

**Bonding with Cultural Brands: Exploring the ‘Binds that Tie Us’**

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## **Abstract**

In contexts such as those in the arts and culture industry, where the use of branded products may be difficult to access due to intermittent availability, or, where the branded product outcomes may be difficult to predict, it is argued that consumers form complex relationships with brands. In order to explore these complex relationships, this research explores the components of the bond that consumers form with arts and cultural products and brands.

This research highlights empirically five components of brand bonding with arts and cultural products, viz., brand trust/affinity, social/self connectedness, loyalty, emotional connectedness and brand involvement. These results found that intricacies emerge, such as consumer optimism about branded product failures, anticipation of usage, and a sense of responsibility for the success of the brand. More importantly, these findings suggest that in situations where service outcomes are uncertain, and where the service is available intermittently, loyal consumers are still willing to develop a relationship based on their connectedness or bond with the brand, despite the situational difficulties associated with accessing it.

## **Keywords**

Cultural branding, ‘difficult’ brands, brand-consumer relationships, relationship marketing.

## **Introduction**

Brands identified within the spectrum of arts and culture offer consumers a unique range of sensory experiences and, are presented for consumption through a variety of mediums. Adding to the rich contextual differences in branded product offerings identified within the arts and culture industry, is the availability, or perhaps the unavailability of these performance pieces over time. As such, performances are recognised as varying in frequency or exposure whereby the artist may perform the artistic work over an extended period of time (i.e., season/s at a theatre), over a limited period of time (i.e., a performance repeated at set times at a festival) or as a once-off performance.

The way in which marketers of cultural products connect with their consumers is of growing interest as consumers are being offered the opportunity to engage in an increasing number of cultural experiences. In highly competitive service environments marketers are recognising that competitive advantage can be gained through the establishment and maintenance of valuable relationships with their customers (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990; Sheth and Parvitiyar, 1995; Ennew and Binks, 1996; Bove and Johnson, 2000). In many cases, these relationships go beyond traditionally measured transactional outcomes, to incorporate factors such as social and emotional connectedness, identity, trust, and affinity (Low and Lamb, 2000). Furthermore, the relational bond between an organisation, in this instance, the producers of the art and/or cultural experience and the customer can be enhanced by the development and maintenance of relationships that provide loyalty, respect, reciprocity, and affinity (Fournier, 1998).

Identifying components of customer loyalty and commitment is important in all service contexts, but in the case of atypical service environments such as those identifiable in the arts and culture industry, this becomes even more critical (Gummesson, 2002). Understanding the relational bonds of consumers to these unique service contexts can enable these organisations to gain an understanding of what brand elements motivate behavioural outcomes such as repeat patronage or positive word of mouth referrals by consumers. These behavioural based outcomes are valuable contributors to the ongoing success of many arts and cultural events. Hence, this research aimed to explore the types of bonds that consumers form with arts and cultural brands, particularly those associated with high uncertainty and which are intermittently available. The nature of these brands, in comparison to mass-market goods and services, has led them to be recognised by the researchers as ‘difficult’. The difficulty aspect of these branded products may also offer arts and cultural marketers a means through which to create and sustain market viability.

There is an underlying assumption that brand loyalty is established and maintained through repetitive and frequent usage (Keller, 2001). However, some service contexts, by their very nature, may not lend themselves to this level of repeat patronage, yet consumers are still able to form relational bonds with the service organisation and their brand. Using an example of an bi-annual music festival, consumers may attend and are highly satisfied with their experience yet, despite their desire to re-attend, would not be able to until the festival is held again in two years time. Despite the infrequency of contact demonstrated, brand commitment, loyalty and satisfaction are not necessarily negated due to the customer’s degree of behavioural usage.

