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Shoppers' attachment with retail stores: Antecedents and impact on patronage intentions

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ABSTRACT

Systemic changes are transforming traditional brick-and-mortar retailing, with some venerable retailers closing some or all of their stores, others reinventing store layouts and shopper engagement tactics, and, interestingly, the migration of erstwhile online-only retailers to the physical retail landscape. Given these changes, it is imperative for brick-and-mortar retailers to identify newer customer relationship mechanisms that motivate patronage intentions. Drawing from research on consumer-brand relationships, this study introduces store attachment as a second-order relational construct comprising of store-self connection and store prominence. Subsequently, for store attachment, cognitive and emotional antecedents as well as consequent influence on store patronage intentions are hypothesized and tested. Based on the findings, implications are offered for retailing researchers and practitioners.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the retail environment has witnessed systemic changes that have irreversibly transformed the face of traditional, brick-and-mortar retail stores. In the US, in the recent few years alone, several retailers have either announced closure of poorly-performing store locations or exited the industry permanently. According to some estimates, more than 6000 stores were closed in 2017 and an additional 3600 closures are expected in 2018 (Business Insider, 2017; Fortune, 2017). Yet, the future of brick-and-mortar retailing is not entirely bleak. Traditional retailers like TJ Maxx, Target, and Nordstrom have announced new store openings, albeit with smaller footprints as compared to existing stores. Shopping malls, which have been in decline for years, are reinventing themselves by focusing on customer experience, entertainment, technology, and design (McKinsey, 2014, 2017). Meanwhile, erstwhile online-only retailers such as Amazon, Bonobos, and Wendy Parker have opened brick-and-mortar stores designed to focus on customer engagement and experiential value. In fact, Amazon, the online retailing giant, is making inroads into the offline realm by establishing pop-up stores, bookstores, delivery lockers embedded within stores, and most recently, a brick-and-mortar retail store called Amazon Go, where there are no cashiers or registers and shoppers can charge their purchases to their Amazon accounts as they shop (Business Insider, 2018).

These developments point toward a distinctive retailing future,

where brick-and-mortar retailers must battle for relevance by engendering customer engagement through outstanding customer experience, emotional connections, and shared identity (e.g., Grewal et al., 2009; Grewal et al., 2017a, 2017b). Accordingly, it becomes critical for retailing strategists and researchers to embrace newer value propositions and frameworks to understand, assist, and influence shopper behavior (Grewal et al., 2017a, 2017b). One important, yet under-researched, driver of retail shopper behavior is *store attachment*, which captures the nature and salience of shoppers' bonds with retailers (Park et al., 2010). Attachment theory proposes that individuals' attachment with an entity influences their intentions to interact with that entity (Bowlby, 1969, 1979). In fact, extending the relationship marketing paradigm (Palmatier et al., 2006), it has been demonstrated that customers expect organizations to acknowledge and respond to their attachment preference and that organizations that understand, identify, and respond to customers' attachment preference are more successful in customer acquisition and retention than others (Mende et al., 2013). Yet, there has been very little research on the antecedents and consequences of shoppers' attachment with retailers. Accordingly, this study draws from the literature on consumer-brand relationships to develop and test a store attachment-based theoretical framework of shoppers' patronage intentions toward retailers.

Specifically, the framework tests cognitive and emotional antecedents of shoppers' attachment with retailers as well as patronage-related consequences. Importing seminal work from the branding

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literature (e.g., Park et al., 2010) to the retailing domain, we conceptualize store attachment as a combination of *store-self connection* and *store prominence*. Store-self connection captures the psychological attachment between shoppers and a retailer, whereas store prominence captures the valence of such a connection. As store prominence can be high or low with or without store-self connection, a combination of the two dimensions provide a robust understanding of store attachment. The framework developed in this study makes several contributions to the retailing literature. First, although prior studies have examined shoppers' emotional attachment with retailers (e.g., Vlachos and Vrechopoulos, 2012), the conceptualization of store attachment as a second-order construct comprising of store-self connection and store prominence has not been undertaken and tested. Second, this study advances research on store attachment by investigating critical store-related cognitive and emotional antecedents such as store prestige, store equity, and store affect. Third, this study provides insight into the motivational power of store attachment by investigating the influence of store attachment on store patronage intentions. Based on empirical analysis of the proposed framework, the study offers several theoretical and managerial contributions.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, the conceptual underpinnings of the store attachment construct are presented. Second, the theoretical framework is developed and hypotheses are introduced. Third, data collection procedures, analytical techniques, and results are discussed. Finally, theoretical and managerial contributions as well as study limitations and directions for future research are provided.

