

Conceptualising four new social bonds in business relationships

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Abstract

Social bonds have been recognised by researchers as one of a number of bonds in a business relationship. Social bonds which develop between individuals can impact positively on long-term relationships at an organisational level. Although they are central to business relationships, social bonds are not as well defined, conceptualised and measured as other relationship marketing constructs. Constructs such as commitment and loyalty have been found to be multidimensional however the social bond is still generally considered to be unidimensional. One of the barriers to identifying more social bonds has been the limited use of theory in scale development. A review of the literature has suggested that social bonds may be based on attachment and liking. Attachment theory emerged from research into parent-child relationships but has more recently been found to be relevant to business relationships. Liking has been found to be a significant driver of relationship maintenance in business. However these theories have not been used so far to identify social bonds in business relationships. In the current study, attachment theory and Sternberg's Theory of Love were used to identify four potential social bonds: security, intimacy, passion and

affective commitment. A phenomenological study consisting of in-depth interviews with thirty business people was conducted to explore these potential social bonds. This paper outlines the process of conceptualising four new social bonds using theory, literature and data from primary research.

Keywords: social bonds, attachment, liking, business relationships.

Introduction

Social bonds are recognised as one of a number of relationship bonds which develop between individuals and can impact positively on long-term relationships (Wilson and Mummalaneni, 1986). Social bonds can lead to positive outcomes such as customer retention (Seabright et al, 1992), word-of-mouth recommendations (Price and Arnould, 1999), trust (Nicholson et al, 2001) and loyalty and satisfaction (Guenzi and Pelloni, 2004). However social bonds have not received the same level of research attention in the business and marketing literature as other relationship marketing constructs such as trust, commitment and loyalty. As a result of significant research interest, these constructs have become better understood by marketers and are widely considered to be multidimensional. However the social bond continues to be measured as a unidimensional construct. It is suggested that this may be due to a lack of theoretical support in identifying different social bonds and also due to the social bond frequently being included as one type of bond in a relational or relationship bond measurement scale e.g. Smith (1998) and Rodriguez and Wilson (2002).

The purpose of the research is to propose a theoretical framework to identify new social bonds and to explore them in the context of business relationships. A review of the literature has suggested that social bonds may be based on attachment and liking. Four potential social bonds were identified based on these theories: security, intimacy, intimacy, passion and commitment. The literature review sets out the theories proposed and briefly examines the literature used in conceptualising each social bond. The methodology outlines an exploratory study undertaken to better understand the proposed social bonds from the perspective of the people involved in business relationships. The results are summarised followed by a brief conclusion.

This paper aims to respond to three research questions:

1. What social bonds can be identified using theories of attachment and liking?
2. What literature is available to conceptualise the potential social bonds of security, intimacy, passion and affective commitment?
3. What do business people tell us about these four potential social bonds in relation to their own experiences of business relationships?

Literature Review

Social bonds

Social bonds have emerged from social psychology literature and have been used by sociologists such as Turner (1970) and McCall et al (1970) to explore family and group interactions. Bonds are among a number of relationship marketing constructs which have been taken from the literature on personal relationships into the literature on business relationships. The ability to form and manage relationships has become recognised as a key part of doing business. Wilson and Mummalaneni (1986) recognise that a relationship which exists at an interpersonal level strengthens the inter-organisational relationship. Therefore although social bonds develop at an individual level, they are also important to organisations since bonds can provide an incentive to maintain the business relationship.

The social bond is identified as one of a number of bonds in business relationships by the Interaction and Network Theorists and researchers from the IMP Group and Nordic School of Services Marketing. However it is not clear how many social bonds there are and there is no accepted theory to identify types of social bonds. A number of researchers such as (Smith, 1998 and Rodriguez and Wilson, 2002) have developed scales to measure the social bond in business and consumer relationships however all the scales found in the literature except one show the social bond to be unidimensional. The only multidimensional social bond scale found in the literature (Perry et al, 2002) proposes five social bonds which are not supported by theory. Therefore the literature so far has not proposed and empirically tested a multidimensional scale of social bonds for business relationships based on a comprehensive theoretical framework.

