Customer-service firm attachment: what it is and what causes it?

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to: conceptualize customer-service firm attachment; as well as to propose a theoretical framework that provides insights into the formation and development of affectionate ties in customer-service firm relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – Toward these two goals, the authors integrate conclusions from a multidisciplinary literature that covers attachment theory, brand attachment, and place attachment.

Findings – The authors formally define customer-service firm attachment as the emotional bond connecting a customer with a service firm. They offer a conceptual framework that assumes that customer satisfaction, service quality, customer trust towards the service firm and its personnel, customer-firm image congruence, and positive emotions felt during the service experience are the main drivers of customer-service firm attachment.

Research limitations/implications – Notwithstanding the fact that this article remains conceptual in spirit, it provides several theoretical and managerial implications.

Originality/value – This article reviews and merges the latest insights from diverse attachment theories and concepts in diverse disciplines (i.e. social psychology, environmental psychology, leisure science, consumer behavior, and marketing). It also presents attachment styles as a new consumer segmenting criteria.

Keywords Attachment, Customer, Service firm, Conceptualization, Drivers, Customers, Customer service management

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Many conceptual (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Berry, 1995; Gouthier and Schmid, 2003; Liljander and Strandvik, 1995) and empirical (Colgate *et al.*, 2007; Liang and Chen, 2009; Mende and Bolton, 2011) articles on relationship marketing[1] of services suggest that the greatest gains in customer retention and success for the long-run are achieved when several bonds are formed between the customer and the service firm. Of these bonds, social and emotional ones were commonly depicted, both by researchers and practitioners, as very effective exit barriers (Gopal, 2004; Hallberg, 2004; Jones *et al.*, 2008, 2009; Mende and Bolton, 2011; Price and Arnould, 1999; Rosenbaum, 2009; Zhang and Bloemer, 2008). Understanding the nature of these ties and their impacts on customer behavior therefore represents an issue of paramount importance. Not surprisingly, a number of recent studies inspired from well established theories and

concepts in organisational behavior (Bansal *et al.*, 2004) and social psychology (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2007; Yim *et al.*, 2008) were conducted to elucidate such bonds. For instance, Bansal *et al.* (2004) use Allen and Meyer's (1990) three-component model of commitment to investigate customer-service firm relationships. Rosenbaum *et al.* (2007) draw on Weiss's (1973) relational theory of loneliness to show how customers receive social support from third-place relationships. Yim *et al.* (2008) employ Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love to extend the well known satisfaction-trust-loyalty paradigm in service contexts.

In line with this ongoing stream of research, the article at hand combines insights from the literature on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), brand attachment (Thomson *et al.*, 2005; Park *et al.*, 2006, 2010), and place attachment (Fried, 1963), to:

- formally define customer-service firm attachment (CSFA); and
- to propose a theoretical framework for understanding what causes customers to become attached to their service providers.

In so doing, this article is responsive to calls by Thomson and Johnson (2006) and Paulssen (2009) for more research joining attachment theory and relationship marketing. It also heeds Thomson *et al.*'s (2005) wishes to examine consumer-brand emotional attachment in a service realm; thereby extending the brand attachment literature. Furthermore, it answers Johnstone and Conroy's (2008) and Rosenbaum *et al.*'s (2007) requests to further explore the concept of place attachment in service research. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it echoes recent practitioners thinking about the significance of developing emotional attachments with customers (Gopal, 2004; Hallberg, 2004).

Advancing understanding of CSFA and its main drivers is an endeavor that is worthwhile from both a theoretical and a practical standpoint. It can supply service researchers with new insights into ways to build more comprehensive models and theories. Likewise, if service managers understand what determines the strength of CSFA, they may be in a better position to foster more durable and profitable relationships with their customers.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: we begin by providing more background on attachment theory, brand attachment, and place attachment. Next, we formally define CSFA and identify its main three targets or foci. Then, we present our conceptual framework. Afterwards, we discuss this article's contributions. Finally, we conclude by enumerating some limitations pointing out to further research directions.

Theoretical background
Attachment theory
Bowlby (1977, p. 201), who is commonly considered as the first attachment theorist, defines attachment as "the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others". In his trilogy on *Attachment and Loss*, Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) hypothesizes an innate psycho-biological attachment system that characterises human beings from the cradle to the grave. A basic tenet of attachment theory is that the attachment system motivates us to seek proximity to supportive others (also called attachment figures) so as to secure protection from physical and psychological threats, promote affect regulation, and encourage healthy environment exploration. According to Bowlby, actual interactions with attachment figures are stored in memory in the

form of mental representations of attachment figures' responses (also called working models of others) as well as representations of the self's efficacy and value (or working models of self). These working models serve as guides to approaching new relationships throughout the entire life span.