2. Store attachment

Attachment theory addresses the propensity of individuals to develop strong bonds with objects and that suggests that the nature of an individual's attachment with an object influences the individual's interaction with that object (Bowlby, 1969, 1979). Applying the tenets of attachment theory, marketing scholars have investigated the formation, maintenance, and consequences of consumers' attachment with brands (e.g., Thomson et al., 2005; Park et al., 2010), celebrities and human brands (Thomson, 2006), and more specifically, retailers (Dolbec and Chebat, 2013; Vlachos and Vrechopoulos, 2012).

Drawing from attachment theory, Fedorikhin et al. (2008) describe attachment as an emotional bond between an individual and an object, which influences emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses toward that object. In a subsequent work, Park et al., (2010, p. 2) define brand attachment as “the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self,” where the bond is “exemplified by a rich and accessible memory network (or mental representations) that involves thoughts

and feelings about the brand and the brand's relationship to the self.” As per this conceptualization, brand attachment involves not only a bond with an object, but also the fluency with which thoughts and feelings about the object are brought to mind (Park et al., 2010). Therefore, brand attachment is reflected in two unique components: brand-self connection and brand prominence.

Brand-self connection refers to the cognitive and emotional connections between the brand and the self, which lead to the development of a sense of oneness with the brand. Brand prominence refers to the ease and frequency with which the brand is evoked to the top of the mind and, as such, reflects the salience of the connection with the brand. Because of the juxtaposition of these two dimensions, brand attachment is a better predictor of behavior as compared to other psychological constructs such as brand attitude (Park et al., 2010). In fact, in a series of studies, Park et al. (2010) demonstrate that brand attachment is not only empirically different from brand attitude, but also serves as a better motivational predictor of behavioral intent and actual behavior.

Following Park et al. (2010), this study adopts the conceptualization of brand attachment as a two-dimensional relational construct and extends it to examine the relationship between consumers and retailer stores. Correspondingly, store attachment refers to the connection between a store and a shopper's self as well as the prominence of store-related thoughts and feelings in the shopper's mind. In doing so, this study advances prior research on store attachment. Vlachos and Vrechopoulos (2012) examined shoppers' emotional attachment with retailers in the context of grocery retailing; however, their conceptualization and measurement centered on the emotion-laden construct of brand love. Dolbec and Chebat (2013) studied store attachment as a consequence of brand experience, but conceptualized attachment as the strength of the cognitive and emotional bond with a store and did not examine potential consequences of store attachment. A careful review of the retailing literature reveals that prior studies have not afforded adequate attention on the store attachment as well as its antecedents and consequences.

3. Framework and hypotheses

Given the paucity of research on attachment in the retailing literature, this study contributes to current knowledge on shoppers' relationships with retail stores by investigating antecedents of store attachment as well as the influence of store attachment on store patronage intentions. As the simultaneous consideration of both cognitive and emotional antecedents in theoretical frameworks provides a comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior (Sierra et al.,

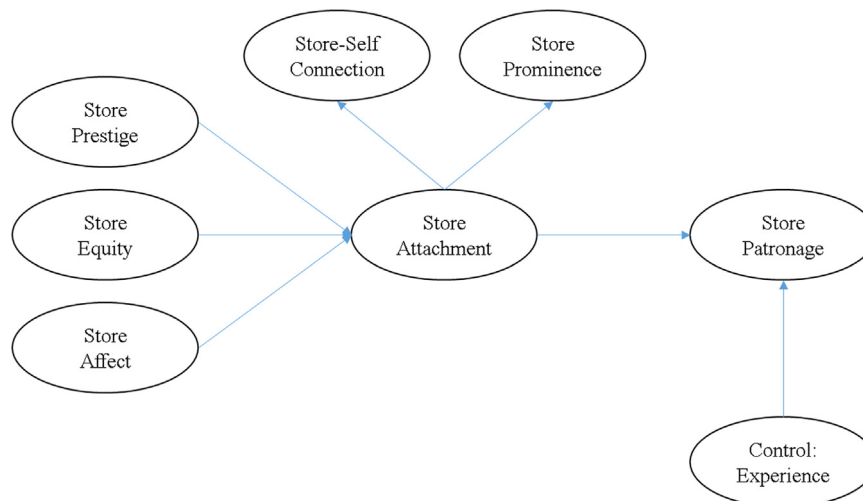


Fig. 1. Theoretical Framework.

