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Human branding: from attachment strength to loyalty

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ABSTRACT

Human branding is everywhere and within every individual. With the increase in the importance of technology and social media, human branding becomes increasingly relevant, but it is still a branding concept with much room to explore. Celebrities, such as actors and athletes, are the greatest examples of human brands, and with social media managing public image is key to success. This study aims to analyze the process by which attachment strength influences loyalty through intimate and public engagement. Thus, a sample of 321 participants, collected through social media platforms, allowed us to treat data and test the hypotheses of the proposed model. Relatedness is the most relevant driver of attachment strength and the flow from attachment to loyalty through public engagement.

Introduction

Our name, our image, our academic track, our hobbies, our personality, and every action we perform, influences what we are as humans and each of us can be seen as a brand, but not all of us are human brands (Jeong, Chung, and Kim 2022). A human brand is essentially what a given person represents, and it is the combination of their personality, their public image, and their skills (Thomson 2006). A human brand is, thus, "any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts (Thomson 2006, 104).

Literature regarding this concept only emerged in the 1990s (Braudy 1997; Carlson and Donavan 2013; Close, Guidry Moulard, and Monroe 2011). Yet, diverse examples of human brands with great influence in the World's history exist, such as Alexander de Great, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela – who were both great political and social forces, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta – who was able to move the World towards peace or even more recently, or Greta Thunberg – who was able to create a strong awareness regarding sustainability (Carson and Lewis 2022; Nobel Prizes 2022).

Dubin claims that regardless of the job anyone has intangible assets such as a name, a reputation, credibility, and an image. All those attributes may be combined into

something that could become a brand (Phipps 2003). Thus, celebrities need to handle how to manage their human brand, otherwise, they can cause damage to their image, and consequently to their business. An example is Will Smith, who tarnished his otherwise great reputation in the 2022 Oscar Ceremony. As Thomson (2006) mentions, the concept of the human brand can be viewed as one of several operationalizations of the broader concept of a brand, and it must be treated as such.

Although the human brand concept can be associated with any kind of industry, usually in Entertainment, Politics, and Sports, human brands are often overlooked (Fournier and Eckhardt 2019). One industry where human branding is extremely important, yet severely underrated, is the industry of tourism or hospitality. It is an industry that is heavily influenced by interactions, which has a significant influence on the tourist experience (Hwang et al. 2021). In tourism and hospitality, having a great human brand alongside the offering of a great service becomes an important source of competitive advantage and thus it brings the possibility of developing a sense of loyalty, attachment, relatedness, and even fandom with consumers.

Prior research employing attachment and self-determination theories attempts to analyze determinants of attachment strength (Loroz and Braig 2015; Thomson 2006), or idol attachment (Huang, Lin, and Phau 2015) and consequences, such as brand loyalty and purchase intentions (Huang, Lin, and Phau 2015; Loroz and Braig 2015) or relationship quality (Thomson 2006). The current study incorporates customer engagement and seeks to answer the following research question: how does attachment strength toward a human brand affect loyalty? Thus, this study contributes to enriching the theory by corroborating the role of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (A-R-C) psychological needs on attachment strength and demonstrating how this last can develop loyalty through the engagement process. When a human brand can translate into consumers' minds their needs for autonomy, the sense of being close to a certain social sphere, and achievement, the result will be an intense attachment (La Guardia et al. 2000; Wang et al. 2019). This intense attachment can lead to loyalty if, for that, an engagement process is developed. This premise is analyzed in the current study.

This paper is structured as follows: the first section is focused on the review of the most relevant literature and the development of hypotheses. This is followed by the second section where we describe the methodology and present the data collection instrument, design parameters, as well as experimental procedure. Next, the results are presented and discussed. The last section focuses on the conclusions, theoretical contribution, managerial implications and limitations, and future research.

Literature review and hypothesis development

Human branding

Dubin claims in *Towle* 'Your clients, whether they are an athlete, an actor, or an actress, has intangible assets: a name, a reputation, credibility, and an image. All those attributes may be combined into something that could be made into a brand' (Phipps 2003, 28). Therefore, human branding can be regarded as an operationalization of the broader concept of the brand since celebrities of any field can be regarded as brands (Zollo et al. 2020). For instance, in political campaigns, where the message, public appearance,

endorsement, and so on, are all managed by a professional team with the intent of creating a perceived quality and brand image to increase votes (Aji, Nadhila, and Sanny 2020; Simon, Gilgoff, and Samuel 2004).

Individuals can develop diverse forms of relationships with human brands, such as idolatry, fandom, or worship, and much of this research has been advanced under the rubric of attachment theory, and associated literature (Frydman and Tena 2023; Kleine and Baker 2004; Shimul 2022). Prior research suggests that attachments are not the same as other constructs. For example, attachment strength is orthogonal to satisfaction, loyalty, involvement, and attitude favorability (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). Attachments can avoid consumer defections (Liljander and Strandvik 1995), and increase consumers' forgiveness, mercy, and patience when facing negative information (Ahluwalia, Unnava, and Burnkrant 2001), which can also serve as an indicator of willingness to pay and brand loyalty (Agamudainambhi et al. 2022; Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). Thus, by understanding what determines the strength of attachment, and how it can be nurtured, managers will be in a much better position to foster durable relations with consumers and look for advantages over competitors.