Several studies followed Bowlby's seminal work. Most relevant to this account are those made by Ainsworth *et al.* (1978), Hazan and Shaver (1987), Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) and Brennan *et al.* (1998) on attachment style – that is, "the systematic pattern of relational expectations, emotions, and behaviors that results from a particular history of attachment experiences" (Shaver and Mikulincer, 2005, p. 27). Initially, research was based on Ainsworth *et al.*'s (1978) three-category typology of attachment styles in infancy (i.e. secure, anxious-ambivalent, and anxious-avoidant) and Hazan and Shaver's (1987) conceptualization of similar adult styles in the realm of romantic relationships (i.e. secure, anxious, and avoidant). Subsequent research (by Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; Brennan *et al.*, 1998) revealed, however, that attachment styles are more appropriately conceptualized as regions in a two-dimensional space. These two dimensions are known as attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety. Avoidance reflects the extent to which a person distrusts relationship partners' goodwill, strives to maintain self-reliance and emotional distance from partners. Anxiety reflects the degree to which a person worries that a partner will not be available in times of need (Shaver and Mikulincer, 2005). These two dimensions have been hypothesized and empirically demonstrated to yield four attachment styles termed secure, preoccupied, fearful, and dismissing (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; Bartholomew and Shaver, 1998).

Although Bowlby's and Hazan and Shaver's seminal work originally focused on attachment processes in the realm of parent-infant and adult romantic relationships, respectively, ensuing research has applied attachment theory to a variety of other attachment figures, including co-workers (Hazan and Shaver, 1990), friends (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991), strangers (Mikulincer and Nachshon, 1991), God (Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 1992), groups and group leaders (Davidovitz *et al.*, 2007; Rom and Mikulincer, 2003), TV stars (Greenwood *et al.*, 2008), and even pet dogs (Kurdeck, 2008).

Brand attachment
Attachment theory has also been inspirational to a growing number of authors that suggest that consumers can and do become emotionally attached to their brands (Belaïd and Behi, 2011; Cristau, 2006; Fedorikhin *et al.*, 2008; Grisaffe and Nguyan, 2010; Lacoeuilhe, 1997, 2000; Malär *et al.*, 2011; Orth *et al.*, 2010; Park *et al.*, 2006, 2010; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Lacoeuilhe (1997, pp. 36-37), for example, argues that many of attachment theory's premises are transferable to consumer-brand relationship. Likewise, besides maintaining that a brand could actually form an attachment figure, Thomson *et al.* (2005, pp. 77-78) use Bowlby's definition of attachment as the cornerstone of their specification of the domain of a construct that they term "emotional attachments to a brand" and which is more recently known as brand attachment (Louis and Lombart, 2010; Malär *et al.*, 2011; Park *et al.*, 2010).

Copious yet consonant definitions have been proposed for brand attachment. In an early paper which may have been the first to conceptualize brand attachment, Lacoeuilhe (1997, p. 33) defines it as an "affective and emotional bond between a brand and an individual". In their influential empirical study, Thomson *et al.* (2005) also offer

us brand attachment as an emotion-laden target-specific bond between a person and a brand. In a similar vein, Louis and Lombart (2010, p. 118) consider it as an "emotional link between a consumer and a brand". Consistent with that, Malär *et al.* (2011, p. 36) view brand attachment as a construct that "reflects the bond connecting a consumer with a specific brand and involves [positive] feelings towards the brand".

However, while there seems to be a certain consensus on the definition of brand attachment, a literature review that we undertook reveals that an agreement about its dimensions is still lacking. Specifically, while Lacoeuilhe (2000) and Louis and Lombart (2010) view brand attachment as an unidimensional construct, Thomson *et al.* (2005) and Malär *et al.* (2011) consider it as multidimensional with affection, connection, and passion as dimensions. According to Thomson *et al.* (2005), affection refers to the warm-feelings a consumer has toward a brand. Connection describes a consumer's feelings of being joined with the brand. Passion reflects intense and aroused positive feelings toward a brand.

No matter how this construct is measured, it has been claimed, both in the business press and academic research, that brand attachment is: "pivotal to understanding customer-based brand equity" (Thomson, 2006, p. 105); one of the key metrics of brand performance (Lautman and Pauwels, 2009; Lehmann *et al.*, 2008); and a powerful predictor of "behaviors that foster brand profitability and customer lifetime value" (Park *et al.*, 2010, p. 1). Our literature review also indicates that brand attachment has been, in a number of recent studies, related to constructs like consumer satisfaction (Esch *et al.*, 2006), brand personality (Malär *et al.*, 2011; Orth *et al.*, 2010; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2009), source credibility (Kim and Villegas, 2009), brand trust (Louis and Lombart, 2010), innovativeness (Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent, 2010), and of-late to another attachment construct; that is, place attachment (Vlachos *et al.*, 2010).

Place attachment
Place attachment has it roots in the pioneering work of Fried (1963). In his classic and often cited study in the West End of Boston, Fried (1963) brings to light the grief and distress of residents who were forced into relocation. Since then, the study of ties that people develop toward specific places (e.g. home, neighborhood, community, or city) or settings (e.g. a forest glade, seaside, or a mountaintop) and the function these places (or settings) full in their lives is a research area that has been garnering tremendous attention in environmental psychology (Hailu *et al.*, 2005; Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001), leisure science (Hammitt *et al.*, 2009; Kyle *et al.*, 2003; Williams *et al.*, 1992), sociology (Gieryn, 2000), geography (Brown and Raymond, 2007), and marketing and consumer behavior (Allard *et al.*, 2009; Johnstone and Conroy, 2008; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2007; Vlachos *et al.*, 2010).