2013), one cognitive antecedent (i.e., store equity) and two emotional antecedents (i.e., store prestige and store affect) of store attachment are included in the framework developed in this study (Fig. 1). Correspondingly, store attachment is proposed to influence shoppers' intentions to visit a retail store. Finally, store experience, is included as a control variable.

3.1. Store equity

There is a rich tradition of research on consumer-based brand equity (e.g., Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Yoo et al., 2000), where brand equity is defined in terms of the incremental value imparted on to a product due to the existence of a brand. Paralleling these efforts, Hartman and Spiro (2005, P.1114) define store equity as “the differential effect of store knowledge on customer response to the marketing of the store.” As such, retail store equity stems from the knowledge in consumers' minds about the retailer based on awareness, favorable associations, and store image (Keller, 1993). Factors such as advertising expenditure, pricing, store image, and distribution intensity are instrumental in enhancing brand equity (Yoo et al., 2000). For retailers, the equity of their store brand is important as it symbolizes the strength, attractiveness, and uniqueness of the retail brand (Pappu and Quester, 2006; Swoboda et al., 2016). It has been demonstrated that high store equity leads to customer satisfaction with the store (Fuentes-Blasco et al., 2017), greater levels of consumer loyalty across different types retail formats (Swoboda et al., 2016), favorable attitude toward the store (Liu et al., 2017). As higher levels of store equity imply greater awareness about the store, more favorable associations, and positive store image, shoppers are likely to develop stronger cognitive and emotional connections with the store and evoke the store more fluently in their minds. Therefore, given that store equity plays a role in enabling the self (Park et al., 2010), it is proposed that store equity engenders store attachment.

H1. Store equity is positively related to store attachment

3.2. Store prestige

In the branding literature, brand prestige is defined in terms of the status enjoyed by a brand relative to other brands (Baek et al., 2010; Steenkamp et al., 2003). It has been noted that prestige brands provide psychological value to consumers through status and conspicuous consumption (Baek et al., 2010). In the corporate branding literature, corporate brand prestige has been used to capture corporate associations that relate to the evaluation of a corporate brand's quality and performance as superior to others (Tuškej and Podnar, 2018). More precisely, Tuškej and Podnar (2018, p. 5) define corporate brand prestige as “the extent to which market and social positions of the corporate brand are perceived as esteemed, respected, appreciated and superior to others.” Correspondingly, store prestige indicates that a particular store is perceived as superior relative to competing stores. In general, shoppers pay attention to design, social, and ambient retail environment cues while evaluating retailers and developing patronage intentions (Baker et al., 2002). Stores that are characterized by superior ambiance, reputable brands, quality products, better space-to-product ratio, customized customer service, and symbolic value tend to be perceived as more prestigious than others (e.g., Sevilla and Townsend, 2016; Tuškej and Podnar, 2018). Store prestige, subsequently, serves as a cue that shopper use to organize stores perceptually and, often, as the single important dimension of comparison across stores (Dawson, 1988). As Deeter-Schmelz, et al., (2000, p. 56) note, “Shopping behavior based on the symbolic prestige qualities of products and stores has long been accepted as ubiquitous in nature.”

In addition, the construal of store prestige has been demonstrated to vary across store type and customers. Dawson (1988), based on a study of shopper perceptions across different types of retailer, proposed a

“prestige hierarchy” in which national department stores were ranked as the most prestigious followed by, in descending order of prestige, specialty stores, local department stores, mass merchandisers, and discount stores. Further, Dawson (1988) reports a “rubber band effect” such that some shoppers perceived a wider continuum of store prestige across different store types as compared to other shoppers. Although prior research has investigated store prestige assessments across store and customer type (Dawson, 1988), factors underlying shoppers' preference for store prestige (Deeter-Schmelz et al., 2000), and store-related antecedents of store prestige (e.g., Sevilla and Townsend, 2016), the effect of store prestige on store attachment has not been investigated.

Store prestige is likely to lead to a pleasurable shopping experience and higher levels of shopping enjoyment, which in turn gratify the self, engender affective evaluations, and bolster store attachment (Bowlby, 1979; Park et al., 2010; Vlachos and Vrechopoulos, 2012). The more prestigious a retail store, the greater is the opportunity to enhance self-esteem by developing a sense of oneness with the store (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). As the consumption of prestige brands signals social status, wealth, and power, such brands are linked to consumers' self-concept and image (Baek et al., 2010; Steenkamp et al., 2003). In their attempts to enhance their self-esteem, consumers seek out prestigious and reputable entities and associate their identities with such entities. Prior research has established that evaluations of prestige are instrumental for creation of long-term memory associations (Baek et al., 2010), preference formation (Hwang and Han, 2016) and engendering identity-based connections (Tuškej and Podnar, 2018). Therefore, given that store prestige plays an important role in gratifying and enriching the self, it is proposed that higher levels of store prestige will lead to higher levels of store attachment.

