THE ROLE OF INDIVIDUALS’ EMOTIONAL SELF-CONCEPT ATTACHMENTS TO A COMPANY IN ITS INTERACTIONS WITH STAKEHOLDER ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

This article looks into relationships which individuals who represent other organizations have with a focal company and the role of these relationships in the interactions and exchange of those organizations with the focal company. We present propositions about how individuals’ emotional self-concept attachments to the focal company may influence the focal company’s interactions with some stakeholder organizations of the focal company which the individuals may represent. The stakeholder organizations addressed in the propositions include potential customer organizations, institutional investors, governmental organizations, and media organizations. The article emphasizes the importance of managing individuals’ emotional self-concept attachments to the company. As an implication, it is also pointed out that an individual may be an active representative of several stakeholders in the different roles he/she has in his/her leisure and professional life, which requires from companies boundary-spanning strategies which do not pertain strictly to functions, as well as orchestration of the targeting of different individuals in different ways to achieve the optimal overall influence on the company performance.
INTRODUCTION

Increasingly applied network approaches to business, such as Industrial Network Approach (e.g. Ford, 1990, 1997; Ford et al., 1998; Håkansson 1987; Håkansson & Snehota 1995; Möller, Rajala, & Svahn, 2005) and Strategic Value Net Approach (e.g. Gulati, Nohria, & Zaheer, 2000; Jarillo, 1988, 1993; Parolini, 1999; Möller et al., 2005), highlight the importance of inter-organizational relationships and their management. However, what has been left with little attention in the network approaches is the relationships which individuals who represent the other organizations have with a focal company and the role of these relationships in the relational interactions and exchange of those organizations with the focal company. There has been little exploration of relationships of individuals, who may represent different stakeholder organizations, with the focal company – relationships which will make difference in the inter-organizational interactions and exchange.

In this paper, we look into how a particular type of relationship, which individuals may have with a focal company (i.e. emotional self-concept attachment) may influence the focal company’s relational interactions and exchange with some stakeholder organizations of the focal company which the individuals may represent. The other organizations explored are organizations which are likely to be important for the business of most companies. They include organizations which are potential customers of the focal company, as well as potential institutional investors, government offices, and media organizations.

When it comes to individuals’ emotional self-concept attachments to companies, it has to be noted first that beyond consumer services, research with explicit focus on individuals’ relationships with companies remains sparse (Fournier, 1998; Fullerton, 2005). Only recently have researchers started to investigate relational concepts relevant to individual-company
relationships (Bengtsson, 2003; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Cardador & Pratt, 2006; Fournier, 1998; Fullerton, 2005; Scott & Lane, 2000). The focus has often been particularly on consumers’ relationships with brands but there is emerging marketing research concerning how individuals can have meaningful relationships specifically with companies (cf. Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Cardador & Pratt, 2006; Fullerton, 2005; Scott & Lane, 2000).

Particularly, Aspara and Tikkanen (2006a), informed by the work of e.g. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) and Scott and Lane (2000), have proposed that individuals may have emotional self-concept attachments to companies and explored the antecedents and consequences of such attachments. Aspara and Tikkanen (2006a) maintain, with their notion of emotional self-concept attachment, an idea very consistent idea with Bhattacharya and Sen’s (2003) consumer-company identification: an individual may incorporate a company into his/her self-definition and identify with the company. Moreover, in Aspara and Tikkanen’s notion, the extent to which an individual incorporates something to his/her self-concept and identifies with it is very closely related to an emotional aspect of his/her feelings of special liking, love, affection and connection towards it – emotional attachment (see Ahuvia, 2005). Thus, according to Aspara and Tikkanen (2006a), the strength of an individual’s emotional self-concept attachment to something, e.g. a company, denotes both (1) the strength of his/her special feelings of liking, love, affection, and connection towards it and (2) the extent to which an individual incorporates it in his/her (extended) self and identifies with it.