Many researchers, representing a variety of disciplines, propose various designations for the tie between people and a place. For example, one can find many similar terms such as topophilia, sense of place, or place integration (for a review see Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2007). But, as Hidalgo and Hernández (2001) indicate, there is now a certain agreement in the use of the term "place attachment". In their study of the tie that people form toward their residential environment, Shumaker and Taylor (1983, p. 233) use the term "place attachment" and define it as "a positive affective bond". According to Low (1992, p. 165), place attachment is "an individual's cognitive or emotional connection to a particular setting or milieu". Hidalgo and Hernández (2001, p. 274)

consider place attachment as an "affective bond between an individual and a specific place, the main characteristic of which is the tendency of the individual to maintain closeness to such a place".

Although place attachment has been both theorized and empirically supported to be composed of several dimensions (see Rosenbaum *et al.* (2007) for a literature review and Hammitt *et al.* (2009) for a recent comparison between the existing measurement models of place attachment), the construct is typically described as having two distinct dimensions known as place identity and place dependence (Brown and Raymond, 2007; Hailu *et al.*, 2005; Williams and Vaske, 2003). Place identity reflects:

> [...] those dimensions of self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideals, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals, and behavioral tendencies and skills relevant to this environment (Proshansky, 1978, p. 155).

In this sense, places offer individuals the opportunity to both express and affirm their identity. As for place dependence, it is "an occupant's perceived strength of association between him or herself and a specific place" (Stokols and Shumaker, 1981, p. 547). As conceptualized by Stokols and Shumaker (1981), place dependence is the potential of a particular place to satisfy the needs and goals of an individual and the assessment of how the current place compares with other presently available places that may satisfy the same set of needs and goals.

Place attachment has been receiving, especially in the last four to five years, an increasing interest among marketing and consumer researchers (Allard *et al.*, 2009; Johnstone and Conroy, 2008; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2007; Vlachos *et al.*, 2010). For instance, the article by Rosenbaum *et al.* (2007) – which probably brought this concept to the services marketing literature – demonstrates that customers who receive companionship and emotional support in a third-place (e.g. restaurant) form attachments to it. In that article, Rosenbaum *et al.* (2007) also urge services marketing researchers to expand Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework in light of research on place attachment. Similarly, Johnstone and Conroy (2008, p. 381) stress that "the way place has been defined in the marketing literature, to date, has been very narrow in its focus". They also argue that place attachment might be helpful in understanding how people consume space and assign meanings to place.

Conceptualizing CSFA
Building on the above reviewed literature, we provide in this section a formal definition for CSFA. We then present its foci (or targets) in a service setting.

Concept legitimatization and definition
As the literature review indicates, an individual could become emotionally attached to a variety of attachment figures including persons, brands, or places. We here argue that a service firm could also form an attachment figure. Our contention is that if it is appropriate to talk about attachment between a consumer and an "inanimate" object – may it be a material possession[2] (Kleine and Baker, 2004), a product (Mugge *et al.*, 2010), or a brand (Thomson *et al.*, 2005; Park *et al.*, 2006, 2010) – it is equally if not way more legitimate to talk about attachment in customer-service firm relationships for at least three reasons. First, it is generally held that without the participation of the customer, services cannot be created and delivered. He or she often had to come into

contact with the service firm, leading to the opportunity for an authentic interpersonal relationship to develop. To speak with a service-dominant logic terminology (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Gummesson *et al.*, 2010), the customer is said to be a cocreator of value. That is, the customer is a proactive cocreator rather than as passive receiver of value. Second, most services involve multiple service encounters that occur over a period of time, requiring an ongoing relationship (e.g. hairdressing) and in some cases an ongoing membership (e.g. banking) that could eventually result in the establishment of affectionate and intimate ties between the customer and the service provider (Aldlaigan and Buttle, 2005; Coulter and Ligas, 2004; McKechnie *et al.*, 2011; Price and Arnould, 1999; Rosenbaum, 2009). Third, service managers have the option to use their servicescapes (Bitner, 1992) strategically to build strong affectionate bonds with their customer. This could be done through a combination of sensory experiences – visual (i.e. design and color), auditory (i.e. music), olfactory (i.e. sent), and/or gustatory (i.e. aroma) – that provide gratification (i.e. pleasure) and service experiences that are memorable and emotionally laden (Park *et al.*, 2006).

To define CSFA, we fall back to what we understand to be common to all the aforesaid conceptualizations of the three reviewed attachment phenomena; that is, the emotional bond that connects an individual with an attachment figure (Table I). Thus, and to be consistent with prior research, we formally define CSFA as the emotional bond connecting a customer with a service firm.