Prior research studying celebrities and well-known figures, or group identities, such as sports teams or musical acts, has documented how they are similar to interpersonal relationships in many ways (Carlson and Donavan 2013; Thomson 2006) (see Table 1). For instance, people regularly experience 'seeming face-to-face' interactions with human

Table 1. Literature review using attachment and self-determination theories.

Research Streams	Method	Findings	Source
Attachment theory and Self-determination theory	Mixed approach (3 studies)	When a human brand enhances a person's feelings of autonomy and relatedness, the consumer becomes more strongly attached to it. Strong attachments predict satisfied, trusting, and committed relationships.	Thomson (2006)
	Qualitative approach	Reveals areas of potential development for personal branding and consumer-personal brand relationships as a result of consumer empowerment on YouTube.	Chen (2013)
	Mixed approach (2 studies)	Achievement vanity, variety seeking, and peer norms influence idol attachment, and this positively affects human brand loyalty. Idol attractiveness has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between vanity traits and human brand attachment.	Huang et al. (2015)
	Mixed approach (2 studies)	Brand personality appeal (and its sub-dimensions of favorability, originality, and clarity) moderates in the relationship between antecedents of attachment (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) and attachment outcomes (brand loyalty and purchase intentions).	Loroz and Braig (2015)
	Data collected from social media and regression analysis	the influence of sampling music decreases at a decreasing rate, music artists increase at a decreasing rate, and artists' social media website increases at an increasing rate.	Saboo et al. (2016)
	Quantitative approach	We corroborate that autonomy, relatedness, and competence are antecedents of attachment strength and public engagement mediates between attachment strength and loyalty.	Current study

brands who are 'met as if they were in the circle of one's peers' (Horton and Wohl 1956, 215). These relationships evince many of the same expectations, cognitions, emotions, and behaviors that operate in normal interpersonal relationships to the point that a consumer might view a human brand as a pleasant companion, good friend, or romantic mate (Cole and Leets 1999; Perse and Rubin 1989; Rubin and McHugh 1987).

Attachments work to create emotional security for the bound party being responsive to a person's needs (Hazan and Shaver 1994). So, if an object is responsive to a person's need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (i.e., A-R-C), intense attachments may result (Deci and Ryan 2000; La Guardia et al. 2000; Wang et al. 2019). Autonomy means a person's need to feel that their activities come from the self (Deci and Ryan 2000), the fulfillment of their need is the perception that a person is free from pressure to behave as he/she wishes. Relatedness represents a homonymous tendency since it is the desire to belong in a social sphere and refers to a person's need to feel a sense of closeness with others. Competence, however, refers to a person's innate, life-span tendency to seek feelings of effectiveness, achievement, and challenge in his/her activities. Thomson (2006) proposes that the consumer-brand dyad may describe a relationship context where these three needs are important because their fulfillment may lead to carefully targeted feelings of attachment.

The three previously described concepts, autonomy, relatedness, and competence (A-R-C) are fundamental human needs (Deci and Ryan 2000). People gravitate and respond toward relationships that serve their A-R-C needs, meaning they go after social experiences that make them feel autonomous, related, and competent, and these experiences highly promote stronger attachments.

If consumers can be made to feel autonomous and related, organizations can be able to foster strong attachments and, thus, enjoy the benefits of superior relationships with consumers. Overall, human brands that make consumers feel appreciated, empowered, and understood succeed in creating feelings of autonomy. Similarly, feelings of relatedness are possible to be developed when a human brand promotes acceptance, openness, tolerance, patience, and belonging (Thomson 2006).

Human brand and loyalty

Human brands are very similar to hedonic products since their consumption tends to induce emotions such as joy, fun, and pleasure (Giertz et al. 2022; Vorderer, Klimmt, and Ritterfeld 2004). However, consumers can only assess those benefits after consuming them or the services they represent, which creates uncertainty in those who do not experience them or have not experienced them yet. This situation prioritizes one of the main functions of brands in general, namely, reducing consumers' uncertainty. So, human brands can operate to reduce consumption doubts and uncertainty (Ibáñez-Sánchez et al. 2022). The well-known persona – human brand – uses a kind of actor mask to permit spectators (consumers) to clearly identify the characteristics of stereotypical personages (Dion and Arnould 2015). Thus, performativity is foundational to the concept of persona that has become widespread in market segmentation. In these applications, the persona is a composite typically drawn from multi-method research and crafted to create what firms often hope is a more holistic and empathetic view of their customers (Cayla and Arnould 2013).

Performativity is a related concept concerned with the perlocutionary effects of practices (Butler 2011), which is to say how managerial actions both represent a cultural template and perform that template (Araujo 2007; Bode 2010; Mason, Kjellberg, and Hagberg 2015; Skålén and Hackley 2011). Such practices entail both template and performance. Nevertheless, professional identities have been seen as performative, that is, constructed in and through conduct rather than pre-existing conduct. Thus, the performativity of professionals is understood as a reiterative and citational practice by which a discursive regime produces the effects that are named through word and deed (Dion and Arnould 2015).

Because human brands are so distinctive in their features, developing them is always unique, and they are not all equally likely to achieve a positive brand image. Human brands benefit from their position relative to competitors, rather than from their absolute degree of awareness. This causes consuming entertainment products utility featuring human brands to move towards establishing a nonlinear and convex distribution across numerous human brands (Hofmann et al. 2021).