H2. Store prestige is positively related to store attachment

3.3. Store affect

Brands have the potential to trigger positive emotional responses in consumers. Correspondingly, drawing from research on brand affect (e.g., Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001), store affect is defined as a store's potential to generate a positive, emotional response in shoppers. Choudhuri and Holbrook (2001) expound that consumers may not always purchase brands they “love,” but may more frequently purchase brands that elicit affective responses such as happiness and joy. Further, they report that brand affect is positively related to attitudinal loyalty and purchase intentions. In a similar vein, it is expected that stores that trigger happiness, joy, and affection are more likely to engender connections with shoppers and feature in the top of their minds. This premise is consistent with the “affect as information” perspective, which proposes that rely on their feelings as valuable information while making evaluative judgments (Ray and Chiagouris, 2009; Schwarz, 1990). In addition, positive feelings reaffirm identity-based connections and make such relationships more salient (McCall and Simmons, 1978). Importantly, research on emotional versus cognitive benefits experienced by shoppers reveals that emotional benefits are more easily recalled than cognitive benefits (Frank et al., 2014). These findings lend credence to the argument that store affect positively influences both self-store connection and the salience of such connections in shoppers' minds. Therefore, given that positive feelings play an important role in gratifying and enriching the self (Park et al., 2010) as well as in influencing shopper responses (Frank et al., 2014), store affect is expected to be positively related to store attachment.

H3. Store affect is positively related to store attachment.

3.4. Store patronage intentions

The nature and salience of the bonds between retail stores and

shoppers, reflected by store attachment, are expected to influence shopper behavior toward stores. When shoppers develop store attachment, they view the store as a part of their self and develop salient thoughts and feelings about the store (Park et al., 2010). As a result, shoppers should become more motivated to engage in relationship-sustaining behaviors and, concomitantly, more willing to expend their resources toward patronizing the store. Park et al. (2010) note that brand attachment motivates consumers to perform difficult behaviors for relationship maintenance and engage in purchase behavior. Vlachos and Vrechopoulos (2012) provide additional support by reporting that store attachment, although operationalized in terms of brand love, influences re-patronage intentions in a grocery store setting. Therefore, store attachment is expected to be positively related to store patronage intentions.

H4. Store attachment is positively related to store patronage intentions.

3.5. Store experience

Prior shopping experience and purchases have been found to affect consumers' decisions, including future patronage intentions (Becerra and Korgaonkar, 2011; Bettman and Park, 1980; Dolbec and Chebat, 2013; Shim et al., 2001). Prior experience affects store choice such that customers with high experience are likely to be driven by habits and enduring preferences than cognitions and emotions toward the store (Shim et al., 2001). Therefore, to provide a more robust test of the proposed relationships, the effect of store experience on store patronage intentions is controlled in this study.

4. Method, analysis, and results

4.1. Data collection

Data was collected via an online survey from 195 respondents in a large southwestern university in the US. Participation was voluntary and respondents received extra credit for their participation. The survey provided instructions in the first two pages of the instrument. In the next two (page 3 and 4) pages, respondents were asked to select a department store that they were most familiar with from a list of nine widely known national department stores (JC Penney, Nordstrom, Macy's, Kohl's, Sears, Saks Fifth avenue, Neiman Marcus, Dillard's, and Lord & Taylor) or to provide the name of a department store they were most familiar with. The selected store was subsequently called "The Store" throughout the survey. Afterwards, respondents answered questions regarding their perceptions about equity, prestige, affect, and prominence as well as perceptions of self-connection with The Store, their experience with The Store and their patronage intentions toward The Store. A majority of questions were randomized and some were reversed-coded. Finally, respondents provided demographic information. A total of 191 useful responses were collected and used in the study with a majority from males (63.3%) and between 18 and 22 years old (78.5%). Although respondents selected a wide variety of national department stores as a basis for providing responses, a majority (88%) of respondents selected JC Penney (23%), Kohl's (22.5%), Macy's (21.5%), Nordstrom (19%), and Dillard's (11.5%) (See Appendix B for a detailed breakdown of stores selected by respondents).