Foci (or targets) of attachment in a service setting

Identifying the exact targets (or foci) of a construct has been recently emphasized in the marketing literature. In current research in the context of interpersonal services, customer loyalty to the individual service worker has been recognized as a distinct construct that explains unique variance in customer loyalty to the service firm (Bove and Johnson, 2006; Crutchfield, 2007; Palmatier *et al.*, 2007). Yim *et al.* (2008) also distinguish between customer-staff trust and customer-firm trust. Jones *et al.* (2008, 2009) identify three separate targets of commitment in consumers' relationships with their service providers, i.e. commitment to the service company, commitment to the

Concept	Author	Definition	Dimensions	Attachment figure
Attachment	Bowlby (1973, p. 201)	Attachment is "the propensity of human being to make strong affectional bonds to significant others"	Anxiety and avoidance	Person
Place attachment	Hidalgo and Hernández (2001, p. 274)	Place attachment is an "affective bond between an individual and a specific place"	Place identity and place dependence	Place
Brand attachment	Park and MacInnis (2006, p. 17)	Brand attachment is "a relationship-based construct that reflects the emotional bond connecting an individual with a" brand	Affection, connection, and passion	Brand

Table I.
Attachment phenomena: definitions and dimensions

individual service provider, and commitment to the individual provider as a friend or acquaintance. This leads us to the question of whether there are distinct targets of attachment in a service setting.

Drawing upon the reviewed literature, it is here argued that there could be three different yet related foci of attachment in customer-service firm relationships:

(1) the service worker;

(2) the service place (or the servicescape); and

(3) the service brand.

It should be here stressed that these targets are not mutually exclusive and that any or all combinations of foci may be conceivable. Of course, the greater the number of foci and the stronger the attachment to each one of them is, the stronger CSFA becomes (Figure 1).
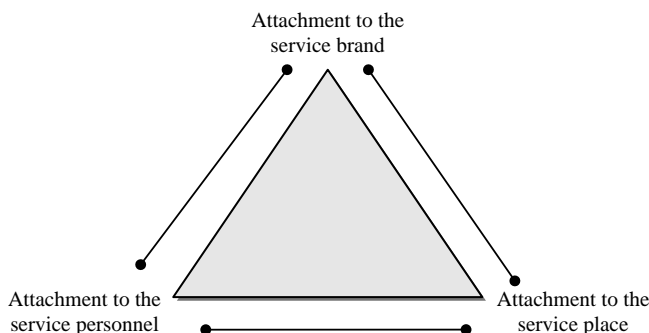
Drivers of CSFA: a conceptual framework

Despite the latest explosive growth in research on attachment in the marketing discipline, little has been written on the attachment construct in service contexts (an exception is the recent article by Vlachos *et al.* (2010)). To fill this void, we here integrate conclusions from a multidisciplinary literature to develop a conceptual framework that assumes that customer satisfaction (CS), service quality (SQ), customer trust towards the service firm and its personnel, customer-firm image congruence, and positive emotions felt during the service experience are the main drivers of CSFA (Figure 2).
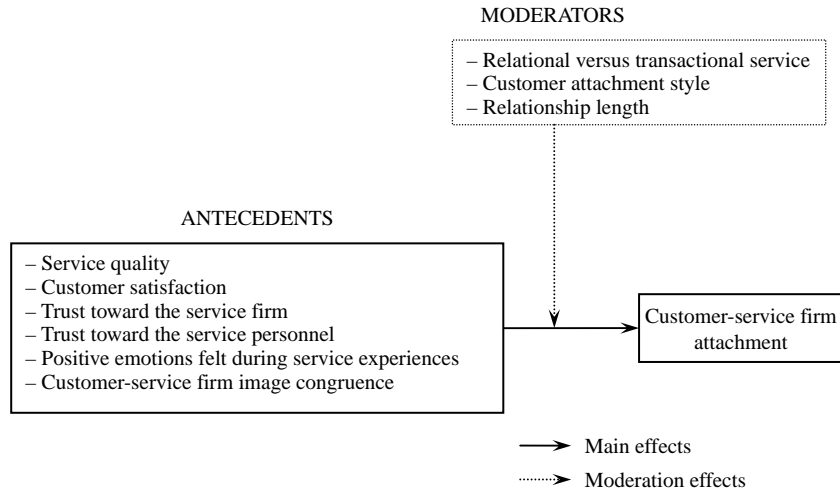
Our rationale for the linkages between these individual constructs and CSFA (i.e. prepositions) as well as further details on findings and theories, on which we rely, are outlined below. It should be here indicated that this model is only a partial model and does not purport to represent all the possible antecedents of CSFA. Essentially, we argue that these five constructs are managerially controllable antecedents that could be manipulated in such a way to develop and foster customers' attachment to their service firms (Table II).