## **Synthesis of the literature**

### ***Antecedents of brand bonding***

Existing research has suggested that in some consumption environments, consumers form strong attachments to brands that might predict their commitment to the brand, and their willingness to make sacrifices in order to maintain the relationship (McAlexander et al., 2002). The prospect that individuals might form strong attachments to brands is analogous to attachment and investment theory in psychology, and social-identity and social-cohesion theory in sociology. For example, in attachment theory, individuals who are attached strongly to another person are more likely to commit to, invest in, and make sacrifices for that person (Hazan and Shaver, 1994; Rusbult et al., 1991). This premise is further supported by Hamilton (2003, p. 67), who purports that “modern consumers no longer consume the utility of goods and services: they consume their symbolic meaning”. As a consequence, consumers are likely to seek out brands and products with which they share a strong personal attachment or affinity.

Attachments to brands have been linked to discourse on the self, and more specifically, an individual’s extended self (Belk, 1988). Ahuvia (2005, p.172) posits that items which inform group identity also contribute to part of the extended self, “to the extent that the individual identifies with the group in question and the item is important to the group identity”. Furthermore, recent research has focused upon the ways in which people use consumption to

form a self identity within the context of society (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995; Murray, 2002). The brand community literature supports the notion that consumption involves the formation of social relationships structured upon a sense of shared product (service) ownership (McAlexander, et al., 2002). The social nature of consumption is further delineated by Miller (1998) who suggests that the importance of brand relationships is underpinned by the way in which they allow consumers to express and mediate their relationship to others.

Similarly, consumption can be viewed as a way of defining oneself and developing links with like-minded others (Holbrook, 1992; McCracken, 2005), and of connecting with others within a broader social and cultural system (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; McCracken, 1988). Consequently, consumers are likely to undertake activities and buy products that contribute to their sense of self, and participate in activities with people they like, and with like-minded people (Holbrook, 1992). In particular consumption environments, the need to affiliate with others in a group, the actual process of participating in the group, and an emotional connection with the brand, may outweigh the generally accepted need for transactional satisfaction with a product or components of the product (Gobe, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Oliver, 1999).

Within service environments there has been a further emphasis on relational bonding dimensions such as trust and commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Sergeant and Lee, 2004). The concept of trust is now accepted as an integral factor in the development of long-term relationships in marketing. Berry (1995) suggested that trust was the single most powerful relationship marketing tool available to service organisations. Similarly, Tax et al. (1998) argued that trust was a key determinant of relational commitment, while Morgan and Hunt (1994) contended that trust was central to the success of a relationship marketing strategy. Furthermore, trust is seen as an important contributor to group cohesiveness, and is cited frequently as an antecedent to attitudinal commitment, and a moderator of interpersonal behaviour in social settings (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). Previous research within cultural service contexts has identified that future intentions of high relational customers, i.e., long-term subscribers, was driven by factors such as trust and commitment, whereas the future intentions of low relational customers, i.e., occasional subscribers and one-off attendees, was driven by customer satisfaction (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999).

Other key focal areas of research in the relational bonding literature discuss a consumer's involvement and identification within the service consumption process (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Bhattacharya, 1998). Involvement, or the centralisation of beliefs held in relation to an object, is founded in the realms of social psychology (see Sherif and Cantril, 1947). McGuire (1974) proposed two dimensions of consumer involvement, viz., 'utilitarian' and 'value expressive'. Subsequently, a number of antecedent models of involvement have been proposed which highlight factors such as relevance, needs, values, interest, importance, risk, pleasure, sign value, interest and concern (Laurent and Kapferer, 1985; Zaichkowsky, 1985; Mittal, 1989).

Many recent articles have suggested that there is a need for marketing researchers to explore the dimensions of brand bonding in atypical service industries (Bhattacharya, 1998; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). This is of particular relevance to this research which explores the elements of relationship brand bonding in arts and cultural environments which are associated with uncertain outcomes, and are offered on an intermittent or infrequent basis.

### ***Defining 'difficult' brands***

The role of brand bonding in the context of highly uncertain, intermittently available services has not been investigated to any substantial degree to date in the international literature. Highly uncertain, intermittently available services are distinguished from other services by two contextual dimensions, 1) constrained availability, and 2) uncertainty of outcomes.

