

Attachment Styles in Business-to-Business Relationships

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ABSTRACT

In personal relationships, attachment theory has produced an impressive body of evidence for explaining individual differences in relationship behavior. The current study examines whether attachment theory can be fruitfully extended to business-to-business relationships. Hypotheses about the impact of personal attachment style on key relationship constructs are developed and empirically tested in two business-to-business relationships. Customers with secure attachment style in their personal relationships with their romantic partner experience higher levels of satisfaction, trust, and repurchase intent in their business-to-business relationships. In addition, an attachment style scale that is specifically tailored for a business-to-business context is developed. Two dimensions of business attachment style are empirically derived: *secure business attachment style* measures the ability and willingness to rely on the business partner, and *close business attachment style* measures the desire to develop personal bonds with a business partner or its employees. The two business attachment dimensions can be used to segment customers with respect to their intrinsic retainability and their preference for personal bonding with their business partners.

Key words: Attachment Style, Trust, Repurchase Intent, Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Relationship marketing—the establishment and maintenance of long-term buyer–seller relationships—has profoundly influenced marketing theory and has gained wide acceptance in marketing practice (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997). Several mostly descriptive studies in both business-to-consumer and business-to-business contexts suggest that there is considerable customer heterogeneity in relationship behavior. In a business-to-consumer context, Barnes (1997) found that 40% of a bank's customers wanted their relationship with the bank to be closer, whereas 10% wanted their relationship to be less close than it currently was. In the business-to-business field, the European Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group found that the style of personal contacts in business relationships varies. Some people prefer close and informal personal contacts, whereas others prefer remote and formal contacts (Hakanson, 1982; Witkowski & Thibodeau, 1999; Price & Arnould, 1999). These and other studies show that not all customers maintain or even desire long-term relationships with a company or its employees (e.g., Barnes, 1997; Fournier, 1998). Resources spent on customers who resist relationship management efforts, such as personal bonding tactics, are wasted and may even threaten the success of the relationship marketing concept itself (Barnes, 1997; Dowling & Uncles, 1997). Therefore the notion to maintain and invest only in relationships with the “right customers” has been broadly accepted; for example, Reinartz and Kumar (2000) propose that a firm should identify the group of intrinsically short-lived customers as early as possible and then stop investing in them. The challenge for market researchers lies in the identification of the “right” customers who are most likely to develop long-term relationships. Unfortunately, methods are lacking for segmenting customers on the basis of their likelihood of developing long-term relationships, especially in the business-to-business context (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001). Reinartz and Kumar (2000) used demographic variables to capture observed customer heterogeneity in relationship behavior, but the explanatory power of demographic variables was disappointingly low. Instead of focusing on demographic variables, it may be more adequate to focus on relationship styles for identifying customers with a high likelihood of developing long-term relationships (see, e.g., Fournier, 1998). An early example of the relevance of relationship styles was provided by Biong, Wathne, and Parvatiyar (1997), who, in a business-to-business context, investigated reasons for companies to engage in close relationships. They discovered that a factor that may impede companies from engaging in partnering relationships was a style they labeled “fear of dependence.”

However, to date, research on individual differences in relationship behaviors has been largely descriptive (De Wulf et al., 2001; Witkowski & Thibodeau, 1999), and the potential of theories on personal relationships has not been fully realized (Fournier, 1998). A successful theory for explaining individual behavior in personal relationships has been attachment theory. Simpson and Rholes (1998, p. 3) state that “no single area of research in personality/social psychology has attracted more interest than the application of attachment theory to the study of adult relationships.” Recent applications to peer (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 2000; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997) and work (Hazan & Shaver, 1990) relationships suggest that attachment theory could have the potential to contribute to the understanding of customer behavior in business relationships. Thomson and Johnson (2006) use attachment theory in the business-to-consumer relationship context and show the impact of personal attachment styles on relationship satisfaction and commitment in a sample of both consumer and personal relationships. The current article follows Thompson and Johnson's call to validate their results in a pure consumption setting. It also goes one step further by applying attachment theory to the supposedly more rational business-to-business context. First, this study tests whether attachment theory spans relationship domains and, specifically, whether personal attachment styles affect the key relationship marketing constructs of satisfaction, trust, and repurchase intent across different business-to-business relationships. Second, it extends attachment theory to business-to-business relationships, develops measures of business attachment styles, and tests for their impact on key relationship marketing constructs. Third, it investigates the suitability of this new measure of business attachment as a potential segmentation basis for relationship marketing purposes. Given the apparent lack of approaches for segmenting customers on the basis of their propensity to

develop long-term relationships and their receptivity to relationship marketing tactics, this as a highly relevant research issue (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, & Iacobucci, 2001).

The article is organized as follows: After a brief introduction to and review of attachment theory, hypotheses are developed about the impact of attachment styles on the key relationship marketing constructs of satisfaction, trust, and repurchase intent. Then, a description of the research setting and design is provided, and the empirical results are presented. The article concludes with a discussion of the results, implications for marketing practice, limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND ON ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment theory is the result of Ainsworth and Bowlby's (1991) work. It conceptualizes people's tendencies to develop strong affectionate bonds with particular others. The main proposition of Bowlby's (1973, 1980, 1982) attachment theory states that the quality of childhood relationships with caregivers determines "internal working models" of relationships that guide expectations and perceptions of all close relationships later in life. Working models are cognitive representations of self and others that evolve through interactions with attachment figures. They are organized representations of prior behavior and experience that provide a frame of reference for comprehending and interpreting relational experiences, thereby guiding social interaction (Shaver, Collins, & Clark, 1996). Building on Bowlby's (1973) work, Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) developed a system with three categories of attachment styles: secure, anxious, and avoidant. These categories are discussed in more detail subsequently.

Although early attachment research focused almost exclusively on early childhood, Hazan and Shaver (1987) adapted attachment theory to adult relationships. On the basis of Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) typology, Hazan and Shaver developed and tested a categorical measure of attachment styles for adult relationships. Research on adult attachment has focused on correlates of individual differences in attachment (for a review, see Shaver et al., 1996). Due to the nature of the current research, only findings on secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment styles that are relevant for the research question at hand are summarized (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Secure Attachment Style: People with a secure attachment style have internal working models of themselves as being valued and worthy of others' concern, support, and affection. Significant others are perceived as accessible, reliable, trustworthy, and well intentioned. They find it easy to be close to relationship partners and feel comfortable trusting and depending on others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Their personal relationships can be characterized by high levels of trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson, 1990).