4.2. Measurement

The study used scales from prior published research (e.g., Badrinarayanan et al., 2014; Baek et al., 2010; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Netemeyer et al., 2004; Park et al., 2010; Park et al., 2013; Yoo et al., 2000). Store prestige (SP) (Baek et al., 2010) uses a three-item seven-point scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 strongly agree. Respondents provided their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements: The Store is a very prestigious

store; The Store has high status; and The Store is very upscale store. Store affect (SA) (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001) uses a three-item seven-point scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 strongly agree. Respondents provided their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements: Shopping at The Store makes me very happy; Shopping at The Store gives me pleasure; and I would feel good shopping at The Store. Store equity (SE) (Yoo et al., 2000) uses a four-item seven-point scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 strongly agree. Respondents provided their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements: It makes sense to purchase a product sold in The Store instead of any other store that sells same product; It makes sense to purchase a brand sold in The Store instead of any other store that sells the same brand; Even, if another store has the features as The Store, I would prefer to shop in The Store; and Even, if there is another store as good as The Store, I would prefer to shop in The Store.

Store prominence (SPR) (Park et al., 2010) uses a two-item seven-point scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 strongly agree. Respondents provided their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements: My thoughts and feelings toward The Store are often automatic, coming to mind seemingly on their own; and My thoughts and feelings toward The Store come naturally and instantly. Store self-connection (SCS) (Park et al., 2010) uses a six-item seven-point semantic scale, asking respondents to provide their impressions of The Store using the following items: Consistent to Inconsistent with self-image; Reflects to Not reflects who I am; Sells brands Similar to Dissimilar to me; Other shoppers who shop there are Similar to Dissimilar to me; People Similar to Dissimilar to me shop there; and Expresses to Does not express who I am.

Patronage intentions toward The Store (IPS) (Badrinarayanan et al., 2014), the dependent variable, used a three-item seven-point semantic scale, asking respondents to provide their likelihood of shopping at The Store within the next twelve months. It includes the following items: Likely to Unlikely; Possible to Impossible; and Probable to Improbable. Experience with The Store (EXS), which is used as a control variable in the framework, uses a four-item seven-point scale, with 1 being never and 7 all the time. Specifically, respondents provided their level of experience with The Store using the following items: I shop at The Store; I visit The Store; I purchase from The Store; and In the past twelve months I have shopped at The Store.

4.3. Analysis and results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), using LISREL 9.1 software, was used to purify and validate scales as well as to test the proposed second-order model. The goodness of fit indices ($\chi^2 = 162.26$; $\chi^2/df = 1.37$; RMSEA = 0.044 ($p > .05$); GFI = 0.92; CFI = 0.99; NNFI = 0.98; SRMR = 0.043) are within acceptable ranges. Further, the scales' validity, unidimensionality and reliability seem adequate, with Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranging from 0.58 to 0.84 and Composite Reliability (CR) values ranging from 0.82 to 0.91 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Additionally, AVE for each construct is greater than all squared correlation between latent variables (see Table 1 for loadings, reliabilities, and AVEs), except between the second-order construct, store attachment (ATT), and its indicators store prominence (SPR) and store-self connection (SCS) as is expected.

For testing the proposed relationships, as store-self connection (SCS) and store prominence (SPR) are two dimensions "that reflect the conceptual properties of brand attachment" (Park et al., 2010, page 2), the second-order brand attachment construct was created with two reflective first-order dimensions, store-self connection (SCS) and store prominence (SPR). This approach is consistent with the conceptualization and operationalization of brand attachment in prior studies. For instance, Park et al., 2010 (p. 14) note, "both the brand-self connection and the prominence dimensions are critical and non-redundant indicators of attachment." Subsequently, structural Equation Modeling (SEM), using LISREL 9.1 software, was used to test

Table 1
Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) Results^a.

Latent variable	Factor loading	CR	AVE	Indicators mean
Store Prestige (SP)		0.85	0.74	
SP2	0.981			4.445
SP3	0.725			4.005
Store Affect (SA)		0.90	0.76	
SA1	0.852			4.618
SA2	0.925			4.649
SA3	0.841			4.848
Store Equity (SE)		0.82	0.62	
SE2	0.582			4.356
SE3	0.891			4.283
SE4	0.850			4.126
Store Prominence (SPR)		0.83	0.71 ^b	
SPR1	0.874			4.623
SPR2	0.818			4.628
Store Self-Congruity (SCS)		0.84	0.58 ^b	
SCS2	0.796			4.539
SCS3	0.804			4.843
SCS4	0.532			4.408
SCS6	0.859			4.440
Store Attachment (ATT)		0.91	0.83	
SCS	0.828			4.622
SPR	0.994			4.626
Patronage Intentions (IPS)		0.88	0.79	
IPS2	0.795			5.398
IPS3	0.971			5.126
Experience with Store (EXS)		0.85	0.73	
EXS2	0.842			3.911
EXS4	0.818			3.806

^aUsing completely standardized results.