Attachment Theory

The pioneers of attachment theory are John Bowlby (1973) and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth 1982) who examined child-parent relationships and found attachment to be based on a biological system where the child seeks closeness, safety and security from the parent or primary attachment figure. Bowlby (1973) believed that the experiences of attachment formed during childhood affect the formation of other attachments during adulthood. Attachment theory has continued to be extended into new areas such as romantic relationships (Hazan and Shaver, 1987) and Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) suggest that attachment can be relevant to non-romantic partners including managers within a business environment. Attachment has begun to be researched in the business literature in order to understand how to manage customer relationships effectively and profitably (Paulssen, 2009). Conceptual descriptions of social bonds suggest that they may be based on attachment. Liang and Wang (2007:64) describe social bonds as being characterised by ‘self-disclosure; closeness; providing support or advice; being empathetic and responsive; feelings of affiliation, attachment or connectedness; and shared experiences.’ Therefore attachment theory appears to be a relevant theoretical framework to identify social bonds in business relationships and explain how and why they form. The characteristics of attachment (closeness and safety/security) have been identified as potential social bonds for the purpose of this study: the intimacy bond and the security bond.

Sternberg’s Theory of Love

Sternberg (1986) included liking in his taxonomy of eight different kinds of love. His theory proposes a three dimensional construct of love as intimacy, passion and commitment. Intimacy is described as ‘feelings of closeness, connectedness and bondedness’ (p.119); passion as ‘romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation’ (p.119) and decision/commitment as ‘the short-term ... decision that one loves someone...and...the long-term...commitment to maintain that love’ (p.119). Yim et al (2008) used these three dimensions to conceptualise customer-firm affection in different service settings such as a fast-food restaurant and hair salon. There is evidence in the literature to show that social bonds are based on liking. Liking is recognised in the literature to be a significant driver of relationship maintenance and the development of emotional bonds (Nicholson et al, 2001). The most frequently cited definition of social bonds among researchers developing social

bond scales is that of Wilson (1995:13) 'The degree of mutual personal friendship and liking shared by the buyer and seller.' Sternberg's theory appears to be relevant in identifying social bonds in business relationships as the three dimensions of love which he identifies (intimacy, passion and commitment) have been conceptualised as three social bonds: the intimacy bond, the passion bond and the commitment bond.

Four potential social bonds

Attachment theory and Sternberg's Theory support four potential social bonds as explained in the previous two sections: the security bond, the intimacy bond, the passion bond and the commitment bond. Each one will be outlined briefly in this section.

Security bond

The security bond is supported by attachment theory. A number of researchers (Ainsworth, 1982; Hazan and Shaver, 1994; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2003) have suggested that two characteristics which define attachment in a relationship are safe haven (turning to the attachment figure for reassurance, comfort and protection) and secure base (the attachment figure being available and reliable). Secure attachment is based on perceiving the other party to be responsive, stable, consistent and accessible (Paulssen, 2009; Weiss, 1974). In a business context, the security bond may be defined as feeling secure in the relationship with a business partner.

Intimacy bond

The intimacy bond is supported both by attachment theory and Sternberg's Theory of Love. A number of researchers (Ainsworth, 1982; Hazan and Shaver, 1994; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2003) have suggested that a third characteristic of attachment in a relationship is proximity-seeking. Intimacy is also the main dimension of liking (Sternberg, 1986). In a business context, intimacy may be defined as wanting to be close to the business partner. Intimacy involves 'feeling understood, validated, cared for and closely connected with another person' (Reis and Shaver, 1988:385). Sternberg's (1997) scale for the intimacy dimension of liking may be used in developing the intimacy bond as a construct and further potential characteristics of the intimacy bond from the literature include: mutual self-disclosure (Derlega et al, 1987), empathy (Saxena, 2006) and humour (Cooper, 2010).

Passion bond

The passion bond is supported by Sternberg's Theory of Love. Although Sternberg developed a scale of passion, it is not appropriate to use in a business context since it measures romantic and sexual passion. Therefore there was a need to reconsider passion within a business environment. A review of the literature showed that there is a limited amount of literature on passion in business. Vallerand et al (2003:757) defines passion as 'a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy.' Vallerand relates passion to active engagement and positive affect and includes interpersonal relationships as a type of passionate activity that parties may wish to invest in.