The structure of this paper is the following. After the introduction, we briefly review the concept of individual-level emotional self-concept attachment to a company, as well as some important sources for such an attachment, including an emotional self-concept attachment an individual has to the company’s products, services, brands, product/service categories, and communications and advertising, as well as to certain “things” which the company supports,
represents, or sponsors. We then present our propositions about the consequences of individuals’ emotional self-concept attachments with a focal company concerning their potential influence on the company’s interactions and exchange with important stakeholder organizations, such as potential customer organizations, investors, government offices, and media organizations. With these propositions, we add to an emerging stream of research which acknowledges that more such integrative approaches are needed which do not focus on certain stakeholders’ perspective but on what happens in the interactive space between individuals and companies (see Cardador & Pratt, 2006; Chun & Davies, 2006; Dacin & Brown, 2002; Dacin & Brown, 2006; Scott & Lane, 2000).

**EMOTIONAL SELF-CONCEPT ATTACHMENT TO A COMPANY AND ITS SOURCES**

Based on consumer research on brand relationships (Edson Escalas & Bettman, 2000, 2003; Fournier, 1998; Kleine & Baker, 2004), company and corporate brands (Balmer, 1995, 2001; Bernstein, 1989; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Ind, 1997; Keller, 2003; King, 1991), extended self and possessions (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; Kleine & Baker, 2004), and consumer-company identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003); management research on stakeholder identification (Scott & Lane, 2000); and psychological research on attachments (Bowlby, 1979, 1980; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005), Aspara and Tikkanen (2006a) propose that an individual may have an emotional self-concept attachment to a company which he/she is aware of. In their notion, an emotional self-concept attachment an individual may have to a company comprises two aspects: (1) the strength of his/her special feelings of liking, love,
affection, and connection towards a company and (2) the extent to which an individual incorporates it in his/her (extended) self and identifies with it.

As a major source of an individual’s emotional self-concept attachment to a company, Aspara and Tikkanen (2006a) view his/her emotional self-concept attachments to products/services which the company is perceived to produce or brands it is perceived to own. They base this view on various streams of research, including research on product-self image congruency (see Sirgy, 1982); company/corporate identity and personality (Davies, Chun, da Silva, & Roper, 2004; Furnham & Gunter, 1993; Goffee & Jones, 1998; Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, & Mohr, 2004); identity-definition as “having/owning/possessing” (Belk, 1988; Sartre, 1943); possessions (Beaglehole, 1931; Belk, 1988; Locke, 1690; McClelland, 1951; Sartre, 1943); communication sources (Kahle & Homer, 1985; Petty, Unnava, & Strathman, 1991; Simon, Berkowitz, & Moyer, 1970); and brand extensions (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Keller & Aaker, 1992a) and the related spillover effects (Aaker, 1996; Balachander & Ghose, 2003; Morein, 1975; Wernerfelt, 1988).

Moreover, basing on consumer research on (ego) involvements (Costley, 1988; Richins & Bloch, 1986; Richins, Bloch, & McQuarrie, 1992), on one hand, and brand extensions (Desai & Keller, 2002; Keller & Aaker, 1992a; Milberg, Park, & McCarthy, 1997), on the other, Aspara and Tikkanen (2006a) view an individual’s emotional self-concept attachment to a product/service category as a potentially important source of his/her emotional self-concept attachment to companies which are perceived to produce the products/services of the category with high credibility. For instance, an individual who has a strong emotional self-concept attachment to design furniture may come to have a strong emotional self-concept attachment to a company which he/she perceives to produce credible design furniture.

Furthermore, Aspara and Tikkanen (2006a) also view as a potential source of an individual’s emotional self-concept attachment to a company his/her perception that the company’s
products/services or product/service categories support or represent certain “things” to which he/she has an emotional self-concept attachment. Aspara and Tikkanen base this view on research on extended self and possessions (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988), consumption and brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), and consumption tribes (Cova & Cova, 2001, 2002). They consider that the “things” may be, for instance, personal activities and areas of interest, such as certain types of music, entertainment, art, sports, and hobbies; other people, including not only friends and family members but also e.g. celebrities, leaders, scientists, media stars, and sports teams; and public places, landmarks, monuments and institutions. Other examples of such “things” may be ideas and ideals, such as nationality or national heritage (see Nuttavuthisit, 2005), beauty of object (see Hassenzahl, 2004), natural health (see Thompson & Troester, 2002) and environmental-friendliness (cf. Dobscha & Ozanne, 2001) – further things which can be important for individuals’ self-definitions.