Rather than relying on disparities in measurable performance, Adler (1985, 2006) mentions that rankings are determined by popularity levels. Therefore, consumption capital refers to the capital stock of previous consumption, which determines the utility of current consumption. Consumers accumulate knowledge about a human brand from their temporally prior consumption. Each time a human brand is consumed, it affects its brand knowledge and popularity. Franck and Nüesch (2012) suggest that the success of a human brand is not only related to performance but also to the size of the network of the brand, with the latter being more impactful.

According to Hofmann et al. (2021), the more successful a human brand is, the more likely it will be recognized, which should enhance its popularity-based brand image. Thus, higher levels of the performance-based attributes of a human brand increase consumers' awareness of that human brand (Yang and Shi 2011), which could create increased consumption capital and popularity-based attributes. Higher awareness of a human brand (e.g., a larger fan base) lowers costs associated with interacting with this consumption network, so finding peers who share similar interests is easier, too. Hofmann et al. (2021) also conclude that the human brand's performance and popularity positively contribute to the brand's image, and, consequently, its market value and loyalty. Therefore, loyalty represents a significant indicator of the marketing success of firms in several different industries, including tourism and hospitality (Kevin et al. 2016). Consumer loyalty means the willingness of consumers to recommend the brand or its products to others, to pay a higher price than the same goods/services of the competitor brands, and the willingness to purchase again (Prentice, et al. 2020). Thus, in the current study loyalty represents the consumers' willingness to provide positive word-of-mouth, intention to purchase again or return and pay a premium price for the service that the human brand represents.

Drivers of attachment strength

Consumers' attachment formation and their response behavior are strongly influenced by credible of the brands. The first step for managers should be to ensure credible signaling since this will positively affect consumers' attachment to the brand. Particularly when they

are uncertain in their decision-making, informational cues can signal quality, such as consistency in product quality over time, charging price levels that fit the destination and its offerings, or providing warranties such as free cancellation policies (Reitsamer and Brunner-Sperdin 2021). Although the success of such marketing efforts will depend on market characteristics, consumer behavior, and competitive behavior, it is crucial for managers to demonstrate a long-term commitment to their signaling approach and assure consumers that their brand promises will be kept (Adler 2006; Erdem and Swait 1998). In other words, destination managers should invest steadily in credible marketing communication, as it constitutes a fundamental antecedent when building attachments with consumers.

Attachment theory has become one of the most important theoretical frameworks for understanding interpersonal functioning, well-being, relationships, and personality development (Fraley 2019; Katz and Katz 2022). Traditional definitions of attachment are anchored in several psychological needs – autonomy, relatedness, and competence – that when attended by the partner (human, object, or brand), it can result in intense attachment (Ryan and Deci 2000). In light of self-determination theory, people respond to the fulfillment of A-R-C psychological needs and such responsiveness is paramount to be attached. In other words, consumers tend to be attached to situations where they have a sense of freedom, closeness, and effectiveness.

Autonomy can be understood as a person's need to feel that his activities are self-chosen, self-governed, and self-endorsed (Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000). This feeling of fulfillment is complemented by the person's perception that he/she is free from any pressure to behave in certain ways and is also able to express what he/she wants. So, when someone achieves this autonomy, he/she may feel 'volition, agency, and initiative' (La Guardia et al. 2000, 368) or, in other words, it may contribute to a person's sense of freedom so that he/she may make his/her own choices and avoid feeling constrained or coerced (Riley 2015). When a person feels in control of his/herself in a relationship with a partner (object, brand, or another person), the same person tends to consider that he/she is autonomous in the relationship (Giles and Maltby 2004), what strength the intensity of the attachment to the other. Thus, the following hypothesis (see Figure 1) is formulated:

H1a: Autonomy needs of a person fulfilled by the human brand positively affect attachment strength.

Relatedness – another construct in the triad A-R-C – may be understood as a person's need to feel a sense of closeness with others (Deci and Ryan 2000; Riley 2015). In other words, this may be seen as a homonymous tendency or a desire to belong to a certain social sphere as well as a need to avoid feeling isolated (Riley 2015; Ryan and Deci 2000). Someone whose need for relatedness is satisfied most probably will feel 'connected with and cared for by another' (La Guardia et al. 2000, 368). Therefore, we hypothesized that:

H1b: Relatedness needs of a person fulfilled by the human brand positively affect attachment strength.
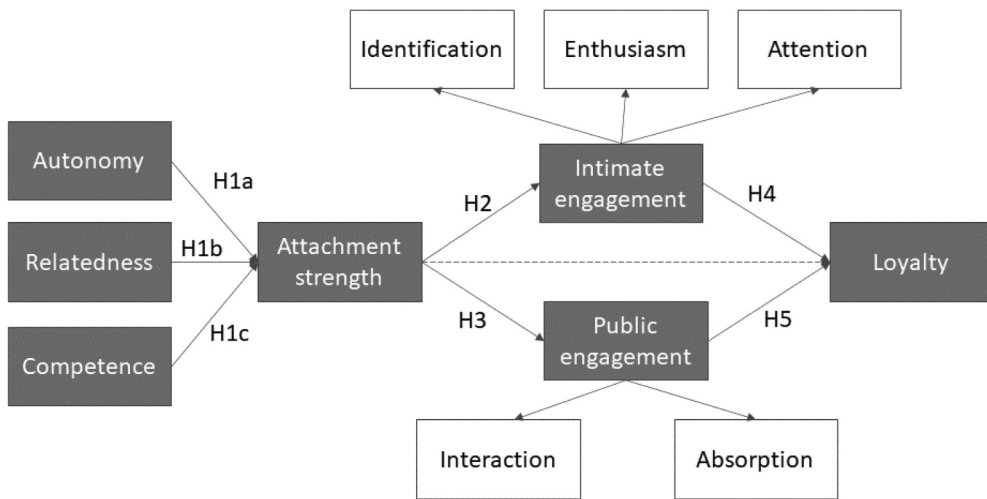
Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Competence is closely linked to a person's innate, life-span tendency to seek various king of feelings like effectiveness, achievement, and challenge in his activities (Deci and Ryan 2000). In other words, there is a search in a person's avoidance of mediocrity and decrements in performance. When someone whose need for competence becomes satisfied, he/she will report a feeling of curiosity and skill (La Guardia et al. 2000). In this vein, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1c: Competence needs of a person fulfilled by the human brand positively affect attachment strength.