Anxious Attachment Style: People with an anxious attachment style have internal working models of themselves as being misunderstood, unconfident, and underappreciated. They perceive others as reluctant to be close, and they frequently worry that their partners do not truly love them or will abandon them (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Their relationships can be characterized by low levels of trust, commitment, satisfaction, and interdependence (Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson, 1990). They report high breakup rates in their relationships and comparatively low and unstable self-esteem (Feeney & Noller, 1990).

Avoidant Attachment Style: People with an avoidant attachment style tend to fear closeness. They avoid close relationships and try to maintain independence and a sense of invulnerability. Avoidant people tend to develop more distant relationships that are characterized by lower levels of trust, satisfaction, and commitment. They do not like to share intimate knowledge about themselves and tend to withdraw from their partners (i.e., they avoid care and support) in stressful situations (Shaver et al., 1996).

MODEL DEVELOPMENT

Most of the research on attachment in adulthood has been conducted in the context of romantic and marital relationships. However, Mikulincer and Shaver (2003) maintain that it is incorrect to equate adult attachment solely to romantic love. Instead, a wide variety of relationship partners, including parents, friends, groups, institutions, abstract or symbolic figures, and even managers in organizational settings,

can act as attachment figures and become sources of support and proximity seeking (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Furthermore, despite Bowlby's (1982) emphasis on close relationships, several recent studies have shown that even in infancy, attachment can affect nonaffectionate bonds, such as relationships with peers or even with strangers (for a review, see Berlin & Cassidy, 1999). If attachment theory is not confined to romantic or marital relationships and can explain behavior in nonaffectionate relationships, it should be able to explain individual behavior in business relationships as well. In other words, the internal working models of self and other, shaped through experience in personal relationships, should affect perceptions and judgments of relationships with business partners as well. In personal relationships, internal working models of others as being generally well intentioned, reliable, and trustworthy lead securely attached people to make positive appraisals, hold positive expectations, and come up with positive explanations for their romantic partner's traits and behaviors (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2003). As with their personal relationships, securely attached people should also make more positive appraisals of their business partner's traits and behaviors. That is, in a given interaction, securely attached people are also more likely to perceive their business partner as more supportive (Feeney & Noller, 1991), and in general, they will be more satisfied with their business partner's support (Collins & Read, 1990) than will insecurely attached people. Similar to personal relationships, differences in appraisals of others' traits and behaviors and of person–environment transactions will lead to the observed differences in levels of trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. Therefore, securely attached people should also be more likely to achieve higher levels of trust, satisfaction, and loyalty in business-to-business relationships. In contrast, anxious people have internal working models of themselves as being misunderstood, unconfident, and underappreciated. Similar to their personal relationships, this will lead anxious people to have low levels of trust, loyalty, and satisfaction in business relationships. Thus, the following hypotheses are offered (repurchase intent is the measure of loyalty):

Hypothesis 1: Secure personal attachment style is positively related to satisfaction, trust, and repurchase intent in business relationships.

Hypothesis 2: Anxious personal attachment style is negatively related to satisfaction, trust, and repurchase intent in business relationships.

In line with the work of Asendorpf, Banse, Wilpers, and Neyer (1997), avoidant attachment is operationalized with a clear emphasis on self-reliance and independence. Similar to Asendorpf et al. (1997) and Collins and Read (1990), this attachment type is labeled *depend attachment*. Asendorpf et al. report that depend attachment has a strong impact on interaction frequency and an inconsistent and mostly insignificant impact on judgments of relationship quality. Likewise, depend attachment was not correlated with satisfaction, self-stated likelihood of leaving, or the three dimensions of trust in Collins and Read's (1990, p. 658) study.¹ Thus:

Hypothesis 3: Depend personal attachment style is not related to satisfaction, trust, and repurchase intent in business relationships.

Business Attachment Style

In Bowlby's (1980) original conceptualization, attachment style was considered a general trait acquired during childhood that guides behavior in future relationships. Several studies have shown moderate reliability and consistency of attachment styles across different relationships (e.g., Asendorpf & Wilpers, 2000; Baldwin, Keelan, Fehr, Enns, & Koh-Rangarajoo, 1996) and moderate temporal stability (Feeney, Noller, & Callan, 1994; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994), thus leading to the current theory that people possess distinct global and relationship-specific models of their relationships (Collins & Read, 1994; Crittenden, 1990; Pierce & Lydon, 2001). Consequently, a new, specific measure of business attachment was developed for this relationship type. For the business relationships at hand, only items measuring secure and depend attachment were developed. Because anxious attachment style is characterized by a predisposition to perceive others as reluctant to be close and by the worry that partners do not truly love or will eventually leave the relationship (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), it was problematic to conceive of an anxiety equivalent for a business-to-business relationship. As a result, the hypotheses address only secure and

¹ For female respondents, depend attachment correlated positively with the two trust dimensions of predictable and dependable.

depend business attachment. Similar to secure personal attachment, the more specific secure business attachment should lead to business relationships that can be characterized by higher levels of trust, satisfaction, and repurchase intent. Thus:

Hypothesis 4: Secure business attachment style is positively related to satisfaction, trust, and repurchase intent.

Similar to depend attachment in personal relationships, items were developed to measure a depend dimension of business attachment. Conceptually, this dimension of business attachment measures what Biong et al. (1997) call fear of dependence. They argue that cooperation between companies leads to a loss of independence that can be uncomfortable or even threatening. A fear of dependence may impede companies from engaging in partnering relationships. Following the line of argument for personal attachment, it is proposed that depend business attachment does not affect judgments of relationship quality; rather, it should negatively affect the likelihood of actions that result in a lack of flexibility (e.g., limit choice of suppliers) or loss of personal or organizational control (Biong et al., 1997).

