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Struggle to stay faithful

It's hard to shake the seven-year itch, even when it comes to shopping

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JUST like a romance, customers start looking for rival product brands after seven years, Deakin University's Paul Harrison said.

In his thesis, the Deakin Business School lecturer looked at the bond customers form with their favourite brands.

He found people moved through a three-stage cycle of attraction with their brand — similar to the blossoming of a romance.

"In the first stage, they are optimistic, they use the product once or twice and they feel positive. Like a relationship, everything is exciting, the customer is infatuated — the brand can do no wrong," Dr Harrison said.

"In the second stage, they are most loyal and committed, wanting everyone to use the same brand as them, and they have the most affinity.

"But by the third stage, they are open to competition from other brands — a bit like the seven-year itch.

"When you couple this with the huge amount of choice that customers now have, it's not surprising that they exercise their options."

Dr Harrison described many niche brands as "difficult" or "risky" brands.

"Marketers make it difficult for us to use their products which, ironically, make us feel special, and part of a unique group," he said.

"If you look at the smaller brands, say, Virgin Blue, Mooks, or Crumpler, the whole brand is about being a renegade, and a bit silly, sticking it to the system.

"People warm to that because it is different and they are part of a like-minded group."

Dr Harrison said there is quite a bit of "what's in it for me" in brand-buying, even with charities.

"Red Nose Day is a classic example. We want something in return," he said.

"If you donate, we give you something in return that's tangible. By wearing the nose, I am part of a community that supports research into SIDS.

"The counter point to that is that once the brand is too popular it stops being individual, and the group who were initially drawn to it will move on.

"In these situations, marketers have to come up with ways to reignite the romance, and make them feel special again."