Customer engagement

Customer engagement has turned into an essential issue in a firm long-term competitive advantage (Gligor et al. 2022; Lim et al. 2019) and is a direct consequence of the customer's action to voluntarily contribute, with time and effort, to the firm or brand beyond the purchase transaction. Therefore, customer engagement allows customer co-creation through their emotional feedback and cognitive experiences as a direct result of service interactions (Zhang et al. 2017).

Customer engagement can be understood in different conceptual scopes, distinct in their applications (Rasool, Shah, and Islam 2020) since it can be seen as a psychological state (Brodie et al. 2011), a process (Bowden 2009), or even a behavioral manifestation (Roy et al. 2018, 2018; Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1996). Customer engagement´s construct can also be conceptualized through multiple dimensions, such as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (e.g., Bowden 2009; Dwivedi 2015; Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014). These customer behaviors represent different degrees of customer commitment and engagement

and can represent opportunities for mobile companies to create and reinforce their brand (Utami et al. 2022). True customer engagement only arises when there is an enduring psychological connection to a brand in addition to behavioral participation.

This engagement process can balance between attachment strength and loyalty and may be understood as a construct based on a multidimensional approach, comprising five dimensions, including attention (describes a consumer's attentiveness to the brand), enthusiasm (reflects the individual's strong level of excitement and interest concerning the brand), identification (the individual's perceived oneness with, or belongingness to the brand), interaction (customer's online and offline participation with the brand, or other customers, outside of the purchase transaction) and absorption (the pleasant state in which the customer is fully concentrated, and deeply engrossed while playing the role as a consumer of the brand) (Kevin et al. 2016; Tan 2023).

Due to the nature of these dimensions and for the purpose of the current study, we consider two facets of engagement: intimate engagement and public engagement. Indeed, human brands, as well-known individuals subject to marketing communications efforts are expected to develop with consumers more public or/and intimate relationships. All depend on the way human brands express themselves to others through social media and other marketing communication tools, but also on the interest and desire of the consumer to know more about a certain human brand. Thus, intimate engagement – identification, enthusiasm, and attention – refers to internal processes that a consumer lives in their relationship with the human brand. Public engagement expresses itself more on the outside of the self – interaction, and absorption – because of the pleasant felt and recognized in being concentrated and interacting with the brand.

For example, a person can identify with a human brand and the service that his/her represents, desire to learn more about the human brand's actions and behavior and develop an enthusiastic passion for everything connected to that human brand, that is, develop an intimate engagement. This intimate relationship is composed of endogenous dimensions of the consumer and is strengthened by the attachment felt by him/her toward the human brand and services represented.

Public engagement, however, is represented by exogenous dimensions – interaction and absorption – of the consumer toward the human brand and the services represented. Here, customers effectively participate and enjoy interacting with others, the brands, and the communities where they are involved and be happily immersed in such a process. This public engagement is very demanded by the consumer and will occur in an intensified attachment.

Following the attachment theory, attachment only develops when consumers have positive feelings and thoughts (Boon and Lomore 2001). So, the intensity of the relationship can be expressed by the engagement process. Customer engagement, as a private enthusiastic mechanism of a customer, where he/she can be fully concentrated in their relationship with the human brand and the services that he/she promotes, may enhance loyalty (Rasool, Shah, and Islam 2020; Rosado-Pinto and Loureiro 2020). Thereby, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2:   Attachment strength is positively associated with intimate engagement.

H3:   Attachment is positively associated with public engagement.

The enduring psychological connection that consumers can develop with the human brand and the services that he/she represents, express the engagement process through interactive experiences, and goes beyond purchasing a service or a good (Brodie et al. 2011). The engagement process influences perceptions, and attitudes toward brands and services (Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan 2012) leading to loyalty. Although both facets of engagement can be associated with loyalty, public engagement, aggregating exogenous dimensions, express a more interactive relationship than intimate engagement and so it is expected a stronger association with loyalty than in the case of intimate engagement. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H4:   Intimate engagement is positively associated with loyalty.

H5:   Public engagement is positively associated with loyalty.

Methodology

The collected sample was composed of participants chosen by non-probability convenience sampling and was collected through an online questionnaire since this allows flexibility, convenience, and a high-speed rate of responses reaching a great number of respondents, saving time and costs compared to traditional survey models (Evans and Mathur 2005). Even though they are representative of the population to a certain degree, it is still considered a reasonable method when faced with resource and time constraints. The possible bias limitation is less important when there is little variation in the population, with a method that deeply relies on accessibility (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2009; Thomson 2006).