Hypothesis 5: Depend business attachment style is not related to satisfaction, trust, and repurchase intent in business relationships.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Interrelations Among Relationship Constructs

Numerous studies have demonstrated that both trust and satisfaction are determinants of repurchase intentions (Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, & Bryant, 1996; Geyskens, Steenkamp, & Kumar, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Szymanski & Henard, 2001). Because findings concerning these relationships are almost unanimous and not the focus of this study, no hypotheses are formally proposed, tested, or discussed. However, important to the managerial relevance of this study is the notion that satisfaction, trust, and repurchase intentions are linked (1) to actual repurchase behavior (e.g. Bolton, 1998; Mittal & Kamakura, 2001) and (2) to profitability on an aggregate level (e.g., Anderson, Fornell, & Lehmann, 1994; Kamakura, Mittal, de Rosa, & Mazzon, 2002). Figure 1 depicts the hypothesized impact of personal and business attachment styles on relationship outcomes and their interrelationship.

METHOD

Setting and General Considerations

This study investigates business-to-business relationships between companies that use commercial vehicles and (1) their vehicle manufacturers and (2) their vehicle dealerships. Transactions between these companies can be characterized by a low degree of integration. Vehicles tailored to the specific need of a particular buyer are not common. Customers of a commercial vehicle manufacturer may rely on different vendors and change the allocation of purchase shares according to the record of performance. Furthermore, relationship marketing activities and programs are common among manufacturers and dealerships in this market.

Measure Development

Measures for some of the constructs were available in the literature, though it was necessary to adapt most of them to the specific context of this study. Multi-item scales were used to measure attachment styles because these have demonstrated greater precision and validity than categorical measures, which are based on prototype descriptions (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Personal attachment style measures were adapted from Collins and Read's (1990), Sanford's (1997), and Asendorpf et al.'s (1997) scales. Because specific business attachment styles have not yet been investigated, it was necessary to develop these scales. Thus, the study began with conducting three focus groups before the survey.

A total of 17 customers of a commercial vehicle manufacturer participated in the focus groups (they received a monetary incentive). Participants were asked to talk about their manufacturer, their dealers, and their personal contacts at their dealers (if applicable) to obtain an understanding of what these

relationship partners meant to them. Then, they were asked to talk specifically about the nature of their bonding and to rate the degree of their emotional bonding with these three relationship partners on a bipolar scale, anchored by "close emotional bond" and "no emotional bond at all." As expected, there was considerable heterogeneity in the three focus groups. Whereas some respondents stated that they had a close emotional bond with the manufacturer that was characterized by trust and sympathy, others stated that they had no emotional bond at all. The latter respondents stated that they simply make rational decisions about cost, size, and loading capacity (it is all about "steel sheets, rubber, and plastic").

On the basis of the results of the focus groups and the literature review, an initial questionnaire was developed. To increase face validity, several experts (two from academia and four practitioners who work for the commercial vehicle manufacturer) reviewed the initial item pool to measure the constructs of interest (e.g., attachment style, trust). The experts qualitatively judged comprehensibility and correspondence between the items and the respective constructs that these items were supposed to measure. Items with low correspondence or low comprehensibility were either reformulated or dropped from the analysis. The final questionnaire was then pretested on 40 respondents from the manufacturer's customer base (this is described in more detail in the next section). On the basis of item-to-total correlations, some of the initial items were slightly rephrased, and others were dropped (for items and constructs, see the Appendices).

Data Collection

A market research company conducted telephone interviews with customers of a commercial vehicle manufacturer. Similar to other studies in the business-to-business domain, this study uses a key informant procedure (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Rindfleisch & Moorman, 2001). The cooperating manufacturer provided a customer database containing the name and telephone number of the person who is responsible for fleet management in each company. Addresses were randomly selected from the database. Ten contact attempts were made on varying days and at varying times before a selected address was discarded. In addition, each respondent was asked whether he or she participates in purchase decisions for new vehicles. Respondents who did not participate in purchase decisions were excluded from the interview. This study investigated straight rebuy and modified rebuy purchasing situations (i.e., companies already owned commercial vehicles). Because these more routine types of buying situations are carried out by small buying centers (Anderson, Chu, & Weitz, 1987), decisions are more likely to be made autonomously (Sheth, 1973). Thus, the fleet manager's appraisal of the relationship with the vehicle manufacturer and the dealerships is likely to be relevant for actual decision making, and the key informant approach is an acceptable choice for this study. Overall, the response rate was 38%. A total of 575 participants completed the interviews. Because one customer complained about the personal nature of the interview, the cooperating manufacturer had the personal attachment questions removed from the survey after 171 interviews were already completed. Thus, only 171 respondents answered the full interview with personal attachment measures.

RESULTS

Tests of univariate and multivariate skewness and kurtosis indicated the presence of highly nonnormal data. Therefore, all models were estimated with Mplus, in which the Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square is obtained by using the MLM estimator (Satorra & Bentler, 1988). Furthermore, listwise deletion of cases with missing values was conducted for all estimated models.

Validating Attachment Measures

Personal attachment style. Collins and Read's (1990) three-factor model with the attachment dimensions of secure, anxious, and depend was tested. The three-factor model provides an excellent fit: $\chi^2(74) = 70.904$, $p = .58$; comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .00. On the basis of an inspection of the estimated lambda values, three reverse-coded items with indicator reliabilities below 0.20 were deleted. The final model fits very well ($\chi^2(41) = 35.29$, $p = .72$;

CFI = 1.00, and RMSEA = .00) with the attachment dimensions of secure, anxious, and depend. In line with Asendorpf et al.'s (1997) results, only the dimensions of secure and anxious were negatively correlated ($\phi = -.49$).

Business attachment style. It was necessary to develop scales for the business attachment style. Note that a general measure of business attachment style was used. That is, items measuring business attachment style (e.g., "It is easy for me to rely on my business partner.") were not asked with respect to a specific business partner. Respondents were instructed as follows: "Please think about your business relationships in general." For the business relationships at hand, only items measuring secure and depend attachment were developed (for dimensions and items, see Appendix A). However, the hypothesized two-factor solution (N = 508; 12% deleted) needed to be rejected ($\chi^2(43) = 305.77, p = .00$; CFI = .72, and RMSEA = .00). Close inspection of the estimated lambda values for the secure attachment items showed that all items measuring the ability or willingness to rely on the business partner had lambda values less than .40.