As other potential sources of an individual’s emotional self-concept attachment to a company, Aspara and Tikkanen (2006a) view e.g. an emotional self-concept attachment the individual has (1) to a “thing” which the company is perceived to sponsor or support; (2) to employees that are perceived to be employed by the company; (3) to top managers that are perceived to be employed by the company; and (4) to communications and advertising, the source of which the company is perceived to be. These propositions they base, respectively, on (1) sponsoring research (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Bennett, Henson, & Zhang, 2002; Clark, Cornwell, & Pruitt, 2002; Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Irwin, Lachowetz, Cornwell, & Clark, 2003; Levy, 2004; McDonald, 1991; Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001; Olkkonen & Tuominen, 2006; Quester & Thompson, 2001; Ross, Patterson, & Stutts, 1992); (2) consumer services research (Arnould & Price, 1993; Berry, 2000; Berry & Lampo, 2004; Grönroos, 1994;
Influence of Individuals' Emotional Self-Concept Attachments on Interactions with Stakeholder Organizations

In this section, we present our propositions about the consequences of individuals’ emotional self-concept attachments with a focal company concerning their potential influence on the company’s interactions and exchange with important stakeholder organizations, such as potential customer organizations, institutional investors, government offices, and media organizations.

With respect to customers and investors, we begin by discussing consumers and individual investors in order to provide background for our propositions concerning organizational customers and investors.

Influences on Interactions with Potential Customer Organizations
In consumer context, with respect to corporate images and reputations, it has been widely demonstrated that individuals’ positive evaluations and feelings about companies positively affect their product judgments and evaluations, as well as responses, including purchase quantities and willingness to pay premium prices (Aaker & Keller, 1993; Belch & Belch, 1987; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Wansink, Kent, & Hoch, 1998). On the other hand, it has been suggested that an individual’s identification with a company leads to preference for its products over its competitors (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

Moreover, in consumer context, an individual consumer who has an emotional self-concept attachment to a company is also likely to be affectively and continuously committed to the company as seller and exhibit loyalty in buying the products/services of the company. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) propose that identification-based commitment is likely to be expressed through a long-term preference with the company’s products over those of its competitors and view company loyalty as a key consequence of an individual’s identification with a company. They suggest that as a consumer identifies with the company rather than its products, this loyalty is likely to be somewhat immune to minor variations in product formulation and extend to all the products produced by the company.

Finally, in consumer context, considering the company as a company brand, an individual consumer with an emotional self-concept attachment to a company is likely willing to try and buy products/services introduced as brand extensions by the company (brand) (see e.g. Aaker, 1990; Keller & Aaker, 1992b). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) suggest that the increased commitment and desire to increase the welfare of the company (see Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994), which results from an individual’s identification with the company and may even manifest in his/her efforts to support the company in new product introduction. The consumption of new products is
considered to give identified individuals yet another opportunity to support the company and enable them to feel as if they are bearing some of its risk.