Prior to the distribution of the survey, a pilot questionnaire was tested by five people to refine the questionnaire and guarantee effectiveness, with a few phrases reworded after their feedback. Pilot testing ensures that respondents will clearly understand the questions and that there will be no problems in data recording and assessing its likely validity and reliability (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2009).

The questionnaire was available for one month, between the 1st and 30th of September 2022 on Social Media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn). It was possible to collect a total of 321 valid responses, all completed. We asked about the frequency of use of hospitality and tourism services and sociodemographic variables (age, gender). The items of the constructs were adapted from prior studies, namely A-R-C psychological needs (7 items) and attachment strength (4 items) were adapted from Thomson (2006), intimate and public engagement dimensions and items (23 items) from Kevin et al. (2016), and loyalty (9 items) from Prentice et al. (2020) (see Table 2). All constructs' items were evaluated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (Likert 1932), ranging from 1 to 7 being: 1 - Strongly disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 - Somewhat disagree, 4 - Neither agree nor disagree, 5 - Somewhat agree, 6 – Agree, and 7 - Strongly agree. The easiness of

Table 2. Sample profile.

Gender	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Male	125	38.940
Female	190	59.190
Non – binary/Third gender	6	1.870
Prefer not to say	0	0.000
Total	321	100
Age		
18–30	166	51.710
30–45	83	25.860
45–60	50	15.580
>60	22	6.850
Total	321	100
Frequency of use tourism and hospitality services		
1–2 times in the past 5 years	53	16.510
1–2 times in the past year	71	22.120
1–2 in the past 6 months	108	33.640
1–2 times in the past month	52	16.200
1–2 times in the past week	20	6.230
Daily	17	5.300
Total	321	100

administering and understanding are the main advantages of Likert scaling, with the disadvantage of only offering limited information about the constructs (Plumeyer et al. 2019).

The questionnaire began with a small introduction to explain the purpose of the study, and how often the participant uses services in the tourism and hospitality industry. Then, we followed the methodological procedure of Thomson (2006) saying that 'Diverse individuals tend to think of themselves as being attached to certain celebrities or well-known figures (e.g., actors, athletes, singers) when they prepare to purchase and use services in the tourism and hospitality industry. Please think about a celebrity or well-known figure to whom you are very [not] attached and answer the following questions related to a service (XYZ is the hotel, restaurant, attraction, festival, event, or another service in the tourism context) that such figure represents'. The last part was composed of questions to evaluate the constructs in the proposed model. Participants received one of the two versions of the questionnaire (prepared in the Qualtrics software, randomized selected, and then spread through social media) to create variance in responses on the construct of attachment strength, as considered by Thomson (2006).

Results and discussion

The first aspect to be regarding before analyzing data is to understand if the sample size is suitable for the model under analysis. The minimum sample size to detect the minimum R^2 value of 0.10 in any of the endogenous constructs in the structural model for a significant level of 1% is 176 and for a level of 5% is 124, considering 3 as the maximum number of arrows pointing to a construct (Hair et al. 2016). Considering *G* Power (version 3.1.9.7) (Faul et al. 2009) to calculate the minimum sample size required, based on a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.3$), $\alpha = 0.05$, and pre-set power ($1 - \beta = 0.95$) for an expected power of 0.95 is 134. In this vein, the sample size of 321 is suitable for the current study.

Sample profile

Regarding the demographic profile of the sample, 59.19% of the participants were female, 38.94% were male, and 1.87% were non – binary/third gender. Half of the participants, (51.71%) were of an age between 18–30 years old, 25.86% were between 30–45 years old, 15.58% were between 45–60 years old, and 6.85% of the respondents were older than 60 years old.

Concerning the level of occurrence with which the respondents use services from the tourism and hospitality industry, 3.43% said never, 16.51% have used such services 1–2 times in the past 5 years, 22.12% said 1–2 times in the past year, 33.64% said 1–2 times in the past 6 months, 16.20% said 1–2 times in the past month, 6.23% said 1–2 times in the past week, and 6 respondents (1.87%) replied as using tourism and hospitality services daily. Most female participants in the sample coincide with the fact that women are more likely to willingly participate in online questionnaires (Smith 2008). Table 2 shows the profile of the sample.

Measurement model

The first step in analyzing the data is to assess the reliability of the individual measures, the convergent validity, and the discriminant validity of the constructs. In the case of our data, all factor loadings are above 0.707, except for two that were eliminated (see Table 3). The reliability values are all higher than 0.7 (Hair et al. 2016). The measures demonstrate convergent validity because the values of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are above 0.5.

Two criteria were used to analyze the discriminant validity. The Fornell-Larcker criterion was met because the square root of AVE should be greater than the correlation between the construct and other constructs in the model (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) – Matrix also demonstrated that the criterion was reached due to the values below 0.90 (see Table 4).

The degree of multicollinearity among constructs was assessed through the variance inflation factor (VIF). VIF values lower than 5 are regarded as acceptable and so the results did not seem to pose a multicollinearity problem (Hair et al. 2011).