This suggests that in business relationships, the secure dimension of personal attachment can be divided into two dimensions, or facets. Secure attachment measures the ability and willingness to rely on business partners, and closeness measures the desire to develop personal bonds and personal relationships with business partners. A three-factor model was tested and provided an acceptable fit ($\chi^2(41) = 105.43, p = .00$; CFI = .93, and RMSEA = .056). Depend attachment was removed from the model because only one item had an indicator reliability greater than .20. Thus, it was not possible to test Hypothesis 5. The remaining two-factor model with secure and close business attachment had a good fit ($\chi^2(8) = 12.07, p = .15$; CFI = .99, and RMSEA = .032). With a correlation of only .34, the secure and close business attachment styles display discriminant validity. In personal relationships, willingness to rely or depend on the partner and the willingness and ability to be emotionally close to the partner are closely related and characterize secure attachment. In business-to-business relationships, however, both constructs are distinct, meaning that a person can have a high ability and willingness to rely on the business partner without a need or willingness to be personally close to the business partner. This result confirms Asendorpf and Wilpers's (2000) statement that the structure of attachment dimensions can vary across different types of relationships. It is also in line with results from the European Industrial Marketing and Purchasing Group, which found that some people prefer close and informal personal contacts, whereas others prefer remote and formal contacts in their business relationships (Hakanson, 1982, Witkowski & Thibodeau, 1999). The close dimension essentially measures the preference or desire for close and informal personal contacts in business relationships.

To assess concurrent validity of the new measure of business attachment, it was necessary to test whether it is related to the respondent's personal attachment style. Although business relationships represent a different domain, there should be a similar consistency across relationships, though at a somewhat lower level than that shown in personal relationships (e.g., Crowell, Fraley, & Shaver, 1999). A confirmatory factor analysis with personal and business attachment styles provided an excellent model fit ($\chi^2(109) = 103.43, p = .63$; CFI = 1.00, and RMSEA = .00). Secure personal attachment correlates positively with secure ($\phi = .21, t = 2.09$) and close ($\phi = .21, t = 2.97$) business attachment. Anxious personal attachment correlates negatively with secure ($\phi = -.26, t = -2.32$) and close ($\phi = -.25, t = -2.15$) business attachment. As expected, the depend dimension of personal attachment is not significantly correlated with the two dimensions of secure business attachment. The results of this study are in line with those of Asendorpf and Wilpers (2000, p. 124), who report average cross-relationship consistencies of personal attachment styles between parents and peers of .28. This coherent relationship between business attachment style and personal attachment style provides evidence of concurrent validity for the newly developed business attachment style measures. The moderate consistency supports the notion of global and relationship-specific working models of relationships and also confirms the necessity of developing a specific measure of business attachment (Crowell et al., 1999).

MODEL TEST: THE IMPACT OF ATTACHMENT STYLES ON BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

Personal Attachment Style

Respondents (i.e., the fleet managers of companies with a commercial vehicle fleet) were interviewed about both their relationship with the vehicle manufacturer and their relationship with their vehicle dealerships. Hypotheses about the impact of personal attachment style on business relationships were tested with respect to these two relationships. Listwise deletion of missing values resulted in a sample size of $n = 153$ (11% deleted for the relationship with the manufacturer) and of $n = 124$ (9% deleted² for the relationship with the dealer). Before testing the hypothesized model, the extent of bias due to nonresponse on the personal attachment questions was ascertained. The mean of each variable in the reduced samples was compared with the mean from the original sample using a t -test (e.g., Kamakura et al., 2002). All means were statistically identical (all p s > .05). Trust and repurchase intent were measured for both business relationships. In addition, satisfaction with the vehicle (for manufacturer relationship) and satisfaction with sales and repair experience (for dealer relationship) were measured (for constructs and items, see Appendix B; for construct intercorrelations, see Appendix C). Both the model for the manufacturer and the model for the dealer exhibited an excellent fit ($\chi^2(155) = 161.16, p = .35; CFI = .99$, and $RMSEA = .02$; and $\chi^2(188) = 209.51, p = .13; CFI = .98$, and $RMSEA = .03$, respectively). Hypothesis 1, which posits a positive relationship between secure attachment style and key relationship variables, is partially confirmed. For both the dealer and the manufacturer, secure personal attachment has a positive impact on trust and satisfaction judgments. Only the result for satisfaction with the sales experience is as proposed positive but not significant at $p < .05$ (see Table 1). Secure personal attachment has no significant, direct impact on repurchase intentions in either marketing relationship. Therefore, a mediation test was conducted following Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach. Three regression models were estimated for both marketing relationships. The impact of secure personal attachment on repurchase intent is perfectly mediated by satisfaction in the manufacturer model and by trust in the dealership model. This result is consistent with previous studies that have documented similar mediating effects for satisfaction (Mittal, Kumar, & Tsiros, 1999; Szymanski & Henard, 2001) and for trust (e.g. Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Anxious attachment shows no negative impact on key relationship characteristics, leading to the rejection of Hypothesis 2 (see Table 1). A possible reason for this could be gender-specific effects of attachment styles. Collins and Read (1990) note that men's satisfaction with dating relationships is related only to their secure attachment, whereas women's satisfaction was inversely related to their anxious attachment (for similar results, see also Feeney, 1999; Feeney et al., 1994). Respondents in this study were predominantly male (80% of the sample), which could explain the nonsignificant effects of anxiety. Because of the small proportion of females in the sample, it was not possible to test post hoc for the moderating effect of gender. Except for a significant impact of depend attachment on repurchase intent at the manufacturer, depend personal attachment had no significant impact on relationship characteristics, in support of Hypothesis 3. There is no straightforward interpretation for this single, significant effect.

Explained variance for satisfaction ratings is 6% (sales experience), 9% (repair experience), and 12% (vehicle); for trust explained, variance is 10% (dealer) and 15% (manufacturer). For a personality variable, this effect is substantial (Kassarjian & Sheffet, 1991). Considering the moderate consistency of attachment styles across different relationships, this result underscores their relevance in business relationships. Moreover, in social psychology, the proposed relationship between attachment styles and relationship characteristics has usually been confirmed within a specific relationship and not across relationship domains. Thus, the statistical relationships reported here must be interpreted in the context of the diverse

² The question block on dealership was administered only to respondents with a dealership that also handled their repairs.

domains of behavior that these correlations cross: fleet managers' attachment styles in their personal relationships with romantic partners are reflected in their differences in business-to-business relationships with vehicle manufacturer and dealerships. As with personal relationships, the positive predispositions of those who view romantic partners as generally well intentioned, reliable, and trustworthy also manifest in higher levels of trust, satisfaction, and repurchase intent in the two different business relationships. The impact of secure personal attachment on relationship variables remains unchanged, even when the length of the relationship is controlled.³ These results support the relevance of attachment theory for business-to-business relationships.