Nevertheless, not only in consumer context but also when it comes to products/services bought by organizations in business-to-business markets, emotional self-concept attachments to a focal company which individuals who represent the buyer organizations may be relevant. Even more than consumers, organizational buyers have been found to value, in their buying decisions, the reputation or image of supplier companies (e.g. Kauffmann, 1994; Lehmann & O'Shaughnessy, 1974; Levitt, 1965; Möller & Laaksonen, 1986; Shaw, Giglierano, & Kallis, 1989). There is also increasing demonstration of organizational buyers’ buying decisions being affected by emotions, like those of final consumers – particularly the reputations or corporate brands of supplier companies and the buyers’ feelings about them (e.g. Gilliland & Johnston, 1997; Lynch & De Chernatony, 2004). We suggest that, ceteris paribus, individuals deciding about purchases in organizations prefer to choose as a supplier a company to which they have emotional self-concept attachment over competitors to which they have weaker or no attachments. Moreover, at higher levels of emotional self-concept attachment, the increased commitment and desire to increase the welfare of the focal company resulting from an individual’s identification with the company may manifest even in his/her efforts to consciously support the company (see Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Thus, individuals deciding about purchases in organizations may prefer to choose as a supplier a company to which they have emotional self-concept attachment also because they want to increase the welfare of the company e.g. in the form of sales – knowing that the purchases of their organization may have significant impact on the sales of the focal company.

**Proposition 1:** The stronger emotional self-concept attachment an individual who makes given buying decisions on behalf of his/her employer organization has to a company, the stronger
his/her tendency to decide that his/her employer organization chooses the company as a supplier of products/services over competitors.

Moreover, in organizational buying context, there are multiple individual organizational members influencing the buying decisions of the organization (Anderson & Narus, 2004; Webster & Wind, 1972: 78–80). Again, ceteris paribus, organizational members as individuals are likely to try to more influence their organization to buy products/services from and have as a supplier a company to which they have emotional self-concept attachment than a competitor in which they have weaker or no attachment. Note that individuals are likely to be aware of many companies who are potential suppliers to their organizations and may indeed have emotional self-concept attachments to them, since many companies operate in both consumer and business markets. For instance, in the top ten on the list of Best Global Brands (Business Week, 2006), most of the companies (company brands) operate extensively in both markets: Coca-Cola, Microsoft, IBM, GE, Nokia, and Toyota. Both same and different products/services can be bought by consumers vs. organizations. For instance, with respect to Nokia, many individual consumers buy their own mobile phones but also companies and other organizations buy a great number of mobile phones for the use of their employees; mobile communications networks, on the other hand, are bought only by organizations, such as telecom operators. For some products/services needed in personal work, organizations even let their individual members decide the seller or brand which the individual may use in his work; consider e.g. mobile phones and devices, laptop computers, search engines and other free web services, fringe benefit cars and gasoline, airline flights, etc.
Proposition 2: The stronger emotional self-concept attachment an individual has to a company, the stronger his/her tendency to influence that his/her employer organization chooses the company as a supplier of products/services.

Influences on Interactions with Institutional Investors

In the context of individual investors, it has been proposed that an individual having an emotional self-concept attachment to a company may gain experiential utility from owning the stock of the company and, thus, exhibit more demand for its stock than what would be rational based on the expectations about the cash flows of the company (Aspara & Tikkanen, 2006b; see also Beal, Goyen, & Phillips, 2005; Kahneman, Wakker, & Sarin, 1997). Moreover, an individual having an emotional self-concept attachment to a company may have overconfidence and optimism in forming expectations about the financial returns from investing in the stock of the company and exhibit more demand for its stock than the demand based on rational expectations (Aspara & Tikkanen, 2006b).

Nevertheless, also when it comes to large investments made by organizational or institutional investors, emotional self-concept attachments to a focal company by individuals who represent the investors may be relevant. Institutional investors, such as mutual funds and pension funds, have professional individuals as their representative managers and also these individual’s investment decisions have been shown to involve irrationality and emotions (Shefrin, 2002; Stephand & Kiell, 2000; Wärneryd, 2001). Besides, individual financial analysts, whose recommendations have major impact on institutional investors’ investment decisions, are affected by irrationality and emotionality. For instance, Ganzach (2001) found that analysts based their judgments of risk and return for unfamiliar stocks upon a global attitude. If companies were
perceived good, their stocks were judged to have high return and low risk; if bad, their stocks were judged to be low in return and high in risk. Slovic et al. (2004) imply that this is an instance of affect heuristic: the positive affect an analyst has towards a company directs judgments of risk and benefit and, further, the investment decisions.