^aFit indices $\chi^2 = 162.26$; $\chi^2/df = 1.37$; RMSEA = 0.044; GFI = 0.92; CFI = 0.99; NNFI = 0.98; SRMR = 0.043.

^bSCS's and SPR's AVEs are lower than squared correlation with ATT (0.58 vs 0.69, and 0.71 vs 0.99, respectively); SPR and SCS reflect ATT and thus, there is shared common variance with ATT.

hypotheses (see Table 1). The goodness of fit indices for test of main effects in the structural model ($\chi^2 = 163.62$, $\chi^2/df = 1.53$; RMSEA = 0.053 ($p > .05$); GFI = 0.91; CFI = 0.99; NNFI = 0.98; SRMR = 0.053) indicate that the model fits the data adequately. R-squared values, provided by LISREL following Hayduk's (2006) formula, show that the r-squared value for store attachment (ATT) is 87.3% and 49.5% for patronage intentions (IPS). Overall the model explains a large portion of variance in store attachment and patronage intentions.

As for the relationships proposed in the hypothesized framework, store prestige (SP) was not found to exert a significant influence on store attachment (ATT), thus failing to lend support for hypothesis H1. Store equity (SE) exerts a positive and significant ($p < .05$) influence on store attachment (ATT), thus supporting hypothesis H2. Store affect (SA) exerts a positive and significant ($p < .01$) on store attachment (ATT), thus providing support for hypothesis H3. Finally, store attachment (ATT) exerts a significant ($p < .01$) influence on patronage intentions (IPS), as hypothesized in H4. Although not hypothesized, the indirect effects of the three antecedents on store patronage intentions were also examined. Store prestige (SP) has no indirect significant influence on patronage intentions (IPS), whereas store equity (SE) ($p < .05$) and store affect (SA) ($p < .01$) exert positive, indirect effects on patronage intentions (IPS). Experience with store (EXS), the control variable, has a significant ($p < .01$) influence on patronage intentions (IPS). In addition, although not hypothesized, the effects of the antecedents on each individual dimension on store attachment were also examined. The analysis revealed that both store affect ($p < .01$) and store equity ($p < .05$) have positive effects on the two dimensions of store attachment. Results and coefficients are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Structure Equations Model (SEM) Results and Hypotheses Testing.

Relationship	Factor loading ^a	t Statistic	Hypotheses testing
H1: SE on ATT	.280	1.99 ^b	Supported
H2: SP on ATT	.021	.41	Not Supported
H3: SA on ATT	.380	3.97 ^c	Supported
H4: ATT on IPS	.651	4.39 ^c	Supported
EXS on IPS	.454	4.22 ^c	
Indirect effect of SP on IPS	.014	.41	
Indirect effect of SA on IPS	.248	3.27 ^c	
Indirect effect of SE on IPS	.182	1.92 ^b	
Other Effects:			
Effect of SP on SCS	.021	.41	
Effect of SA on SCS	.380	3.97 ^c	
Effect of SE on SCS	.280	1.99 ^b	
Effect of SP on SPR	.027	.41	
Effect of SA on SPR	.487	4.19 ^c	
Effect of SE on SPR	.359	2.01 ^b	

Note: SE – Store Equity; SP – Store Prestige; SA – Store Affect; ATT – Store Attachment; IPS – Patronage Intentions; SCS – Store-Self Connection; SPR – Store Prominence.

^a Completely Standardized Results.

^b $p < .05$ (Koufteros 1999).

^c $p < .1$ (Koufteros 1999).

5. Discussion and conclusion

Unprecedented changes are transforming traditional brick-and-mortar retailing, with some venerable retailers closing some or all of their stores, others reinventing store layouts and shopper engagement tactics, and, interestingly, the migration of erstwhile online-only retailers to the physical retail landscape. Given these changes, it is imperative for brick-and-mortar retailers to identify newer customer relationship mechanisms that motivate patronage intentions. Drawing from research on consumer-brand relationships, this study introduces store attachment as a second-order relational construct comprising of store-self connection and store prominence. Subsequently, for store attachment, cognitive and emotional antecedents as well as consequent influence on store patronage intentions are hypothesized and tested. Based on the findings, implications are offered for retailing researchers and practitioners.