Firstly, constrained availability implies that intermittently available services are available only at particular times, usually determined by the organisation, rather than the behaviour of other customers, and are subject to seasonality. For example, in the case of a theatre production, the customer is only able to participate in the exchange at a time determined by the organising body. Similarly, in the case of an annual festival, such as a food or arts festival, customers are only able to participate in the exchange at a particular time of the year – and only at that time – or they “miss out”. Hence, consumers attribute constraints on the temporal dimensionality, distribution and accessibility of these services to their brands.

Secondly, uncertainty of outcomes indicates that intermittently available services require an involvement with the service beyond the utilisation of the service as a commodity, i.e., the activity is evaluated by more than its exchange value in a trade context (Goulding, 2000). This is because customers of the intermittently available service may be able to develop a relationship with the service even when there is no physical co-presence or ongoing interactional accessibility of the participants with the service (Sigman, 1991). This particular defining attribute, high uncertainty, is also of interest to researchers because the majority of services research is conducted in fields where there are elements of risk, but in general, the approach of services marketers is to reduce the perception of risk.

Nevertheless, in the case of the context under investigation, the element of risk is a key component of the potential product portfolio. In other words, consumers of this high uncertainty product seek out risk willingly as a means of experiencing something unique and exciting. Here customers acknowledge risks associated with the uncertainty of outcomes in terms of the experimental nature of the service (e.g., attendance at a ‘new artist’s’ art exhibition could perhaps result in an overall dissatisfying experience due to low quality artwork), and the social investment made by the consumer (e.g., attendance at a music festival with a group of friends heightens the anticipation that the individual and group interaction will be satisfying and that they will feel a sense of belonging with their interactions with other patrons of the festival).

As highlighted in the discussion resulting from the aforementioned distinguishing dimensions of ‘difficult’ brands, arts and cultural organisations can be further delineated as having fewer opportunities to satisfy the consumer. It is therefore important for these organisations to identify other factors beyond satisfaction which might contribute to customer loyalty. Here we propose that the nature of the bond that consumers form with highly uncertain, intermittently available services may provide valuable insight into sustainable service outcomes such as service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty.

#### ***Why consumers might bond with ‘difficult’ brands***

Since the Renaissance, and in particular with the growth in consumption and corporatism (Hamilton, 2003), there has been a shift in society to see all experiences as a commodity. Individualism advocates a commodification of all experiences, i.e., “what’s in it for me?” Consumer’s now weigh up their options in terms of what is being offered from a utilitarian and “rational” perspective. Many products, particularly ‘difficult’ products, grapple with this context, because what they are ‘offering’, to a large degree, is often irrational in the context of classical economic theory.

This movement has been largely brought about with the growth of neo-liberal economic ideologies, that argue that consumers should be free to choose how and what they consume (Friedman and Friedman 1990). This approach works to a large extent in a frontier environment, where natural resources are plentiful and widely accessible. In such circumstances, each individual could be made almost entirely responsible for his or her own conditions of life. But in an era of large scale industrialisation, and urbanisation, and the consequent increase in interdependence and helplessness for many individuals, the results of acting on the same set of premises are, in large measure, unacceptable. Consumers, therefore, may seek to bond with others of similar mindset, around irrational activities, including the consumption of products, to

alleviate the inconsistency of a focus on rationalism and “freedom to choose”, and the powerlessness of many to choose.

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) argued that postmodern consumers are aware of the issues around authenticity to the point where they are reflective about the commercial milieu in which they live. In other words, consumers are fully aware of modernist marketplace attempts to get them to consume, and are therefore choosing to consume outside of a modernist framework. Thus, we are witnessing a shift in consumer emphasis on traditional marketing practices and subsequently, the types and ways in which consumers are forging relationships with branded product and services. ‘Difficult’ brands offer consumers an alternative, and perhaps more attractive, means through which to establish social connections especially as these brands tend to appeal on a higher psychological level such as those offered within the realm of arts and culture.