**Proposition 3:** The stronger emotional self-concept attachment an individual who works as a fund or money manager has to a company, the stronger his/her tendency to favor the company as an investment target for the institutional investor which he/she represents.

**Proposition 4:** The stronger emotional self-concept attachment an individual who works as a financial analyst has to a company, the stronger his/her tendency to produce favorable analyses of the company for the use of institutional investors.

**Influences on Interactions with Governmental Organizations**

Further organizations of interest to us are governmental organizations. Although e.g. Scott and Lane (2000) engage in only little explicit discussion of specific stakeholders beyond customers and employees, their basic suggestion is that all the stakeholders or individuals representing them may come to identify themselves with a focal company, resulting in preferential treatment of the company, more interaction with it, and more helpful and supportive behaviour towards it relative to other companies. Also, the company and its claims are considered more legitimate and it is given more of the stakeholder’s scarce resources. Governmental organizations are among important stakeholder groups recognized by Scott and Lane (2000).

Particularly in governmental decisions pertaining directly to an individual company rather than companies in general, emotional self-concept attachments to a focal company which individual government officials who represent the government organizations may have influence.
As related evidence, it has been demonstrated that government officials, particularly in highly regulated and developing economies such as China, tend to make decisions which are favorable to a company based on, to some extent, their personal perceptions of and feeling about the company as implicated in good company image or reputation and the officials’ personal relationship to the company and its employees (e.g. Luo, 2001; Yongqiang & Zhilong, 2006). The relevant decisions pertaining especially to individual companies may include e.g. different kinds of operating licenses and government subsidies and licenses of foreign companies to enter the market or carry out foreign direct investment.

**Proposition 5:** *The stronger emotional self-concept attachment an individual who participates in decision-making in a governmental organization has to a company, the stronger his/her tendency to influence the decisions that favor the business of the company.*

**Influences on Interactions with Media Organizations**

The last organizations of interest to us are media organizations, which are also among the stakeholders whose representatives Scott and Late (2000) recognize as those who may come to identify themselves with a company, resulting in preferential treatment of the company, more interaction with it, and more helpful and supportive behaviour towards it.

Indeed, an emotional self-concept attachment an individual media worker or editor who produces media content potentially has to a company may influence his/her giving coverage to the company or writing about it in a positive manner. For media workers, companies are potential subjects of a wide variety of stories, including dramatic ones – sometimes subjects similar to celebrity persons (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006). In addition to writing about certain issues which they deem as such that will interest readers, media workers have been suggested to
express their own beliefs and values in public communication (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991) and write about certain issues as reflection of personal issue-importance and involvement with the issue (Aspara, 2004; Peiser, 2000). An individual media worker who has an emotional self-concept attachment to a company is likely to show involvement with the company and may be inclined to give extra coverage to the company in his/her stories and even write about the company in a particularly positive manner.

**Proposition 6:** The stronger emotional self-concept attachment an individual media worker has to a company, the stronger his/her tendency to give coverage to the company and present it positively in the media for which he/she produces content.

**DISCUSSION**

This paper contributes to inter-organizational research by emphasizing the role of individuals who represent various organizations in the interactions and exchange of those organizations with a focal company. This is consistent with Jones’s (1995) and Scott and Lanes’s (2000) view of stakeholders as consisting of individuals and groups of individuals. Specifically, we argue that an emotional self-concept attachment which an individual who represents a stakeholder organization of a focal company has to the focal company may significantly influence the stakeholder organization’s interactions and exchange with the focal company. Important stakeholder organizations we explored in this paper included organizations potentially buying the focal company’s products or services, institutional investors potentially buying stocks of the focal company or investing capital in it, governmental organizations potentially making decisions supporting or hindering the business of the focal company, and media organizations potentially...
giving media coverage to the focal company and producing content which represents the company in a certain tone.