Customer satisfaction
As Bowlby (1958, p. 350) indicates:

Attachment to the
service brand

Attachment to the
service personnel

Attachment to the
service place

Figure 1.
The CSFA triangle

MODERATORS

– Relational versus transactional service
– Customer attachment style
– Relationship length

ANTECEDENTS

– Service quality
– Customer satisfaction
– Trust toward the service firm
– Trust toward the service personnel
– Positive emotions felt during service experiences
– Customer-service firm image congruence

Customer-service firm
attachment

Figure 2.
Conceptual framework

⟶ Main effects

┈┈▸ Moderation effects

Construct	Author	Definition
Customer satisfaction	Oliver (2010, p. 8)	Satisfaction "is a judgment that a product/ service feature, or the product or service itself, provides (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under- or over-fulfillment"
Emotion	Bagozzi *et al.* (1999, p. 184)	An emotion is a "mental state of readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals of events or one's own thoughts"
Trust	Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 23)	Trust is the "confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity"
Image congruence	Kleijnen *et al.* (2005, p. 345)	Image congruence is "the fit between the self-image and the service [firm] image"
Service quality	Parasuraman *et al.* (1988, p. 15)	"Perceived quality is the consumer's judgment about an entity's overall excellence or superiority"

Table II.
Potential antecedents of
the CSFA construct

The child has a number of physiological needs which must be met [. . .] In so far as a baby becomes interested in and attached to a human figure, especially mother, this is the result of the mother meeting the baby's physiological needs and the baby in due course learning that she is the source of gratification.

Analogously, it can be argued that a customer becomes attached to a service firm that is responsive to and satisfies his/her needs. As our literature review indicates, CS has been found to positively influence both brand attachment (Esch *et al.*, 2006) and place attachment (Brocato, 2006). For instance, Esch *et al.* (2006) demonstrate that satisfaction and brand trust are in conjunction the sole predictors of brand attachment. They indicate that, "Only if a brand results in satisfaction and is trusted by the customer, will there be the development of attachment" (Esch *et al.*, 2006, p. 100).

Investigating the antecedents of place attachment, Brocato (2006, p. 85) found that "there is a positive direct effect of satisfaction on place identity, place dependence and affective attachment". Several other studies document a strong and positive interrelationship (i.e. correlation) between satisfaction and (brand) attachment (Aldlaigan and Buttle, 2005; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). One argument advanced for elucidating that correlation is that "An individual who is emotionally attached to a brand is likely to be satisfied with it" (Thomson *et al.*, 2005, p. 79). Hence, it could be here proposed that CS provides a necessary ingredient for developing emotional ties with the service firm:

P_1. A high level of CS leads to a higher level of CSFA.

Service quality
SQ is a fundamental concept in service research. There is a plethora of models and measurement instruments that have been developed to assess it (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988, 1994; Thach and Olsen, 2006). One common thing to all of these models and scales is that customer perceptions of SQ are based on multiple dimensions. For instance, Parasuraman *et al.* (1988, 1994) propose five dimensions of SQ;, i.e. reliability, responsiveness, assurances, empathy, and tangibles (for a 20 years literature review of SERVQUAL research see Ladhari (2009)). An alternative model offered by Brady and Cronin (2001) indicates that customer perceptions of SQ should be measured by three dimensions, namely interaction quality, service environment quality, and outcome quality. To evaluate SQ perceptions in winery centers, Thach and Olsen (2006) have recently developed a scale comprised of five dimensions, namely, customer service, visitor education, brand differentiation, appearance, and purchase assistance.

Beyond its operationalization, SQ has been linked to a variety of consequences for both service providers and customers (Cronin *et al.*, 2000; Zeithaml, 2000; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996). Among these, place attachment and brand attachment are now receiving a rising amount of interest amongst researchers in marketing and hospitality management (Alexandris *et al.*, 2006; Brocato, 2006; Jawahar and Maheswari, 2009; Thach and Olsen, 2006; Theodorakis *et al.*, 2009). For example, using Parasuraman *et al.*'s (1988, 1994) SERVQUAL model, Jawahar and Maheswari (2009) find, in a retail banking setting, that SQ strongly and positively influence brand attachment. Similarly, Alexandris *et al.* (2006) find, in a skiing resort context and using Brady and Cronin's (2001) SQ model, that both the interaction quality (i.e. the interaction with the employees or the human element of the skiing resort) and service environment quality (i.e. the tangible/physical element of the skiing resort) significantly predict place attachment dimensions – with interaction quality being the most powerful predictor of place identity and environment quality as the most powerful predictor of place dependence (Alexandris *et al.*, 2006, p. 420). In a study of similar design to their first, Alexandris and colleagues (Theodorakis *et al.*, 2009) report that place attachment has a mediational effect on the relationship between SQ and customer loyalty. Using an overall measure of SQ (i.e. four items adapted from Brady and Cronin, 2001), the findings in Brocato (2006) support – in a restaurant context – a direct and positive relationship between SQ and place attachment. Thach and Olsen (2006) also report that all their five factors of SQ correlate highly with brand attachment and that three of them entered the predictive model they proposed. Consequently, and based on these

studies' findings, it can be argued that a service firm cannot attract consumers and cause them to develop affectionate ties without displaying and offering an excellent SQ. Accordingly:

P_2.　A high level of SQ leads to a higher level of CSFA.