### ***Importance of bonding with ‘difficult’ brands***

The paucity of research into the antecedents of brand relationships in contexts high in uncertainty and with intermittent availability is due primarily to the assumption that these types of interactions are more likely to be transaction-based given the nature of the brands i.e., short-term and sporadic. There is a further underlying assumption that the relationship between the customer and the organisation (or brand) will be difficult to develop and maintain due to the lack of investment in the relationship, the break between interactions, and the possibility of extra dyadic behaviour between consumption opportunities (Christopher et al., 2002; Drigotas et al., 1999; Grönroos, 1990). This research proposes that the type of relational bonds with highly uncertain, intermittently available services influence the way consumers evaluate that type of service. For instance, in particular social or consumption environments (for example, sporting clubs, charities, museums, arts festivals) individuals who develop strong bonds, and have a sense of affinity or community associated with the brand, and with the people who use the brand, may be more willing to act in support of the brand and organisation, be willing to wait to use the brand, and be willing to make sacrifices for it.

## **Method**

### ***Research context***

As discussed previously, there are many arts and cultural products that encompass the components of what we have defined as a ‘difficult brand’ however, for the purposes of this research, the arts and cultural brand chosen was a national contemporary arts festival held within Australia (hereafter referred to as ‘the festival’). The festival context is an important and popular arts context in which to examine the factors that lead to brand bonding. Festivals are of particular interest in relation to the arts in that, in general, they are presented on an annual or biannual basis. In addition, the specific festival context examined has a range of attributes that distinguish it from other arts festivals, and locate the offering of the festival in the high uncertainty domain. A key element of both the positioning and internal operations of the chosen festival context is the way in which it celebrates diversity and difference and sees itself, and its brand, as distinct from other mainstream festivals.

The festival management does not curate, or choose, the art presented in the festival via a festival director or producer. Indeed, the festival prides itself on its “all-comers” policy in relation to the festival program, and participation is only restricted by the registration fee (\$200 – \$290 in 2005) and the costs involved in presenting an event, performance or exhibition. Management sees this approach as a critical element of its existence and survival, and thus creates a point of difference from many other arts festivals. This approach, however, also creates problems with quality management, particularly in relation to the events staged at the festival. This is because the festival organisation and its brand schema are affected by the performances that take place under its name.

### ***Development of the survey instrument***

An extensive review of the branding, relationship marketing and brand loyalty literature revealed several latent constructs which were identified as applicable in assessing relational bonding to brands. As previously discussed, relational bonding is posited to incorporate a range of attributes including loyalty to the brand, an identification with the brand and its attributes, an appeal to the consumer's sense of self, a resonance between the brand and the consumer, an attitudinal commitment based on a sense of trust, and an appeal to the customer that he or she belongs to a unique grouping. A review of the literature further revealed that no empirically established instrument to measure relational bonding within the given service context currently exists hence, items derived from a range of sources were adopted for this research. Measures used to operationalise constructs such as, measuring loyalty (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Hellier et al., 2003; Kelley and Davis, 1994), commitment and identification (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Bhattacharya, 1998; Gundlach et al., 1995; Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Hogg and Turner, 1985; Pritchard et al., 1999), relationship marketing (Rentschler et al., 2002), resonance (Keller, 2001), and intimacy (Treacy and Wiersema, 1993) were examined, adapted and included where appropriate. Furthermore, questions were modified to suit the context where appropriate. As a result, the relational bond measurement instrument consisted of 16 items which were presented as seven-point Likert scales, anchored 1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree.

### ***Research design***

The research constructs were tested using a sample of the population of those attending the festival in 2005. This population was identified as current (and previous) users of the intermittently available service, rather than the general population (which include those not exposed to the festival). Data were collected using an embedded email questionnaire sent to subscribers to the festival newsletter, and to those who chose to receive the email questionnaire after being approached at the festival venues and asked to complete a form that invited them to participate.