Results provide support to the two-dimensional structure of store attachment, cognitive and emotional antecedents of store attachment, and impact of store attachment on store patronage intentions. Specifically, as for antecedents, both store equity and store affect were found to positively influence store attachment. This suggests that retailers must work toward augmenting perceived customer-based equity of their stores and delivering positive customer emotional experiences such that they enable, augment, and gratify the brand attachment components of store-self connection and store prominence. Engendering store attachment is critical for retailers in the contemporary business environment as shoppers are making fewer visits and spending lesser resources in typical brick-and-mortar store (Business Insider, 2017).

Due to the emotional and psychological motivations inherent in store attachment, it becomes a powerful predictor of shopper behavior – even more so than shopper attitudes toward the store (Park et al., 2010). Importantly, since the relationship strength and salience denoted in store attachment take much longer to develop, as compared to attitude toward the store, store attachment represents a more advanced stage of relationship development (Park et al., 2010). By demonstrating the relationship between cognitive and emotional antecedents and brand attachment, this study also provides partial support for Grewal et al. (2017a), (2017b) hierarchy of customer engagement. Grewal et al. (2017a), (2017b) propose that customer engagement increases as retailers move shopper along from customer experience to emotional connections to shared identities. Correspondingly, this study

demonstrates that store patronage increases as retailers cultivate distinctive store knowledge and positive emotions, which in turn, foster store-self connection and store prominence.

Although store prestige was hypothesized as an antecedent of store attachment, the data did not support that relationship. However, three possible explanations can be offered for this counter-intuitive finding. First, although store prestige is an important positioning factor, prestige does not influence all shoppers the same way (e.g., Baek et al., 2010; Dawson, 1988). Publicly self-conscious shoppers or those susceptible to thinking about how others judge them are more likely to discern prestige and incorporate it in their decision making processes (Baek et al., 2010). Second, since the respondents were asked to provide responses with respect to their most familiar national department store – a category ranked highest on the retail store prestige hierarchy (Dawson, 1988) – perhaps, consideration of other store types (e.g., discount store, grocery stores, etc.) might shed more light on the relationship between store prestige and store attachment. Third, the sample used in this study typically does not shop in luxurious or prestigious stores. Therefore, they may use other cues such as knowledge about the store or emotional responses from prior visits to develop strong and salient associations with retail stores.

5.1. Managerial implications

This study provides useful information to store managers on how to retain customers by enhancing customer relationships vis a vis increasing store-self connection and store prominence. Stores need to search for ways to create imagery and experiences that enable and amplify the strength of the bond between the store and its customer base. Understanding the characteristics of the target customer base and customizing store attributes based on their cognitive and emotional preferences would greatly assist stores in establishing strong identity-based connections with customers. Stores need to develop engagement strategies to make sure that customers are actively interacting with the store and, as a result, bring the store to the top of mind more fluently. These strategies are likely to be successful with especially with millennials and young adults as such groups seek identity-enhancing experiences, self-expressive benefits, and customized outreach from retailers. In addition, store managers may want to understand what is important to its customer base regarding the store and shopping in general to create salient points of connection that customer may remember; which ultimately engender store attachment and increases patronage intentions. Specifically, store managers must identify store attributes that trigger positive emotions and evaluations and, subsequently, augment such attributes in the store environment. For example, Nordstrom, during this past Christmas, moved its gift wrapping from the back of store to highly visible sections of the store and also created a separate section for customers to pick-up, return, or exchange items bought online. These actions were applauded by shoppers as they created positive emotional responses and memorable associations and, subsequently, translated into strong bonds and patronage intentions.

5.2. Limitations and future research

Our study has some inherent limitations. The framework is neither holistic nor exhaustive. However, it replicates the work of Park et al. (2010) on brand attachment in the retailing context and provides a launching pad for additional empirical efforts and theory development regarding the role of store attachment and its antecedents on consumers' store patronage intentions. Future research could include other variables that may aid in formation of store attachment and impact patronage intentions such as store personality or image, store satisfaction, product or brand assortment, among others. Similarly, variables denoting store characteristics that may impact consumers' emotions, such as store atmospherics, displays, and design elements may impact formation of attachment (Sherman et al., 1997). In a recent study,