Business Attachment Style

The impact of the empirically derived secure and close business attachment styles on the quality of respondents' relationships with the manufacturer and the dealer were also tested (see Table 2). Both the manufacturer (N = 445, 23% deleted) and the dealer (N = 377, 18% deleted) models provided an excellent fit ($\chi^2(104) = 144.82, p = .01$; CFI = .99, and RMSEA = .03; and $\chi^2(80) = 109.854, p = .02$; CFI = .99, and RMSEA = .03, respectively; for construct intercorrelations, see Appendix D). Again, means of all model variables are statistically identical in the reduced samples and the original sample (all $ps > .20$). The results underscore the relevance of secure business attachment because it affects trust and satisfaction ratings in both business relationships in this study. However, contrary to Hypothesis 4, again, secure business attachment has no direct impact on repurchase intentions. Except for a negative but weak effect on trust with the dealer, close business attachment does not explain any unique variance in relationship constructs. Explained variance for satisfaction ratings are 6% (vehicle), 6% (sales experience), and 9% (repair experience). The corresponding values for trust are 17% (trust in the manufacturer) and 16% (trust in the dealer).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Similar to secure personal attachment, secure business attachment has no direct impact on repurchase intention. Again, a mediation test following Baron and Kenny's (1986) approach was conducted. Consistent with the result for secure personal attachment, the impact of secure business attachment on repurchase intent is perfectly mediated through satisfaction and trust judgments (see also Mittal et al., 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Szymanski & Henard, 2001). Furthermore, controlling for length of the relationship does not alter the reported findings.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

Marketing approaches that examine individual differences in business relationship formation have been mainly descriptive (e.g., Barnes, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Price & Arnould, 1999; Witkowski & Thibodeau, 1999). The primary contribution of this study to the relationship marketing literature is to provide a theoretical framework to explain heterogeneity in relationship formation. This study may be the first to extend attachment theory from personal relationships to business-to-business relationships. People possess internal working models of relationships that influence their behavior not only in personal relationships but also in business relationships. Because securely attached customers have internal working models of others as being generally well intentioned, responsive, and reliable, they are more likely to make positive appraisals, hold positive expectations, and come up with positive explanations of their business partners' traits and behaviors. These positive predispositions manifest in higher levels of trust, satisfaction, and repurchase intent in business relationships and even have an impact across relationship domains: a fleet manager's attachment to his or her romantic partner predicts his or her business relationship outcomes. In other words, the fleet manager with a secure attachment style in his or her

³ Because length of the relationship was measured only between companies and the vehicle manufacturer, controlling for length was possible only for the manufacturer model.

personal relationships also experiences greater satisfaction, trust, and repurchase intent in his or her business relationships. History and experience in personal relationships color perceptions and judgments in a supposedly rational business environment. This result is particularly noteworthy because in the literature on personal relationships, attachment style effects have usually been assessed within relationships (attachment style to a specific relationship partner on the quality of the relationship to this specific relationship partner) but not across relationship domains. Furthermore, business relationships differ conceptually from personal relationships (i.e., they do not involve love, they are not egalitarian, and they involve power and authority). Therefore, the consistent impact of personal attachment on different business-to-business relationships provides strong evidence for its relevance to the relationship marketing context and support for the relationship paradigm itself.

A key research objective of this study was to extend attachment theory to business-to-business relationships and to develop a measure of business attachment style (Kassarjian & Sheffet, 1991). Two facets of business attachment were empirically derived: secure and close business attachment. In personal relationships, trust in the partner and being emotionally close to the partner are related and define the secure attachment dimension. In business-to-business relationships, both constructs are distinct, meaning that a person in a business relationship can have a high ability and willingness to rely or depend on the business partner without a need or willingness to be personally close to the business partner. Consistent with expectations, securely attached customers are more satisfied with their relationship experiences, display higher levels of trust in their business partner, and thus possess stronger intentions to continue the business relationship. Both the impact of secure business and secure personal attachment on repurchase intent is mediated through satisfaction and trust judgments.

A common criticism of attachment research is that measures of relationship-specific attachment dimensions and measures of relationship-specific experiences are difficult to distinguish (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1990). Therefore, unlike most of the attachment research on personal relationships, a general measure of business attachment was used. Items measuring business attachment style were not asked with respect to a specific business partner. This general measure of business attachment was then related to outcomes in two different business relationships. The consistent impact of secure business attachment on different relationship outcomes, as diverse as satisfaction with a commercial vehicle and trust in the dealership, provides strong evidence for its nomological validity.

Managerial Implications

The two facets of business attachment can form the basis of a segmentation scheme for relationship marketing activities (see Figure 2). Several authors stress the importance of identifying customers with high levels of intrinsic retainability on whom companies can focus their relationship-building efforts (Reichheld, 1996; Reinartz & Kumar, 2000). A key conclusion of Reinartz and Kumar's (2000) study is that a substantial group of intrinsically short-lived customers exists and that it is necessary to identify this group as early as possible and stop investing in them. Instead, relationship building should focus on customers with higher levels of intrinsic retainability because they represent a constant and consistent source of revenue and may buffer the company in times when performance temporarily falters (Mittal & Kamakura, 2001; Reichheld, 1996). The newly developed scale of secure business attachment provides a way to identify customers who are likely to form strong bonds with their business partners. Securely attached customers experience higher levels of satisfaction and trust in their business relationships and, thus, higher intentions to continue their business relationships. Because previous studies have confirmed the link between repurchase intent and actual repurchase behavior (e.g., Bolton, 1998; Mittal & Kamakura, 2001), the secure facet enables the identification of customers with high intrinsic retainability. Intensity of relationship-building efforts should increase with the level of secure business attachment.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Several (mainly qualitative) studies have found considerable heterogeneity in customers' desire to develop close and personal relationships with their business partners (Barnes, 1997; Price & Arnould, 1999). Price and Arnould (1999) label customers who consider the commercial context inappropriate for personal bonding with their business partners the "friendship-averse customer segment." The close dimension of

the newly developed business attachment scale measures customers' preferences for personal bonding with their business partners and enables the identification of these friendship-averse customers (Witkowski & Thibodeau, 1999). Customers that scored low on close business attachment style had a significantly lower preference for relationship marketing tactics that have a personal character ($p < .05$), such as surprises/presents at special personal events (e.g., birthday); invitations to talks with executives or developers about experiences, desires, ideas; surprises/presents at vehicle-related events (e.g., vehicle delivery, multiple repairs); invitations to events, such as exhibitions, readings, and concerts. Thus, relationship marketing tactics targeted for personal bonding should increase with the level of closeness.