Structural result

Using a non-parametric approach, Bootstrap (5000 re-sampling), to estimate the precision of the PLS estimates and support or not the hypotheses (Hair et al. 2011). All path coefficients are found to be significant at 0.001, 0.01, or 0.05 levels, except H4. All values of Q^2 (chi-squared of the Stone – Geisser criterion) are positive, revealing predictive relevance (Fornell and Jee 1994) and predictive power (R^2) since the modeling constructs explained 46.5% of attachment strength, 46.5% of brand loyalty or 31.5% of public engagement (see Table 5).

Contributing to answering the research questions – how does attachment strength toward a human brand affect loyalty? – this study uncovered the role of intimate and public engagement in strengthening the relationship between consumers and human brands and the services he/she represents. First, although autonomy, relatedness, and competence can

Table 3. Measurement model.

Construct	Item	FL	Source
Relatedness A = 0.668, CR = 0.857, AVE = 0.749	XYZ makes me feel cared about	0.839	Adapted from Thomson (2006)
	I relate to XYZ	0.891	
Autonomy A = 0.691.CR = 0.736, AVE = 0.584	XYZ makes me feel pressured to be in certain ways	0.700	
	XYZ makes me feel free to be who I am	0.823	
Competence A = 0.691, CR = 0.736, AVE = 0.584	XYZ makes me feel inadequate	a	
	XYZ makes me feel good	0.917	
	XYZ makes well-taken care off	0.931	
Attachment strength A = 0.800, CR = 0.868, AVE = 0.623	I feel better if I'm going back to the service of XYZ often	0.701	
	I miss XYZ when not using their service	0.777	
	If XYZ service was permanently shut down. I'd be upset	0.867	
	Losing XYZ forever would be distressing to me	0.812	
Attention A = 0.807, CR = 0.874, AVE = 0.625	I like to learn about XYZ	0.754	Based on Kevin et al. (2016)
	I pay a lot of attention to XYZ actions	0.851	
	Anything related to XYZ grabs my attention	0.839	
	I concentrate a lot on XYZ	0.738	
Enthusiasm A = 0.898, CR = 0.925, AVE = 0.715	I'm heavily into XYZ	0.798	
	I'm passionate about XYZ	0.777	
	I'm enthusiastic about XYZ	0.909	
	I feel excited about XYZ	0.905	
	I love XYZ	0.823	
Identification A = 0.758, CR = 0.862, AVE = 0.677	When someone criticizes XYZ. it feels like a personal insult	0.761	
	I feel happy when XYZ is successful	0.816	
	I feel happy when someone praises XYZ	0.887	
Interaction A = 0.898, CR = 0.925, AVE = 0.711	In general. I like to get involved with XYZ community	0.466	
	I am someone who enjoys interacting with like-minded others in the XYZ community	0.656	
	I actively participate in XYZ community	0.495	
	In general. I enjoy exchanging ideas with other people in the XYZ community	0.556	
	I often participate in activities/events of the XYZ community	0.476	
Absorption A = 0.938, CR = 0.953, AVE = 0.801	When interacting with XYZ. I forget everything else around me	0.919	
	Time flies when interacting with XYZ	0.903	
	When interacting with XYZ I get carried away	0.852	
	When interacting with XYZ. it is difficult to detach myself	0.896	
	When interacting with XYZ. I am immersed	0.904	
	When I interact a lot with XYZ. I feel happy	a	
Loyalty A = 0.929, CR = 0.941, AVE = 0.641	I would say positive things about this service to other people.	0.879	Based on Prentice et al. (2020)
	I would recommend XYZ to someone who seeks my advice.	0.875	
	I would refer XYZ to my friends and relatives.	0.817	
	I would provide positive reviews for XYZ.	0.867	
	I am most likely to return to XYZ's service.	0.751	
	I will come back to XYZ's service even if the price increases.	0.728	
	I pay a higher price than for other services for the benefits of XYZ's service.	0.704	
	I'm pleased to have used XYZ's service	0.846	
	It was a good idea to have used XYZ's service.	0.713	

Note: A- Cronbach's alpha, CR- Composite reliability, AVE- Average Variance Extracted, FL-Factor loading, a-item eliminated, XYZ means the service that the human brand represents.

Table 4. Discriminant validity.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1.Absorption	0.895									
Fornell-Larcker criterion	0.895									
2.Attachment strength	0.477	0.789								
3.Attention	0.681	0.511	0.797							
4.Autonomy	0.459	0.454	0.345	0.764						
5.Relatedness	0.505	0.660	0.545	0.474	0.866					
6.Loyalty	0.399	0.411	0.617	0.258	0.490	0.801				
7.Competence	0.302	0.542	0.489	0.374	0.758	0.642	0.924			
8.Enthusiasm	0.618	0.565	0.656	0.388	0.630	0.645	0.613	0.844		
9.Identification	0.583	0.449	0.621	0.344	0.485	0.605	0.475	0.624	0.823	
10.Interaction	0.685	0.514	0.761	0.416	0.553	0.582	0.444	0.661	0.627	0.843
Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) – Matrix										
1.Absorption										
2.Attachment strength	0.525									
3.Attention	0.796	0.617								
4.Autonomy	0.857	0.895	0.679							
5.Relatedness	0.626	0.892	0.732	0.839						
6.Loyalty	0.402	0.455	0.681	0.616	0.611					
7.Competence	0.343	0.658	0.590	0.748	0.826	0.733				
8.Enthusiasm	0.790	0.652	0.802	0.716	0.805	0.686	0.704			
9.Identification	0.691	0.570	0.816	0.723	0.670	0.705	0.601	0.877		
10.Interaction	0.744	0.587	0.801	0.825	0.699	0.625	0.522	0.852	0.763	