Huang et al. (2017) find that when shoppers are in a crowded retail environment, they desire to engage in social engagement decreases and, instead, they seek non-social substitutes, such as brands, for social relationships. Their findings offer interesting new directions for researching the effect of crowdedness on the formation of store attachment. For instance, future research can examine how crowdedness in department stores, especially during peak shopping occasions or holiday seasons, influences store affect and store equity as intervening mechanisms in the formation of store attachment. In addition to store patronage, post-purchase variables such as store satisfaction may aid in understanding role of attachment on future patronage; indeed, research suggest brand attachment aids in the formation of brand satisfaction, trust and more importantly loyalty (Belaid and Temessek Behi, 2011). Future research should investigate if store unattractiveness and store-self distance (Park et al., 2013) reduce formation of store attachment and thus, patronage intentions; while our study concentrates on what aids store attachment, understanding what deters from it may increase our understanding of store attachment and its influence on patronage. In addition, as research indicates that positive and/or negative word of mouth affect consumer patronage intentions (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013), future research may include influence of word of mouth or store reputation on consumers' store attachment formation. As for the consequences of store attachment, future research can consider other outcomes beyond store patronage intentions. One promising area for further attention is the dark side or negative outcomes emanating from store attachment. For example, Japutra et al. (2018) note that consumer high in attachment avoidance are likely to engage in trash-talking and anti-brand behaviors. This implies that retailers must monitor store attachment levels and develop mitigation tactics to curtail negative behaviors among attachment avoidance consumers. Finally, individual differences, such as demographic variables, shopping propensities and predispositions, motivations, and cultural factors can be employed in future frameworks for a more holistic understanding of the antecedents and consequences of store attachment.

An additional limitation of this study pertains to the nature of the sample recruited for data collection purposes. Although undergraduate students have been considered as acceptable proxies for retail shoppers in prior studies, they represent a convenience sample and pose a limitation on generalizability of findings. It would be interesting, and would increase study generalizability, if future research verifies whether our findings are replicable in different shopper populations and segments. The generalizability of the findings can be further extended by considering other store types as well as other channels of distribution, such as online or catalog sales. For instance, Dolbec and Chebat (2013) indicate that store type moderates influence of store image on store experience, which is an antecedent of store attachment. Their findings suggest that stores where consumers can have a more sensorial experience, create greater experiences and attachment.

Correspondingly, future research could investigate if store type moderates the influence of store equity and store affect on store attachment. In addition, future research could test if brick-and-mortar stores, because of increased sensorial experiences, can create more store affect, store equity and store attachment than online counterparts, and thus, could develop a blue print to increase patronage intentions in the hyper-competitive retail landscape. Through various hedonic and utilitarian mechanisms, brick-and-mortar stores hold better opportunities for customer engagement and customer experience management, as compared to online stores. Therefore, these opportunities should be fully leveraged to facilitate store equity and store affect. Going the extra mile in helping customers locate a product, free gift wrapping, pet friendly stores, social initiatives, and even closing the store on popular shopping days (as was the case with the outdoor equipment retailer, REI, which closed doors on Black Friday to allow customers and employees to spend more time outdoors) are some examples of leveraging brick-and-stores to create attractive emotional and rational appeals that cultivate strong and salient bonds with shoppers.

Finally, improving upon the cross-sectional study reported here, future research must design longitudinal studies in concert with objective retailer data to understand the proposed relationships, the

evolution of store attachment over time and, importantly, the impact of store attachment and patronage intentions on actual purchase behavior, under different environmental conditions.

Appendix A

See [Table A1](#)

Table A1
Inter-construct Correlations.

Construct Correlations and Means ^a									
Constructs	Mean	SCS	SPR	SP	SA	SE	EXS	IPS	ATT
SCS	4.621	1.201							
SPR	4.625	0.405	1.219						
SP	4.280	0.431	0.518	1.391					
SA	4.705	0.563	0.676	0.595	1.258				
SE	4.254	0.488	0.586	0.548	0.693	1.220			
EXS	3.819	0.431	0.518	0.268	0.589	0.482	1.141		
IPS	5.261	0.439	0.527	0.213	0.617	0.455	0.599	1.392	
ATT	4.623	0.828	0.994	0.521	0.680	0.589	0.521	0.530	0.995

(Note: SE – Store Equity; SP – Store Prestige; SA – Store Affect; ATT – Store Attachment; IPS – Patronage Intentions; SCS – Store-Self Connection; SPR – Store Prominence).

^a Standard Deviations in diagonal.

Appendix B

See [Table B1](#)

Table B1
Descriptive information for department stores used by respondents.

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
JC Penney	44	23.0	23.0
Nordstrom	19	9.9	33.0
Macy's	41	21.5	54.5
Kohl's	43	22.5	77.0
Sears	6	3.1	80.1
Saks Fifth Avenue	3	1.6	81.7
Neiman Marcus	5	2.6	84.3
Dillard's	22	11.5	95.8
Other ^a	8	4.2	100.0

^a Respondents provided name of store they felt applied to description of department store, including Academy Sports, Home Depot, etc.

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