Affective commitment bond

The bond of commitment is supported by Sternberg's theory however Shaver et al (1988) are uncertain if all types of commitment are a component of love (or liking). A number of researchers e.g. Morgan and Hunt (1994) have recognised that commitment has an instrumental basis and an affective basis and a review of the literature suggests that only affective commitment is a social bond. Geyskens et al (1996:303) defines affective commitment as 'the extent to which parties like to maintain their relationship with specific partners.' Evanschitzky et al (2006) found that affective commitment can be developed through customer attachment rather than economic incentives. However some authors such as Cater and Zabkar (2009) suggest that commitment is a separate concept from social bonds and that the social bond may lead to affective commitment.

Methodology

It was necessary to undertake primary research to better understand the four potential social bonds suggested by the theoretical framework. A phenomenological approach was selected as most appropriate for this research study. The author conducted thirty semi-structured, in-depth interviews with business people who work in and around London. The interviewees came from a variety of service industry sectors such as accounting, auditing, banking, business development, IT, management consultancy, law, property consultancy and PR. An interview guide was developed to facilitate the collection of data about the four potential social bonds by asking the interviewees to reflect on their business relationships.

Results

The thirty in-depth interviews generated 250 pages of data (over 155,000 words) which were analysed using NVIVO 9 software. A coding scheme was created with predetermined codes so data could be captured about each bond e.g. intimacy bond as well as potential bond items from the literature e.g. self-disclosure. Additional codes were created as new bond items were identified from the interview data which had not been identified earlier in the literature. Due to the word count permitted for this paper, it is not possible to present the full analysis here therefore the results are summarised.

Intimacy bond

The interviewees recognised intimacy or closeness as integral to bonding with a business partner. This bond generated the most data and interviewees talked about the characteristics of intimacy with very little prompting. Some of the characteristics from the literature which were mentioned are: sharing personal information, humour, empathy and sharing similar interests, attitudes and values. Some new characteristics mentioned were: socialising outside work, having a chat or a gossip and sharing memorable experiences.

Security bond

Interviewees talked about business relationships which were comfortable and supportive. They were less inclined to relate security to bonding however they recognised the importance of being available, responsive and dependable (key characteristics of security). Those interviewees who had experienced an emergency situation when working with their business partner recognised the importance of helping each other to overcome challenges and providing reassurance in difficult times. This often resulted in stronger bonds.

Passion bond

One of the main characteristics of the passion bond recognised by interviewees was chemistry or when you naturally ‘click’ with another person which enables you to work better together. Passion was seen to exist at various levels: enthusiastic individuals who engage with what they do; enthusiasm for the business and making it work; and being passionate about certain industries, in particular creative industries such as PR and the charity sector as people felt more deeply about good causes.

Affective commitment

Affective commitment was the bond which generated the least amount of data. Interviewees recognised liking-based commitment and talked about staying in a business relationship because they liked the business partner or the way they work. They also discussed coming back to someone they liked to work with or finding new business opportunities so they could work together again. They talked about wanting to keep in touch with business partners even if they are currently not working together.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Attachment theory and Sternberg’s theory propose four social bonds which were explored in this paper. There is a good base of literature available on intimacy, security and affective commitment however there is a need to explore passion further in business relationships. An exploratory study of the four social bonds revealed that intimacy is best recognised and most clearly conceptualised by those involved in business relationships. The business people interviewed spoke about the importance of secure business relationships day to day however it appeared that security provides the strongest bond in an emergency situation. Interviewees recognised passion as enthusiasm for the work and chemistry between themselves and

business partners which made working together easier. Finally, the literature is not clear on whether affective commitment is a bond or the outcome of bonding however the interviewees recognised the importance of liking-based commitment as being integral to people wanting to continue to work together.

The next step will be to create a scale of the four potential social bonds and test the scale to see if these social bonds can be found to exist. This scale could be a useful tool in the future to measure the social bond strength of individuals in business relationships such as partners, suppliers and clients. The data could be utilised to create personalised strategies to develop and enhance these bonds in order to maintain long-term business relationships.

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