contribute to attachment strength – what corroborate the self-determination theory – relatedness ($\beta = 0.505$, $p < 0.001$) is the most effective driver of attachment strength. Thus, the desire to somehow belongs to something (Deci and Ryan 2000; La Guardia et al. 2000), as a human brand, strongly contributes to being attached to the brand. A human brand creates a social sphere of fans and displays a certain lifestyle, thus, consumers feeling connected to the human brand and caring for such a brand are more attached to the brand than those who do not care and do not feel attached. Second, attachment strength does not significantly influence loyalty directly. Consumers can feel deeply attached to a human brand and consider that they feel distressed if they lose the target of their admiration (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005), but it does not mean that they are open to using, purchasing, or recommending the hospitality or tourist services that the human brand recommends or use. Third, engagement is key. The engagement process involves emotions, attention, interaction, enthusiasm, identification, and absorption and these dimensions can justify the process by which attached consumers become loyal. More concretely, it is mainly public engagement that acts as a mediator influencing loyalty. Indeed, the relationship between attachment strength and public engagement $\beta = 0.561$, $p < 0.001$) and the relationship between public engagement and loyalty ($\beta = 0.721$, $p < 0.001$) are both significant. Fourth, in this study, public engagement is composed of interaction and absorption. Interaction represents the consumer participation with the brand, the interest in knowing more about the human brand, and the services that she/he promotes by using or recommending. Absorption refers to a pleasant state where consumers are fully concentrated/devoted (Kevin et al. 2016) to the human brand. Therefore, in the engagement process, when consumers reach a kind of high level of engagement by feeling absorbed and interacting with the human brand, they become loyal.

Finally, the current study traces a route that flows from relatedness to loyalty passing through high levels of attachment and engagement represented by absorption and interaction. Therefore, consumers are willing to purchase, use and recommend the

Table 5. Structural results.

Direct Effect	β	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	f^2	VIF inner model	Hypothesis
Autonomy → Attachment strength	0.180	3.363	0.001**	0.047	1.291	H1a supported
Relatedness → Attachment strength	0.505	6.731	0.000***	0.182	2.608	H1b supported
Competence → Attachment strength	0.192	1.984	0.037*	0.057	2.350	H1c supported
Attachment strength → Intimate engagement	0.539	14.278	0.000***	0.410	1.000	H2 supported
Attachment strength → Public engagement	0.561	14.185	0.000***	0.459	1.000	H3 supported
Intimate engagement → Loyalty	−0.089	1.055	0.291ns	0.005	3.215	H4 not supported
Public engagement → Loyalty	0.721	9.182	0.000***	0.292	3.329	H5 supported
Attachment strength → Loyalty	0.054	1.090	0.276ns	0.004	1.499	
Second order reflective						
Intimate Engagement → Absorption	0.923	97.755	0.000***	5.712		
Intimate Engagement → interaction	0.913	83.411	0.000***	4.995		
Public Engagement → Attention	0.938	102.085	0.000***	7.290		
Public Engagement → Enthusiam	0.959	219.907	0.000***	11.521		
Public Engagement → Identification	0.851	39.773	0.000***	2.625		
$R^2_{Attachment\ strength}$	0.465	$R^2_{Public\ engagement}$	0.315			
$R^2_{Intimate\ engagement}$	0.291	$R^2_{Loyalty}$	0.465			
$Q^2_{Attachment\ strength}$	0.325	$Q^2_{Public\ engagement}$	0.225			
$Q^2_{Intimate\ engagement}$	0.181	$Q^2_{Loyalty}$	0.344			

Specific indirect Effect	β	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
Attachment strength → Intimate engagement → Loyalty	−0.048	1.043	0.297ns
Competence → Attachment strength → Intimate engagement → Loyalty	−0.004	0.711	0.477ns
Relatedness → Attachment strength → Public engagement	0.283	5.513	0.000***
Relatedness → Attachment strength → Loyalty	0.027	1.074	0.283ns
competence → Attachment strength → Loyalty	0.005	0.665	0.506ns
Competence → Attachment strength → Intimate engagement	0.050	1.404	0.160ns
Competence → Attachment strength → Public engagement → Loyalty	0.037	1.354	0.176ns
Relatedness → Attachment strength → Public engagement → Loyalty	0.204	4.422	0.000***
Autonomy → Attachment strength → Loyalty	0.010	1.009	0.313ns
Attachment strength → Public engagement → Loyalty	0.405	7.262	0.000***
Autonomy → Attachment strength → Public engagement	0.101	3.410	0.001**
Autonomy → Attachment strength → Intimate engagement	0.097	3.260	0.001**
Competence → Attachment strength → Public engagement	0.052	1.375	0.169ns
Relatedness → Attachment strength → Intimate engagement	0.272	5.378	0.000***
Autonomy → Attachment strength → Public engagement → Loyalty	0.073	3.331	0.001**

Table 5. (Continued).

