When love becomes hate: The role of emotional attachment in consumers’ responses to functional failures. A case of product-service bundles.

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Consumers often purchase and use products and services offered in bundles. In some cases, this bundling is an intentional marketing strategy by companies to provide consumers with integrated solutions in one package. In many other cases, bundling occurs naturally; some examples include a mobile phone and a network service, cars and car mechanics, computers and the Internet, or, in a retail context, products and a retailer. Product-service bundles are prevalent across different consumption contexts, in which the consumer uses a product and a service that are provided together and are not perceptually distinct. The question is how the consumer distinguishes emotionally and cognitively between the two firms. In particular, in the face of a functional product failure, a product-service bundle represents a challenge for the consumer to determine why the failure occurred, who to blame and what to do. As these factors subsequently affect their evaluations of both brands, the complicacy of the product-service bundle also presents challenges to firms.

Customers’ responses to product failures are not only motivated by needs to solve technical or practical issues but also by psychological needs. Indeed, one important factor that might influence consumers’ responses to product failures is what the product means to them. Consumer psychology has shown that people relate to brands in a way that is similar to the way in which they relate to other people (Fournier, 1998), and as a result often form relationships with products and brands that mirror interpersonal relationships (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004). A relationship formed between a consumer and a product/service or brand often involves a certain amount of emotional attachment (Aggarwal & Zhang, 2006). In a product-service bundle, consumers might develop an emotional attachment with each of the contributing brands to different extents (i.e. they might be more attached to the product than the service or vice versa), which in turn could bias the way they attribute responsibility in the case of a functional failure.

For instance, in the telecommunication context, a mobile phone has a constant physical presence; you can see it and touch it. A mobile network service on the other hand requires little interaction between consumers and the company or sales staff. The people behind automated network services are even more distant. In such cases when the offering consists of a tangible, physically proximate product, and an intangible, less physically proximate service with lesser
ongoing customer-employee interaction, the different consumption experience might cause the emotional connection between the consumer and the product/service to differ. This also applies to many other product-service bundle industries where the primary product (e.g. phone, equipment, or car) is a tangible product and the service provides the facilitating function. This is not uncommon because some types of services are less personnel intensive than others, and furthermore, since the introduction of different online and electronic platforms, the interaction between consumers and customer service personnel has significantly diminished for some industries. For example, McDonald’s provides touchscreen kiosks which allow full-menu ordering and customization of burgers, which could easily diminish the role of workers (Johnson, 2016).

We were interested to find out whether different levels of emotional attachment to a product and service component in a bundle would affect consumers’ evaluations of the individual components in the face of a functional failure. To test this, we conducted a series of experiments with over 400 participants in a behavioral laboratory at the University of Alberta, Canada. Using a method referred to as “priming” we activated participants’ emotional attachment to a product or service in the context of a mobile phone and network bundle.

In an initial study, we asked one group of participants to write about how they would customise their current product (mobile phone), while another group wrote about how they would personalise their current service (network). The theory of “self-object link” (Belk, 1988) suggests that when an individual customizes or personalizes a product, they essentially “contaminate” the product with parts of their self, through which an emotional connection is developed. People invest “psychic energy” in an object to which they have directed their efforts, time, and attention (Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011). Having participants write about what they have done to customize their product or service component of the product-service bundle activates, or makes salient, their emotional attachment with that component.

In a second experiment, we activated product/service emotional attachment in a more direct way. Participants were asked to do a writing task in which they reflected on a period of time when they felt emotionally attached to their phone (or the service). We then exposed participants to a scenario in which their phone/network service malfunctioned with an ambiguous cause (specifically, messages were constantly sent to the wrong contacts, and it was unclear whether it was the fault of the phone or the network service). In this study, half of the participants read about the scenario as if it had happened to themselves and the other half read about the same scenario as if it had happened to a classmate of theirs. Importantly, the brand of product or service the classmate used was the same as that of the participant’s. This allowed us to test whether the effect of emotional attachment is related to ownership (i.e. of the product owned by the consumer) or to the brand in general which does not require a sense of ownership.
One might expect that consumers who are more emotionally attached to their product, would be more likely to forgive it for the failure and instead attribute responsibility to the service instead. Gregoire and Fisher (2006) refer to this as a “love is blind” effect. However, our research shows, perhaps counterintuitively, that the product component (i.e. in this case the cell phone) did not benefit from the stronger emotional attachment in the face of a functional failure. In fact, the stronger the emotional attachment, the more likely it was that product evaluation deteriorated more than service evaluations. In this case, “love has become hate” (Gregoire & Fisher, 2006).

This effect was present when the incident occurred to the participants themselves but not when they heard it had happened to someone else. Given that the brands used in both scenarios were the same, the result shows that it was not the brand that was punished but the product consumers’ had become attached to. In contrast, the same effect was not observed in the context of service attachment. Even when high emotional attachment to a service is activated and made salient, it is not sufficient to impact on consumers’ evaluations, presumably because consumers’ level of attachment to a network is considerably weaker than to their cell phone.

Marketers often focus on their Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tactics, but overlook the relationship that the consumer forms with the actual product/service and the dynamic interaction between them. Results from our research demonstrate that, at least in the telecommunication context, service providers might benefit from building emotional attachments and promoting strong relationships between themselves and their consumers. Obviously this is more challenging for a service than a product, as the latter is in close proximity to the consumer, while a service is more intangible. In addition, many consumers today tend to lean towards available self-service options, giving service providers even fewer opportunities to interact with them. While consumer-brand connection is certainly important, the idea of ownership is something that a tangible product naturally entails but not an intangible service. Thus marketers might want to enhance consumers’ perception of the ownership of a service.

Moreover, just as consumers tend to anthropomorphise a well-loved product; that is, considering an unanimated product as a human; service providers too might want to consider ways to evoke animism such as using lively brand characters. By leveraging online social networks, brand communities and social media service providers can also interact with their consumers across different touchpoints. However, caution clearly needs to be exercised as it appears from our research that a strong emotional attachment between consumers and a product/service could backfire in the event of a product/service failure. Finding a way to offset this delicate balance between emotional attachment and propensity to blame will be particularly relevant in the case of the highly attached segment.

Our research was restricted to the context of the telecommunications industry in which the service element in the bundle involves little interaction between the service personnel and customers. This is not, however, always the case across other service sectors. We suspect that in industries where service attachment is likely to be stronger compared to the
In telecommunication context, service attachment is likely to show the same effect as product attachment. That is, consumers with strong emotional attachment to the service are going to be more likely to attribute greater responsibility for a failure to the service component rather than product component. One example is the food delivery services with the establishment of various online platforms in the recent years allowing the consumers to order from a wide array of restaurants with a single click (for example, Deliveroo, UberEATS). These delivery services involve extensive consumer interaction, thus the consumer might form an attachment to the service as much as to the restaurants.

In today’s highly competitive environment, communication with customers is important and could help to change customers’ evaluations and attitudes. In their failure recovery attempts, our research has shown that product and service providers should focus on the consumer segment with the highest emotional attachment, to not only solve the technical issue but also to recover the consumer's emotional attachment before the “love becomes hate” effect becomes permanent.

References


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