment (Cossette, 1994; Giordano, 2003).

Data Collection Method

The interviews were conducted directly (face-to-face) with respondents residing in Casablanca, and via videoconference (Zoom) with those living in other regions of Morocco or abroad. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and then fully transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, the transcripts were translated into English in accordance with academic translation standards.

The average duration of the interviews was 25 minutes. They were conducted over a period extending from February 28, 2025, to April 1, 2025. The collected data were subjected to qualitative content analysis using a thematic approach, which is widely recognized as one of the most commonly employed methods in qualitative research (Evrard et al., 1993; Thiétart et al., 1999).

Sample Composition and Characteristics

The study sample consists of 33 respondents, selected through convenience sampling, based on one main criterion: being emotionally attached to a brand purchased online.

The diversity of participant profiles is a major strength of this study. The sample includes 21 women and 12 men, representing a wide range of age group, from 18 to 59 years old, and engaged in various professions. Respondents reside in several cities across Morocco, as well as abroad, which allowed us to incorporate insights from members of the Moroccan diaspora living on different continents. This socio-demographic diversity enriches the data collected and enhances the analytical depth of our study.

In qualitative research, sample size is often guided by the principle of data saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which occurs when interviews no longer yield new insights. In our case, thematic saturation was reached by the 30th interview. However, we chose to conduct three additional interviews to ensure the stability of the data, given the subjective and contextual nature of brand attachment, which may emerge from various dimensions depending on the individual.

RESULTS

Following a thorough examination of respondents' statements, we identified various factors that strengthen brand attachment in the context of online shopping:

Ease of Use and Smooth User Experience

Respondents mentioned intuitive navigation, site clarity, and effective filters as key factors that facilitate the online shopping experience and strengthen attachment to a particular brand or website.

"The site is ergonomic, fast, well-organized, with useful filters" (Respondent 10).

"The brand's website is aesthetically pleasing, easy to navigate" (Respondent 24).

"The customer experience is amazing on the app... you can filter using whatever criteria you want" (Respondent 6).

Trust in the Brand

Product reliability, fast delivery, fulfillment of commitments, and after-sales service foster a sense of security, thereby strengthening both trust and attachment to the brand.

"This positive experience made me fully trust the brand" (Respondent 5).

"I became attached to the brand because I feel confident with this choice" (Respondent 9).

"We begin to develop a special attachment to this brand, or what we call trust in the brand" (Respondent 18).

"Since this first experience, I regularly return to their website. A real sense of trust has developed" (Respondent 33).

Satisfaction

For several respondents, brand attachment was the result of one or more satisfying shopping experiences. Receiving a product that truly meets a need and aligns with consumer expectations frequently leads to strengthened attachment.

"The products were great... I was very satisfied with the delivered package" (Respondent 1)

"I've made almost all my pregnancy and maternity purchases there, and since then, I've felt a strong bond with the site, especially since the value for money is excellent and the after-sales service meets expectations" (Respondent 8).

"The bag perfectly met my expectations" (Respondent 9).

"The service is really great... the after-sales service is perfect" (Respondent 6).

"This attachment developed naturally, through constant satisfaction and the alignment between their offerings and my expectations" (Respondent 33).

Positive Emotions (Pleasure, Excitement, Nostalgia, Memories, etc.)

Positive emotions experienced during the purchase process, such as nostalgia, sensory pleasure, and excitement, create a strong emotional attachment to the brand. This is supported by the following verbatim excerpts:

"I was excited to receive my order... very satisfied and excited to try what I received" (Respondent 1).

"It was our first shopping experience, and we received many items, and the kids were happy. Since then, we've become addicted" (Respondent 3).

"A wave of memories overwhelmed me... as if I were reconnecting with a part of my childhood... Seeing the new items offered, while recognizing the style that was familiar to me, I felt a real attachment. This mix of nostalgia, trust in quality, and familiarity with the brand's universe played a huge role in my desire to buy" (Respondent 31).

"This moment had a significance far beyond what I had imagined" (Respondent 32).

Matching brand and consumer values

The alignment between the brand's values and those of the consumer plays a key role in strengthening brand attachment. When the consumer perceives a genuine affinity between their personal beliefs and the brand in question, they develop a stronger emotional bond, as demonstrated by the following verbatim excerpts:

"I liked that they care about the planet... I felt in agreement with their commitment" (Respondent 17).

"It's the brand's fair and transparent model that made me attach to it" (Respondent 15).

"Their commitment to craftsmanship and ecology made me feel like I was supporting a cause" (Respondent 13).

Personalization of the Offer and Relevant Recommendations

Recognition of the customer's tastes and preferences, targeted recommendations, and personalized loyalty benefits contribute to creating a sense of exclusivity and strengthening attachment. The following verbatim excerpts support this observation:

"I feel like they know me, like they're making personalized recommendations for me" (Respondent 2).

"Zalando will recommend a specific size based on the product and my previous purchases" (Respondent 7).

"Adding a personal touch to the notebook made me feel special, like the product was made just for me" (Respondent 13).

The human and relational side of the brand

Even if we're talking about e-commerce, which is marked by the automation and digitization of exchanges, the human side of the brand is still very important, helping it to stand out and create a solid bond with its customers, as many participants revealed. The tone of communication, thoughtful gestures, attention to detail and customer care create a deep emotional bond.

"A handwritten message... a small card... really touched me" (Respondent 13).

"The manager called me to ask about my mother..." (Respondent 32).

"This sincerity... this attention, it's truly rare" (Respondent 30).

Perceived Lack of Alternatives

In addition to the other elements identified, we can also discuss the perceived lack of alternatives in an online shopping context. The unavailability of certain products elsewhere or a unique offering creates exclusive loyalty and unconditional attachment to a brand.

"I was able to buy products that I can't find here in Morocco" (Respondent 1).

"The unavailability of this brand nearby... helps save costs" (Respondent 22).

"Every time we need food delivery, we think of Glovo right away, and so there's an attachment to Glovo because there's no other option" (Respondent 18).

DISCUSSION

The interviews highlight that brand attachment in the context of online shopping is based on an overall and emotional customer experience, at the intersection of functional performance (trust, ease of use, satisfaction) and emotional and symbolic connection (emotions, values, personalization, humanity).

These factors, far from being independent, work in synergy to build a strong and lasting bond between the consumer and the brand, despite the dematerialization of contact in a digital context.

Research limitations

All research work has certain limitations. Firstly, the sampling adopted in our qualitative study is non-probabilistic and based on convenience, which limits the representativeness of respondents. This method, while suitable for exploratory research, does not allow us to generalize the results to the entire population of Moroccan online consumers.

Secondly, our study targets Moroccan consumers. As such, the results obtained cannot be extrapolated to other international consumers, particularly in areas where e-commerce is more developed.

In addition, we recognize the general nature of our problematic linked to brand attachment in an online purchasing context, without any precise distinction between the different dimensions of this behavior. Indeed, we have not specified:

- The purchasing channels used (websites, mobile applications, social networks, etc.);
- The payment methods (online payment, payment on delivery);
- Nor the sectors or product categories concerned (clothing, food, electronic products, etc.).

This lack of segmentation limits the analytical depth of our findings and reduces the possibility of identifying sector-specific dynamics or differentiated practices according to the channels used.

Future Research Directions

Future research could focus on specific sectors (such as clothing, cosmetics, etc.) and differentiated purchasing channels (websites, mobile applications, social media) to address the phenomenon of brand attachment within the context of online shopping. It would also be relevant to explore generational and geographical differences, or to conduct international comparative studies. Finally, the adoption of integrated mixed methods would allow for a deeper exploration of the results obtained.

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