A professional email marketing research company was engaged to distribute the questionnaire in the final week of the festival. The marketing research company contacted a total of 4,881 email addresses. Of these, 3,765 were active email addresses, i.e., email addresses that were currently in use, or recognised as genuine email addresses, 1,116 were invalid, and 116 subsequently chose to unsubscribe from the research, leaving a potential population of 3,649. Of the 3,649 email addresses, 253 responses were received, yielding a response rate of seven per cent, which is a reasonable result for online marketing research (Adam and McDonald, 2002).

### ***Results***

The measurement models and their hypothesised components have been outlined in the conceptual development and methodology section of this paper. The approach for the establishment of unidimensionality of measures is based on the established common factor model, in which a set of items shares a single underlying factor (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1989). Initial exploratory factor analysis was conducted using SPSS 12.0.1 with the Maximum Likelihood Extraction method and Direct Oblimin rotation. As a check, item-total correlations, and coefficient alpha were used to evaluate the internal reliability of each of the factors. Item-total correlations and coefficient alpha are tests of the internal reliability of the items to measure a similar construct. The exploratory factor analysis identified four potential factors contributing to the bond that consumers form with the brand. Only those items that had loadings above 0.40 were considered to contribute to a factor (Comfrey and Lee, 1992).

Measurement models based on the extracted factors were then built in AMOS 5.0 and a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted for each factor. The use of confirmatory factor analysis as the principal technique for the measurement of unidimensionality in multiple indicator measures was supported by the literature (Anderson and Gerbing, 1982). Each of the relational bond models were subsequently refined using the method suggested by Anderson and

Gerbing (1988). As such, the confirmatory factor analysis determined the unidimensionality of three of the four factors identified in the exploratory factor analysis, viz., factor one (hereafter referred to as “connection”), factor two (hereafter referred to as “trust”), and factor three (hereafter referred to as “involvement”). It was not appropriate to carry out a factor analysis for factor four (hereafter referred to as “loyalty”), as only two items contributed to this factor. Thurstone (Kim and Mueller, 1978, p. 77) recommends at least three variables per factor, when conducting confirmatory factor analysis.

The *connection* factor provided a good initial model, with all fit indices considered to be in the acceptable range, and all of the critical ratios were significant. An internal reliability test was undertaken, which identified a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.85, which is considered to be an acceptable level (Hair et al., 2006).

The *trust* factor was then examined using confirmatory factor analysis. Initial tests resulted in a model with fit indices outside the acceptable levels on three of the seven measures. The factor was refined using the approach suggested by Gerbing and Anderson (1984) to ascertain whether the model could be made more parsimonious through the deletion of variables, without any loss of construct clarity. An examination of the squared multiple correlations revealed that the item, “I think that the people who attend the festival are similar to me”, made the smallest contribution to the measurement model, and was omitted from the model. Upon examination of the remaining items in this measurement model, it was considered that the removal of the item imparted more theoretical clarity to the overall construct. Internal reliability analysis of these six items resulted in a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.87, which is within the acceptable range.

The *involvement* factor was then examined using confirmatory factor analysis. Fit indices were acceptable for this factor, and all three items were retained. Internal reliability analysis of these three items resulted in a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.88. Table 1 shows the model fit statistics for the three key factors.

**Table 1: Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

Variable	Standardised Loading	Cronbach’s Alpha
<b>Connection</b>		<b>0.85</b>
I feel that I share in the success when ---* goes well	0.81	
I feel a personal sense of achievement when --- does well	0.88	
I feel a real sense of belonging to ---	0.81	
I feel proud when --- goes well	0.60	
<b>Trust</b>		<b>0.87</b>
The events at --- always meet my expectations	0.78	
I trust --- to give me a good experience	0.88	
You can count on --- to have good events	0.76	
I am proud to tell my friends that I attended a --- event	0.63	
If it is a --- event, I will probably enjoy it	0.64	
I like people who go to ---	0.69	
<b>Involvement</b>		<b>0.88</b>
Supporting --- is important to me	0.90	
I care about the long-term success of ---	0.84	