Direct Effect	β	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	f^2	VIF inner model	Hypothesis
Relatedness → Attachment strength → intimate engagement → Loyalty	−0.024	0.996	0.319ns			
Autonomy → Attachment strength → Intimate engagement → Loyalty	−0.009	1.000	0.318ns			

Note: ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; VIF Variance Inflation Factor.

services and brands that the human brand advocate or use when the strong ties between the consumer and human brand lead consumers to be absorbed and continuously interact with the brand.

Conclusions and implications

Human brands make consumers feel appreciated, and empowered, which in turn creates a sense of attachment, openness, and belonging (Thomson 2006). This study stresses that autonomy, relatedness, and competence contribute to attachment strength – corroborating the self-determination theory – which, in turn, creates loyalty through engagement. Repeated interaction between a consumer and the human brand reduces uncertainty and provides the basis for an attachment to grow (Greškovičová, Tankošová, and Hrubá 2022), but in the context of human brands, it is not just the frequency, but also the quality of interaction that matters. With direct and proper interaction, consumers are more likely to view a brand as accessible and authentic (Thomson 2006). Through a strong human brand, consumers perceive the brand as attractive.

The literature claims that consumer attachments to human brands result in high levels of satisfaction, trust, and commitment (Thomson 2006), but an attachment is unlikely to develop if the initial steps of the relationship are characterized by intense negative feelings or thoughts. This suggests that managers should introduce the human brand to the world carefully and deliberately and choose a positioning that is appealing and sustainable over time (Thomson 2006).

Theoretical contribution

Regarding academic contributions, this research attempts to explore how attachment strength to a human brand affects the loyalty concept. Thus, the contribution to the theory is threefold.

First, the study adds to the self-determination theory by demonstrating that among the A-R-C fundamental human needs, relatedness is the most influential of the attachment strength in the context of tourism and hospitality services. This does not mean that autonomy and competence are not relevant, but rather reveals that relatedness is a core need to create strong relationships. Consumers want to belong to the social sphere of the celebrity that they admire, the human brand. Thus, they need to feel that they are close to the human brand.

Second, grounded on the attachment theory, the engagement process – mainly through a public process where customer interact and is absorbed by the human brand and the services recommended – performs an important role in conducting the attached relationship to a loyal stage. Engagement represents a process of identification with the human brand, being excited with the relationship, attention to what the human brand is doing, concentrating on following the human brand through services used and being open to interaction. Thus, first, it is important to feel attached to fulfill A-R-C needs but then it is the ongoing process of engagement that leads to loyalty.

Finally, absorption and interaction, which we designated as public engagement, are essential to increase loyalty. When a consumer is fully concentrated on a human brand and the services used and promoted by that human brand and, at the same time, interacts with the brand, and other consumers with the same profile, such a consumer becomes loyal.

Managerial implications

Considering managerial implications, this research is important for professionals breaking through the industry of tourism and hospitality, but also for professionals with established businesses. The findings of this study show that developing strong human branding adds value to the brand and can be a source of competitive advantage.

If consumers can be made to feel attachment and related, organizations may be able to foster strong attachments and thus enjoy the benefits of superior relationships with consumers. In general, human brands that make consumers feel appreciated, empowered, and understood succeed in creating feelings of autonomy. Likewise, relatedness and similar feelings have been proved to be a positive gain by customers when a human brand promotes acceptance, openness, and belonging. This intimacy and connection between brands and consumers can be formed by virtue of a strong human brand.

Overall, managers should pay close attention to the interactions they have with consumers alongside their quality of service. The tourism and hospitality Industry is highly dependent on consumers' habits and preferences. Having a competitive advantage in this industry is extremely valuable, especially, one that creates loyalty and attachment among consumers.

Limitations and future research

There are some limitations to this study, adding to natural time and resource constraints. First, a non-probability sampling technique was used, which implies that the results are only valid for the sample in the analysis. Other limitations include the relatively small sample size of 321 respondents. To tackle this issue, a more extensive and representative sample of the population should be used to not compromise the reliability of the study.

Although it is important to note that while loyalty perception concept was used as a proxy for real loyalty (as an actual behavior), direct conclusions of intention to revisit the tourism and hospitality services should be carefully considered. The data were collected through a questionnaire distributed across social media, where participants might not answer accurately about their intentions. Additionally, users thought of different services whilst answering the questionnaire, whether it was hotels, restaurants, or other types of

services, results may differ from service to service. Further research should include specific services or conduct a deeper analysis of the differences between services. With respect to future research, other variables should be included in the model, such as the purchasing power of the respondents, reviews of the services, and different service categories.

As this research focused only on the overall industry of tourism and hospitality, it would be interesting to study the same variables applied to other industries, and to specific services. Moreover, it would also be interesting to see this research applied to services and industries from different countries and consumers of specific nationalities, age groups, and overall demographic characteristics. It would also be valuable to see this research from the perspective of the professionals and how they can act upon this concept and conclusions. Systematic research into what tactical choices is likely to promote autonomy and relatedness is needed. For example, do self-service models of service delivery or product customization promote autonomy by making consumers feel more self-expressive or self-governing? Do autonomy and relatedness need to be created from scratch, or can firms draw on existing feelings targeted elsewhere? Does possessing one or more strong consumption-related attachments mean that a person experiences elevated life satisfaction, or as alluded to by prior research (Kleine and Baker 2004), are there other, negative effects? Given the power of strong attachments, answering these questions would be a worthwhile undertaking (Thomson 2006).

Disclosure statement

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