A possible approach to implement this segmentation scheme would be to add the six questions that measure business attachment to questionnaires that are regularly administered to customers in the course of customer relationship management programs (e.g., the registration form of a loyalty program or the regular surveys of participants of loyalty programs). Including the attachment questions in the registration form of a loyalty program would enable the early identification of intrinsically short-lived customers, as Reinartz and Kumar (2000) propose. Furthermore, customers with a desire for personal bonding with their business partners, in which the often-recommended personal bonding strategies are viable, can be identified and targeted (Barnes, 1997; Price & Arnould, 1999). For example, a frequently applied relationship marketing tactic for establishing personal bonds or a commercial friendship with a customer involves personal gift giving (Price & Arnould, 1999). In the group of customers that scored below average (median split) on the close dimension, 27% considered surprises or presents at special personal events (e.g., birthday) annoying. Another third of this group stated that they had no interest in this measure. This result illustrates the waste of resources that can occur if this relationship marketing tactic is applied to the whole customer base (e.g. Dowling & Uncles, 1997). Thus, De Wulf et al.'s (2001) recommendation that companies should hire personnel on the basis of their ability to engage in social interaction (show warm and personal feelings) with target customers should be treated with caution. The current study shows that in a business-to-business context, not all customers have a preference for this type of relationship building (see also Barnes, 1997), and it provides a mean for identifying those customers who do.

Limitations and Further Research

The results of this study suggest the applicability of attachment theory to the business-to-business relationship domain. Attachment theory has been shown to affect key relationship marketing constructs and to serve as a viable basis for differentiating customers with respect to their intrinsic retainability and their preference for relationship marketing tactics. Because empirical work on attachment theory in interpersonal domains has shown that attachment theory affects variety of relationship-relevant constructs, these results can be viewed as a starting point for further research on the role of attachment styles in business relationships. Consequently, several issues need clarification in future research endeavors. Regarding the newly developed scales for business attachment, a scale for the depend dimension, which was removed from this analysis, should be developed. Conceptually, the depend attachment dimension measures what Biong et al. (1997) call fear of dependence, and it could be relevant in business-to-business situations that require substantial specific investments. Furthermore, it could also be possible to think of anxiety analogs in business relationships. For example, a vendor might be anxious about losing an important customer, just as a person in a romantic relationship might be worried about losing his or her partner. A vendor could worry that his or her efforts to satisfy a customer's specific needs are not appreciated, just as a person in a romantic relationship might worry about not being accepted by his or her partner.

Additional research should also attempt to further strengthen the current findings in a longitudinal design because a potential problem of the cross-sectional design employed herein is common-method bias. Because of the research design, only repurchase intent could be measured. In a longitudinal design, it would be possible to highlight the relevance of attachment styles further and assess their impact on customer retention, a construct that directly affects profits (Reichheld, 1996).

The results of this study show that securely attached customers have more committed, satisfying, and trusting relationships with their business partners than do insecurely attached customers. Still, Simpson, Rholes, and Nelligan (1992, p. 444) are correct when they state, "Little, however, is known about what kinds of specific patterns of interaction might generate these global effects." As a next step, researchers

should investigate the specific mechanisms that are responsible for the differences between securely and insecurely attached customers. Individual interaction experiences should be investigated for both groups to uncover the processes that lead to differences in satisfaction and trust judgments. For example, research on personal relationships has found differences in strategies used to cope with trust-violating events (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2003). Secure people tend to appraise trust-violating episodes as unimportant and unrelated to a partner's personality, and they are more likely to use constructive coping strategies (Gaines, Work, Johnson, Youn, & Lai, 2000; Mikulincer, 1998). Because of the high relevance of attachment theory for understanding relationships, this study and the scales developed for business attachment styles may provide a foundation for further research that enhances marketers' understanding of customer heterogeneity in marketing relationships.

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FIGURE 1: Attachment-Style Impact on Relationship Constructs