I look forward to the ---	0.77	
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\* NB --- denotes direct reference to the festival's name

Internal reliability tests were conducted on a fourth, two item factor, *loyalty*, viz., “I am a loyal patron of The festival”, and, “I would consider myself a ‘real’ supporter of The festival”, resulting in a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.75, which is low, but still within acceptable levels (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

### Discussion and Implications

The findings from this exploratory study illustrate that consumers form complex relational bonds with ‘difficult’ brands through components of brand trust, brand involvement, and a sense of connectedness with the brand. The identification of these prominent components is of theoretical and practical significance in light of the context in which they were assessed. These findings suggest that in situations where service outcomes are uncertain, and where the service is available intermittently, loyal consumers are still willing to develop a relationship based on their connectedness or bond with the brand, despite the situational difficulties associated with accessing it. Rentschler et al. (2002) identify the paucity of research in nonprofit arts organisations, arguing that building long-term, committed relationships with customers is perhaps one way that arts organisations can realise organisational viability in a turbulent operating environment.

Three factors were identified in this research that contribute to the bond that consumers form with arts festival brands, viz., connection, trust, and involvement. Each of these factors is distinct from one another. The items that loaded on the *connection* factor suggest that consumers of the ‘difficult’ brand form a familial bond with the brand. These items suggest that consumers have made an emotional investment in the brand, and in return, receive an ego boost from that investment (Batson 1994). The items that loaded on the *trust* factor intimate that in addition to their understanding of the fundamental nature of their relationship with the festival, consumers also form a social bond with others who use attend the festival, and take the risk when attending a festival show. As Mayer et al. (1995, p. 712) argued, trust is not “taking a risk per se, but rather it is a willingness to take risk”. The *involvement* factor identified an enthusiasm for the ‘idea’ of the festival, and took into account factors such as an optimistic anticipation of usage, long-term responsibility for the festival, and personal involvement in the support of the brand.

The identification of these self-identity relational bonds is supported by researchers such as Belk (1988) who have shown that consumers create meaning out of their consumption experiences. Furthermore, this research supports the promise that constructs such as trust and involvement in voluntary and nonprofit organisations, such as that of the festival, is of increasing interest to nonprofit marketers (Sargeant and Lee 2004) particularly if they have not had the tools to understand market behaviour, and antecedents of future behaviour amongst their customers (McDonald and Harrison 2002).

This exploratory research extends the relationship marketing paradigm into the context of highly uncertain, intermittently available products. Specifically, these factors offer a theoretically sound, multi-dimensional approach to identifying key dimensions and possible antecedents to the establishment and maintenance of brand loyalty, future patronage intentions, brand advocacy and brand participation in the arts festival field.

### Future Research Directions

Building on the exploratory research findings, the focus is to now test the applicability of these dimensions in a cross-section of arts and non-arts service contexts and to expand the research scope to assess causal relationships between brand bond attributes and behavioural and attitudinal intentions. As such, the present study is identified as an exploratory phase to a larger

research study, that is currently being undertaken by the authors. This ongoing research seeks to not only identify pertinent dimensions of relational bonding with highly uncertain and intermittently available brands, but to measure the impact of these dimensions on critical behavioural outcomes related to brand-customer attachment such as brand loyalty, customer satisfaction, service quality, repeat patronage intentions, word-of-mouth recommendations and brand commitment.

Additionally, it is argued that consumers develop deep emotional responses and connections to brands which translate into emotional preferences (Travis 2000). The emotional connectedness of consumers to 'difficult' brands in particular offers insight into the aspirational motivating desires of consumers as they strive for emotional commitment (Gobe 2001). As a result, current research, being undertaken by the authors is seeking to identify dimensions of emotional bonding to further delineate the degree of connectedness a consumer feels with similar brands.

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