Trust toward the service firm and its personnel
Research in social psychology suggests that for a relationship to be considered an attachment relationship, the attachment figure should promote the other party's feelings of security and confidence (Fraley and Shaver, 2000; Mikulincer, 1998). As Fraley and Shaver (2000, p. 138) indicate, "The attached individual uses the attachment figure as a haven of safety, support, and protection". In marketing, brand attachment advocates go so far as to state that "attachment cannot survive without trust" (Park *et al.*, 2006, p. 208). Recent studies by Esch *et al.* (2006) and Louis and Lambart (2010) provide empirical support for this theoretical statement as brand trust was found to be one of the main predictors of brand attachment. Therefore, and consistent with research in social psychology and marketing, we believe that a customer cannot develop affectionate bonds with an untrustworthy service firm; that is, only if a service firm puts customer interest ahead of the firm's and it strives to enhance customer welfare, will there be the development of attachment. In short, we propose that:

P_3.　A high level of trust in the service firm leads to a higher level of CSFA.

Since the purchase of a service is thought to be (except for self-service) the process that depends in part on the interpersonal interaction between the service personnel and the customer and to be consistent with a research stream that distinguish between customer-staff trust and customer-firm trust (Crutchfield, 2007; Yim *et al.*, 2008), we also propose that:

P_4.　A high level of trust in the service personnel leads to a higher level of CSFA.

Customer-service firm image congruence
All conceptualizations of attachment phenomena indicate that a person, a place, a brand, or a service firm can form an attachment figure in such a way that it is viewed as an extension of the self. It is here proposed that a customer cannot integrate a service firm into his self if some kind of alignment or congruence between his own image and that of the service firm is lacking. Similar to Kressmann *et al.* (2006, p. 955) and Kleijnen *et al.* (2005, p. 345), we define customer-service firm image congruence (or image congruence for short) as the fit or the match between the self-image[3] and the service firm image (Sirgy, 1982; Sirgy *et al.*, 1997).

Before going further in our proposition, we should indicate that in reviewing the literature pertaining to brand attachment we found that image congruence has been operationalized (i.e. measured) either in terms of values congruence[4] (Michel and Vergne, 2004) or personality congruence[5] (Lacoeuilhe, 2000; Malär *et al.*, 2011; Orth *et al.*, 2010). Across both types of congruence, one thing is clear from the reviewed studies; that is, image congruency plays a crucial role in the formation of brand attachment. For instance, the study by Lacoeuilhe (2000) shows that the perception of a congruency between the self-concept and the brand personality explicates an individual's attachment toward it. Research by Michel and Vergne (2004, p. 14) also

indicates that "value congruence significantly explicates attachment toward e-brands". A recent study by Orth *et al.* (2010) provides an interesting account on how consumer personality interacts with brand personality in influencing attachment. These authors found that individuals selectively relate to brands depending on a brand's personality because it provides a vehicle for self expression (Orth *et al.*, 2010). Given these findings, we propose that:

P_5. A high level of image congruence leads to a higher level of CSFA.

Positive emotions felt by the customer during the service experience
Attachment is, by its very nature, an emotional construct. As Bowlby (1980, p. 40) indicates, "Many of the most intense emotions arise during the formation, the maintenance, the disruption and the renewal of attachment relationships". In his *JM* article on attachment to human brands, Thomson (2006, p. 116) suggests that "an attachment is unlikely to develop if the starting point of the relationship is characterized by intense negative feelings". Likewise, Coulter and Ligas (2004) argue that a customer becomes emotionally attached to or as if he belongs with that particular provider, not just because the provider performs satisfactorily, but also because the service provider makes the customer feel a certain way. Such arguments have been recently corroborated by Cristau (2006), Rosenbaum *et al.* (2007), and Orth *et al.* (2010). For example, Cristau (2006) reports a strong and significant correlation between brand attachment and what she refers to as emotional attraction. Rosenbaum *et al.* (2007) uncover that people became attached to a specific place because it is there that they obtain emotional support. Orth *et al.* (2010, p. 1202) find that "attachment is consistently stronger in positive affective environments". Based on these theoretical accounts and empirical findings, positive emotions felt during the service experience seem to be a stepping-stone to, and necessary for, attachment; that is:

P_6. A high level of positive emotions felt during the service experience leads to a higher level of CSFA.

Some moderators of the formation of CSFA
As might be noticed, the framework shown in Figure 2 implies moderation[6] effects played by the relational versus transactional nature of the service, customers' attachment styles, and the age of the customer-service firm relationship. These effects have some theoretical and empirical supports in the literature (Dagger *et al.*, 2009; Ganesan-Lim *et al.*, 2008; Mende and Bolton, 2011; Palmatier *et al.*, 2006; Yim *et al.*, 2008). They are discussed in more detail here below.

Relational versus transactional services. Services have been classified in numerous ways (see Cook *et al.* (1999) for a state-of-the-art review). However, there seems to be an agreement that most services could be classified along a relational-transactional continuum (Bowen, 1990; Lovelock and Wirtz, 2007; Yim *et al.*, 2008). Relational services are services directed at people through high customer contact and high customization (e.g. hair salons). Transactional services are services directed at the mass public that offer standardized service, moderate to low customer contact, and low customization (e.g. fast-food restaurants). It is here expected that the transactional versus relational aspect of the service may moderate the impacts of:

- CS;
- SQ;
- trust;
- image congruence; and
- positive emotions on CSFA.