Our propositions about the influences of individuals’ self-concept attachments with a focal company on the company’s interactions and exchange with potential customer organizations, institutional investors, government organizations, and media organizations should be empirically validated. Moreover, also the emotional self-concept attachments which individuals who represent other stakeholder organizations than these have to the focal company and the influences of those attachments on the other stakeholder organizations’ interactions and exchange with the focal company should be explored in further research. In any case, the influences of the emotional self-concept attachments should be investigated in relation to the influences of other individual-level, as well as organizational, factors. For instance, with respect to the decision-making of the individuals representing the stakeholder organizations, the influence of the emotional self-concept attachment should be contrasted with more “rational” considerations which the individual are likely to engage in. These would include, concerning customers, e.g. price, product/service quality, and delivery times; concerning investors, e.g. expected financial returns and risks; concerning governmental organizations, e.g. development and welfare of local communities and society; and concerning media organizations, interests of readers and topicality. Also the moderating influence of the emotional self-concept attachments on these rational considerations could be explored.

Our research emphasizes the importance of managing individuals’ emotional self-concept attachments to the company. It may be beneficial for managers to attempt to create strategies to make individuals have stronger emotional self-concept attachments to their company, i.e. make them develop special feelings of liking and even love towards the company, as well as identify more with the company and incorporate it more closely to their self-concepts.
Moreover, our propositions implicitly suggest that individuals are potentially active representatives of several stakeholders simultaneously, or in the different roles they have in their lives. For instance, a certain individual can represent e.g. a consumer, influencer or decider of an organization’s purchases, a private investor, an influencer or decider of an institutional investors’ investments, a government official, and a media worker in his/her different private and social leisure and professional roles – if not all stakeholders on a given day, at least several during a longer period of time. By pointing out that an individual may be an active representative of several stakeholders in the different roles he/she has in his/her life, the research calls for boundary-spanning strategies which do not pertain strictly to functions, such as consumer sales & marketing, business sales & marketing, investor relations, or public relations, and do not target only one stakeholder group, such as customers, investors, media workers or government officials, but target individuals and take into account that they can represent various stakeholders.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of a single company, as different conceptualized stakeholders, and interactions and exchange with them have different type and extent of influence on the focal company’s performance and as a single individual is likely to represent more evidently certain stakeholders than others, it is important to orchestrate the targeting of different individuals in different ways to achieve the optimal overall influence on company performance. This means that, besides the attendance to individuals, it remains feasible to design and implement certain strategies particularly with given stakeholder groups as targets. But, again, to the extent that certain group is particularly targeted, it is also important to take into account that the concrete activities, with which strategies are implemented and people and materials mobilized, are likely to also encounter other individuals than those representing mainly the targeted group. In a way, companies are increasingly taking this into account in corporate advertising which is directed, without one clear target group, to employees, stockholders and
investors, community members, suppliers, the media, educators, civic and business organizations, governments, and financial groups, as well as consumers. Yet, also e.g. product advertising targeted mainly to certain individuals in certain consumer segments via TV or print media is likely to be also encountered by individuals not belonging to that segment but still representing e.g. organizational customers, investors, government officials, or media.

Concerning what makes individuals form stronger emotional self-concept attachments to companies, this research emphasizes the importance of strengthening individuals’ emotional self-concept attachments to the company’s products, services, brands, communications, and advertising, as well as supporting and sponsoring things to which individuals have such attachments. This may be less intuitive for practitioners responsible for managing a company’s relationships to organizations (such as customer organizations, institutional investors, government offices, and media enterprises) than for those responsible for e.g. marketing to consumers. Also, the importance of shaping employee and top manager behaviour and having them represent themselves to external audiences in a likable way are emphasized, as well as support for communities or tribes of individuals which form around some thing, e.g. a leisure activity, meaningful to them. One subject of further research would be to study other factors that contribute to the development of individuals’ emotional self-concept attachments to companies in their roles of representatives different stakeholders. Attention should also be paid to how certain individual is likely to represent more evidently certain stakeholders than others – some not at all, of course – and to how varying factors differently contribute to the development of individuals’ attachments to companies in their roles representative of different stakeholders.

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