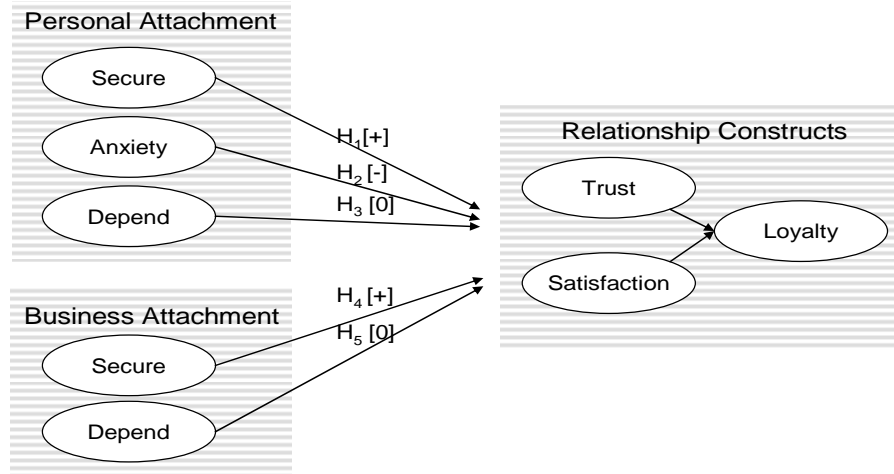


FIGURE 2: Relationship Marketing Segmentation Based on Business Attachment

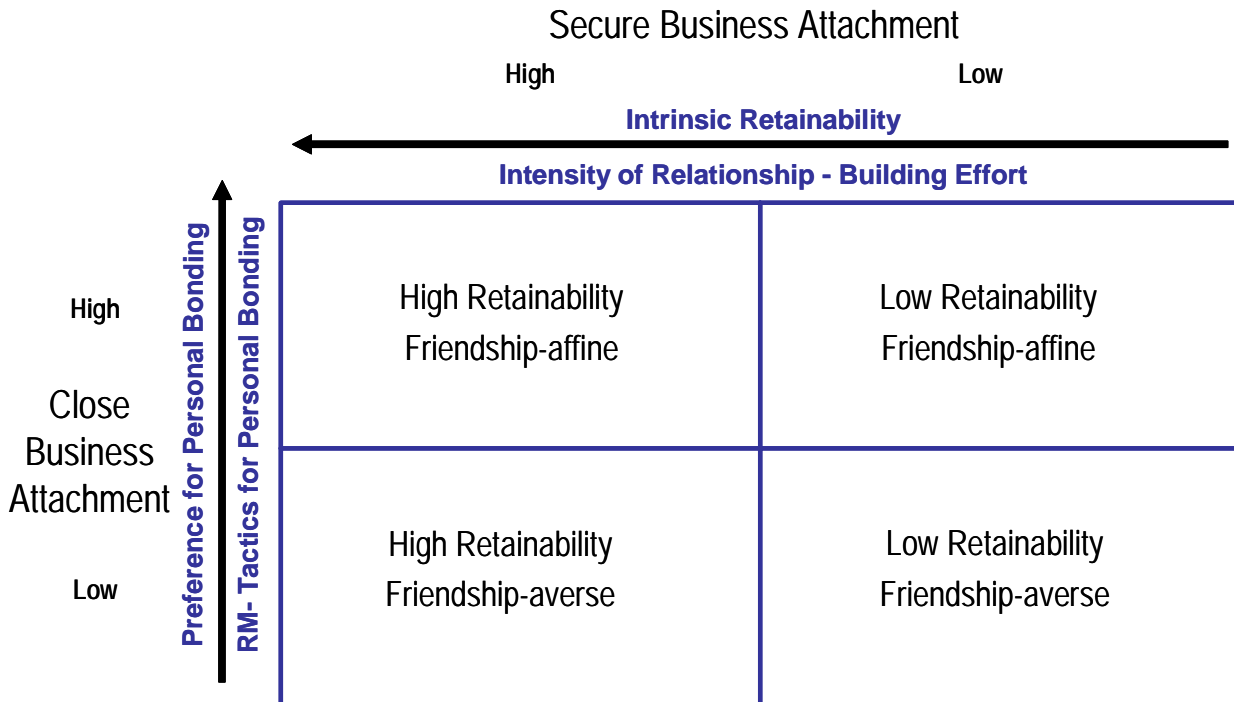


TABLE 1: Personal Attachment Styles and Business Relationship Constructs

Manufacturer				
Personal Attachment (Independent)	Relationship Variables (Dependent)			
	Satisfaction Vehicles	Trust	Repurchase Intent	
Secure	$\gamma_{11} = .43^*$	$\gamma_{21} = .49^*$	$\gamma_{31} = .04$	
Anxiety	$\gamma_{12} = .30$	$\gamma_{22} = .32$	$\gamma_{32} = -.02$	
Depend	$\gamma_{13} = .10$	$\gamma_{23} = .11$	$\gamma_{33} = .14^*$	
Satisfaction vehicles	→ Repurchase intent		$\beta_{31} = .64^*$	
Trust	→ Repurchase intent		$\beta_{32} = .10$	

Dealer				
Personal Attachment (Independent)	Relationship Variables (Dependent)			
	Satisfaction Sales Experience	Satisfaction Repair Experience	Trust	Repurchase Intent
Secure	$\gamma_{11} = .06$	$\gamma_{21} = .33^*$	$\gamma_{31} = .32^*$	$\gamma_{41} = -.02$
Anxiety	$\gamma_{12} = -.17$	$\gamma_{22} = .09$	$\gamma_{32} = .01$	$\gamma_{42} = .09$
Depend	$\gamma_{13} = .15$	$\gamma_{23} = -.08$	$\gamma_{33} = .01$	$\gamma_{43} = .04$
Satisfaction sales experience	→ Repurchase intent		$\beta_{41} = .10$	
Trust	→ Repurchase intent		$\beta_{43} = .60^*$	
Satisfaction repair experience	→ Repurchase intent		$\beta_{42} = .00$	

NOTE: Table includes standardized path coefficients.

* $p < 0.05$ (two tailed).

TABLE 2: Personal Attachment Styles and Business Relationship Constructs

Manufacturer				
Personal Attachment (Independent)	Relationship Variables (Dependent)			
	Satisfaction Vehicles	Trust	Repurchase Intent	
Secure	$\gamma_{11} = .23^*$	$\gamma_{21} = .43^*$	$\gamma_{31} = -.03$	
Close	$\gamma_{21} = .02$	$\gamma_{22} = -.08$	$\gamma_{32} = .05$	
Satisfaction vehicles	→ Repurchase intent		$\beta_{31} = .60^*$	
Trust	→ Repurchase intent		$\beta_{32} = .24^*$	

Dealer				
Personal Attachment (Independent)	Relationship Variables (Dependent)			
	Satisfaction Sales Experience	Satisfaction Repair Experience	Trust	Repurchase Intent
Secure	$\gamma_{11} = .25^*$	$\gamma_{21} = .29^*$	$\gamma_{31} = .41^*$	$\gamma_{41} = .01$
Close	$\gamma_{12} = -.03$	$\gamma_{22} = .01$	$\gamma_{32} = -.13^*$	$\gamma_{42} = .05$
Satisfaction sales experience	→ Repurchase intent		$\beta_{41} = .05$	
Trust	→ Repurchase intent		$\beta_{43} = .70^*$	
Satisfaction repair experience	→ Repurchase intent		$\beta_{42} = -.03$	

NOTE: Table includes standardized path coefficients.

* $p < 0.05$ (two tailed).