Trust and image congruence are in essence relational constructs. Berry (1996, p. 42) offers "trust as perhaps the single most powerful relationship marketing tool available to a company", and Zhang and Bloemer (2008, p. 161) propose that image congruence is "a powerful human motivator for developing and maintaining relationships". It is here suggested that trust and image congruency will play a more important role in the formation of CSFA in a relational than in a transactional service.

As Yim *et al.* (2008, p. 752) indicate, "Relational services exhibit greater amount of affection than transactional services". These authors empirically show that for hair salons the amount of affect is greater than that displayed for a fast-food restaurant. Based on their findings, we propose that the effect of positive emotions on CSFA is stronger for relational services than for transactional services.

Several researchers have discussed the possibility that SQ perceptions may be dependent on the characteristics of a service (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Ganesan-Lim *et al.*, 2008). Ganesan-Lim *et al.* (2008), for example, propose that SQ perceptions differ according to the level of contact inherent to the service. Their results indicate that in comparison to customers in the low-contact (transactional) service category, customers in the high-contact (relational) service category have significantly higher perceptions of interaction quality and outcome quality, two of the three dimensions of the SQ model proposed by Brady and Cronin (2001). In view of these findings, it is here suggested that the relational versus transactional nature of a service may also moderate the effect of SQ perceptions on CSFA.

The relational versus transactional nature of a service is also expected to moderate the relationship between CS and CSFA. Support for this is in Yim *et al.* (2008). Investigating the antecedents of customer-firm affection (which is a close yet distinct construct to CSFA), Yim *et al.* (2008, p. 748) find that the correlation between CS and customer-firm affection was more pronounced in the relational service context (hair salon) than in the transactional one (fast-food restaurant). In short, the preceding discussion leads to the following proposition:

P_7. The relationships proposed in P_1-P_6 are stronger and more significant in a relational service than in a transactional one.

Customers' attachment styles. Based on research in social psychology (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Pietromonaco and Barrett, 1997), the customer's attachment style is also expected to moderate most – but not all – of the proposed relationships in our conceptual framework.

In their investigation on attachment styles in daily social interactions, Pietromonaco and Barrett (1997, p. 1413) report that "preoccupied individuals show less differentiation between themselves and others" than did fearful, secure, or dismissing individuals. Such results fit with those in Hazan and Shaver (1987) indicating that preoccupied individuals experience a relatively high desire to merge

with others. The study by Pietromonaco and Barrett (1997, pp. 1416-1417) also shows that "preoccupied individuals reported significantly more positive emotion than did" dismissing, fearful, or secure individuals. In addition, preoccupied individuals reported greater satisfaction in their relationships than did individuals in other attachment groups (Pietromonaco and Barrett, 1997, p. 1416). Furthermore, preoccupied individuals expressed higher esteem for their relationship partners – even following a high-conflict interaction – than did secure, dismissing, or fearful individuals (Pietromonaco and Barrett, 1997, p. 1417). This later finding is in line with Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991, p. 230) who indicate, in their seminal article on the four attachment prototypes, that preoccupied individuals score high on reliance on others and the use of others as a secure base than did individuals of other attachment styles. Inspired by Pietromonaco and Barrett's (1997) and Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) line of findings, we argue that the effect of image congruence, positive emotion, CS, and trust on CSFA will be more pronounced for preoccupied customers than for the customers in other attachment groups; that is:

P_8. The relationships proposed in P_1-P_6 are stronger and more significant for preoccupied customers than for secure, dismissing, or fearful customers.

Relationship length. Commensurate with a recent stream of work in relationship marketing of services that examines the moderating role of relationship length in the formation of such relational constructs as trust (Coulter and Coulter, 2002) and commitment (Dagger *et al.*, 2009), the length of the relationship is also here expected to moderate the formation of CSFA. Similar to Palmatier *et al.* (2006, p. 140), we define a customer-service provider relationship length as the duration of time that the relationship between the exchange partners has existed. CSFA is highly improbable to appear early in a relationship because there would be a small basis in past experience for its development. CSFA can be gradually formed and strengthened as positive experiences accumulate over time. Hence, a service firm can attract customers and cause them to develop affectionate bonds only if it is continuously offering excellent SQ levels, satisfying their needs, providing them with emotional support, being trustworthy, and being congruent with them in terms of image. Accordingly, we believe that:

P_9. The relationships proposed in P_1-P_6 are stronger and more significant in longer relationships than in shorter ones.

Discussion and contributions
This conceptual article has addressed the following questions: what is customer service-firm attachment? And what causes customers to form emotionally laden ties with their service firms? These questions we believe are theoretically and managerially relevant since several are those researchers and practitioners who suggest attachment as "the foundation of a company's brand equity" (Thach and Olsen, 2006, p. 63), "the ultimate, long-term outcome of a relationship" (Esch *et al.*, 2006, p. 100), or who document that "the big pay off in sales is only attained when the highest level of emotional attachment is achieved" (Hallberg, 2004, p. 232).