APPENDIX A: Constructs and Measures: Attachment Styles

<u>Attachment Style in Business Relationships</u>	Standard Loading	M	SD
Secure			
It is easy for me to rely on my business partner.	.86	3.58	1.09
I have difficulties completely trusting my business partner. (recoded)	.42	3.45	1.22
I can rely on my business partner almost all the time.	.65	3.79	1.01
I am uncomfortable if my business partners know a lot about me. (recoded)	Deleted	3.36	1.31
Close			
In my business relationships, I also try to establish a personal relationship with my business partners.	.74	3.54	1.26
I find it pleasant to have a personal relationship with my business partners.	.79	3.62	1.24
I find it easy to also have a personal relationship with my business partners.	.75	3.42	1.22
It is important for me that I get along with my business partner on a personal level.	Deleted	4.17	1.01
Depend			
I have difficulties solving business problems without my business partner.	Deleted	4.01	1.15
It is important for me to be as independent as possible from my business partner.	Deleted	4.15	1.40
I try not to let myself depend on others in business relations.	Deleted	4.30	1.04

<u>Attachment Style in Personal Relationships</u>	Item Origin	Standard Loading	M	SD
Anxiety				
I worry my partner will not want to stay with me.	C, S	.49	1.42	0.90
I am afraid of not being accepted by my partner.	A	.82	1.33	0.78
I worry that my partner does not respect me as much as I respect him/her.		.47	1.60	1.18
I worry that my partner does not really love me.	C, S	Deleted	1.34	0.86
Secure				
It is easy for me to rely on my partner.	A (ad)	.70	4.59	0.91
I am at ease being emotionally close to my partner.	A	.79	4.68	0.71
My partner should be there if problems occur.	A	.74	4.74	0.70
I am comfortable relying on my partner.	A, C (ad)	.62	4.60	0.88
I find it difficult to trust my partner completely. (recoded)	A (ad), C, S	Deleted	4.64	0.82
I'm nervous when my partner gets too close me. (recoded)	C, S	Delete	4.53	1.00
I find it easy to get close to my partner.	A, C, S	.70	4.53	0.98
Depend				
I find it difficult to depend on my partner.	A (ad)	.73	3.06	1.63
I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others.	A, C, S	.79	3.23	1.59
It is important to me to be independent from my partner.	A	.72	3.29	1.54

SOURCE: Item origins: A = Asendorpf, Banse, Wilpers, and Neyer (1997); C = Collins and Read (1990); and S = Sanford (1997). (ad) = that the item was slightly rephrased.

NOTE: Items measured on 5-point scales, anchored by "definitively not" and "yes definitely." All factor loadings are significant at $p < .01$. Smallest t -value for personal attachment: $t = 3.209$; for business attachment: $t = 6.497$.

APPENDIX B: Constructs and Measures: Relationship Variables

Relationship Variables Manufacturer: (Values from the business attachment model, N = 445)	Standard Loading	M	SD
Repurchase intent^a			
At the next purchase of a fleet vehicle I will purchase a vehicle from X.	.86	3.67	1.40
If I have to replace one of my fleet vehicles, I would again choose a vehicle from X.	.89	3.82	1.41
I will remain loyal to manufacturer X and its vehicles in the future.	.88	3.90	1.26
Satisfaction with vehicle^b			
I think that with a vehicle from X I/my company has made the absolutely right choice.	.93	4.13	1.11
My expectations regarding the vehicles from X were completely fulfilled.	.86	4.02	1.17
Trust^b			
I am convinced that X will treat me fairly in the future.	.81	4.11	1.00
I am convinced that in the future X will be in every respect a reliable business partner.	.87	4.18	1.05
I believe that X will develop an effective and efficient business relationship with me in the future.	.80	3.97	1.05
I can completely rely on X.	.81	4.02	1.15
Relationship Variables Dealer: (Values from the business attachment model, N = 337)			
Repurchase intent^a			
If my next fleet vehicle is from manufacturer X, I will again purchase it at my current dealership.	.91	3.98	1.38
I will remain loyal to my dealership in the future.	.91	3.92	1.39
Trust^b			
The dealer will do everything to satisfy me as a customer.	.87	4.14	1.14
My dealer will always treat me fairly.	.89	4.03	1.24
Satisfaction with sales experience^c			
How satisfied have you been with the advice of your dealer?	.87	4.79	1.21
How satisfied have you been with the professional competence of your dealer?	.95	4.85	1.18
How satisfied have you been with the friendliness and helpfulness of your dealer?	.84	5.02	1.19
Satisfaction with repair experience^c			
How satisfied have you been with the quality of the garage work?	.87	4.46	1.39
How satisfied have you been with the explanations about emerging defects and necessary repairs from the garage personnel?	.90	4.36	1.41
How satisfied have you been with the handling of repairs through the garage or, respectively, the dealer?	.90	4.49	1.40
How satisfied have you been with the professional competence of the garage personnel?	.86	4.69	1.26

^aItems measured on 5-point scales, anchored by “very likely” and “very unlikely.”

^bItems measured on 5-point scales, anchored by “definitely not” and “yes definitely.”

^cItems measured on 6-point scales, anchored by “totally unsatisfied” and “totally satisfied.”

APPENDIX C: Correlations of Personal Attachment Styles and Relationship Constructs

A: Relationship with the Manufacturer

Scale Name	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Secure	1.00					
2. Anxious	-.67*	1.00				
3. Depend	.00	.10	1.00			
4. Satisfaction vehicles	.23	.03	.13	1.00		
5. Trust	.28*	.00	.15	.70*	1.00	
6. Repurchase intent	.22*	-.01	.23*	.73*	.57*	1.00

B: Relationship with the Dealer

Scale Name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Secure	1.00						
2. Anxious	-.54*	1.00					
3. Depend	.09	.08	1.00				
4. Satisfaction sales experience	.16	-.19	.14	1.00			
5. Satisfaction repair experience	.27*	-.09	-.04	.57*	1.00		
6. Trust	.31*	-.16	.04	.52*	.54*	1.00	
7. Repurchase intent	.14	-.01	.08	.40*	.38*	.64*	1.00

* $p < .05$ (two tailed).

APPENDIX D: Correlations of Business Attachment Styles and Relationship Constructs

A: Relationship with the Manufacturer

Scale Name	1	2	3	4	5
1. Secure	1.00				
2. Close	.32*	1.00			
3. Satisfaction vehicles	.24*	.09	1.00		
4. Trust	.41*	.06	.72*	1.00	
5. Repurchase intent	.23*	.11*	.77*	.67*	1.00

B: Relationship with the Dealer

Scale Name	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Secure	1.00					
2. Close	.24*	1.00				
3. Satisfaction with sales experience	.24*	.03	1.00			
4. Satisfaction with repair experience	.29*	.08	.64*	1.00		
5. Trust	.38*	-.03	.45*	.52*	1.00	
6. Repurchase intent	.29*	.03	.34*	.37*	.71*	1.00

* $p < .05$ (two tailed).