Theoretical contributions and relationships with prior research
This article's theoretical contributions are twofold. First, it reviews and merges the latest insights from research on different attachment phenomena in different

disciplines (i.e. social psychology, environmental psychology, leisure science, and marketing). The intent of this exercise is to develop a solid and up-to-date theoretical foundation that could be used as a starting point for subsequent research. Second, the framework here proposed refines and complements current thinking about the antecedents of attachment in service contexts (Vlachos *et al.*, 2010).

Our framework implies that CSFA is a function of not only the successful completion (i.e. satisfaction) or the quality of the core service being offered (i.e. SQ), but also as a function of a number of relational (i.e. trust and image congruence) and person-within-situation (i.e. positive emotion felt during the service encounter) variables. In this regard, and to the best of our knowledge, the suspected relationship between positive affect and attachment has never been advanced/tested before in service contexts. Almost the same argument could be placed for the assumed relationship between image congruence and CSFA. In respect to this linkage, our framework integrates Sirgy's (1986) self-congruity theory which is, according to Sirgy *et al.* (1997, p. 230), "a significant area of research in consumer behavior/marketing". In so doing, this framework also heeds a recent call by Zhang and Bloemer (2008) to pay more attention to image congruence in service research. These authors argue that if researchers "fail to consider its existence they will likely fail to understand why consumers build, maintain, or end a relationship" (Zhang and Bloemer, 2008, p. 172). Furthermore, our model is among the few conceptual frameworks that take into account moderation effects that are assumed to be played by a service-specific characteristic (i.e. relational versus transactional service), a relationship-specific characteristic (i.e. relationship length), and a customer-specific characteristic (i.e. attachment styles). In sum, though the proposed framework strongly builds on previous work, it can contribute significantly to the extant literature.

Managerial implications
Notwithstanding the fact that this article remains conceptual in spirit, a number of managerial implications seem relevant. First, it is widely recognized in the services marketing literature that not all customers of a service firm want a relationship with it or with its employees (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997; Danaher *et al.*, 2008). In this respect and based on attachment theory, this article suggests that there are consumers (i.e. consumers of the preoccupied attachment style) who are "naturally" predisposed to becoming emotionally attached to their service providers. Service managers may find this useful in making allocation decisions and in rationalizing their efforts toward the formation of emotional connections with these customers. Second, our framework implies that service managers should not solely satisfy their customers' needs and provide them with an excellent SQ when aiming to create and nurture strong relationships. They have to realise that more "deep-lying" constructs, such as image congruency, are helpful in the effort to build durable emotionally laden customer-service firm relationships. In this regard, our framework proposes that to be considered as an attachment figure, a service firm should develop an image (either in terms of values or personality traits) that is consistent with the key target segment. Service managers should therefore first identify which values (or personality traits) are important to (or that characterise) their target consumers. Next, they should try to build a clear image through tailored promotions, events, or word-of-mouth communication. Third, both researches on attachment theory and brand attachment indicate that trust

is essential to attachment. So, service managers should pay a particular attention when embarking on efforts, such as the frequent rotation of personnel or the shift to electronic interfaces, which may impede customer-staff trust and eventually undermine a key driver of attachment.

Limitations and further research directions

Despite all the abovementioned contributions, this article has limitations too. However, some of these limitations point out to questions that could be the subject of further work. First, while this article offers a formal definition for CSFA, no measurement instrument (i.e. scale) for that construct is provided here. Henceforth, a chief and delicate task will be the construction of a reliable and valid scale that assesses it. Fortunately, the marketing literature is replete with paradigms, step-by-step procedures, and recommendations that could assist future researchers in this endeavor (Churchill, 1979; Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001; Jarvis *et al.*, 2003; Rossiter, 2002). Second, our conceptual framework is only a preliminary attempt at addressing an issue that has significant implications for service marketing theory and practice. Therefore, the proposed relationships should not be seen as definitive. Fellow researchers are urged to test and eventually refine them.

Our conceptual framework raises a series of research issues that should be investigated empirically. One such issue is how should we operationalize image congruence? Should it be in terms of personalities or in terms of values? Only a comparative study may perhaps provide responses regarding the superiority of either approach in explicating attachment.

Notes

1. Relationship marketing "is to identify and establish, maintain and enhance, and when necessary terminate relationships with customers" (Grönroos, 2010, p. 397).

2. Attachment to a material possession is "the extent to which an object which is owned, expected to be owned, or previously owned by an individual, is used by that individual to maintain his or her self-concept" (Ball and Tasaki, 1992, p. 158).

3. Self-image or self-concept is the "totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to him-self as an object" (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 7).

4. Value congruence is the similarity between a customer's own personal values and his or her perceptions of the service provider's values (Zhang and Bloemer, 2008, p. 163).

5. Personality congruence refers to the match between consumers' personality and the personality of a given product, brand, store, etc. (Kressmann *et al.*, 2006, p. 955).

6. A moderator "is a qualitative or quantitative variable that affects the direction and/or strength of the relation between an independent or predictor variable and a dependent or criterion variable" (Baron and Kenny, 1986, p. 1174).

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