

IDOL ATTACHMENT AND HUMAN BRAND LOYALTY

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ABSTRACT

Purpose — This paper examines the importance and concept of idol attachment, models its antecedents and moderators, and assesses its influence on human brand loyalty.

Design/methodology/approach — This paper includes two studies. In study 1, survey questionnaires were distributed by mall intercept to quasi-random samples across Australia and Taiwan for completion and return. The return yielded 1135 and 736 usable questionnaires, respectively, the data from which were analysed using LISREL structural equation modelling software. In study 2, an experiment was employed to examine whether idol attractiveness is likely to positively moderate the relationship between vanity traits and attachment.

Findings — The results suggest that achievement vanity, variety seeking, and peer norms have a positive impact on the phenomenon of idol attachment, which in turn positively affects human brand loyalty. Contradicting previous studies, the physical appearance of vanity was not found to be associated with idol attachment. However, the results of the experiment show idol attractiveness has a positive moderating effect on the relationship between vanity traits and human brand attachment.

Research limitations/implications — The findings suggest that idol attachment is more complex than previously understood. The constructs chosen in this research represent an initial step but other variables such as liking, involvement, affective commitment, and brand love are not taken into account. Future research models should therefore include such variables.

Practical implications — The findings contain many practical lessons for planners of marketing strategy for the music industry in an international context.

Originality/value — Two existing theories of psychology are integrated with the concept of idol attachment to explain human brand loyalty in an international context.

Keywords: Idol attachment, variety seeking, peer norms, achievement vanity, human brand loyalty

INTRODUCTION

Recently, considerable interest has been generated among consumer and marketing researchers in studying consumers' attachment to human brands (e.g., Orth *et al.*, 2010; Thomson, 2006). This is motivated by regarding a human brand as brand equity embedded in any well-known persona (e.g., idol) who is the subject of marketing communications efforts (Park *et al.*, 2010). For example, artist brands (e.g., Taylor Swift), athlete brands (e.g., Michael Jordan), and CEO brands (e.g., Donald Trump) can be thought of as human brands. Today, as human brands can be famous entertainers or artists in people's minds, their brand names are a major force driving behind the demand for an entertainment product.

Despite heated discussion in the popular press, little academic research has empirically examined the antecedents and moderators of human brand loyalty in the music industry. Therefore, this research investigates the effects of the antecedents and moderators of an individual's emotional attachment strength towards idols (hereafter referred to as idol attachment) on human brand loyalty in this industry. Music artists in this study are considered to be human brands as they possess similar associations and features to a brand that can be professionally managed (Orth *et al.*, 2010; Thomson, 2006). Future loyalty towards purchasing products from a particular favourite music artist is used as a measure of the human brand's equity, since brand loyalty often represents the key dimension of brand equity (Keller, 2008).

In this study, idol attachment is a critical construct as it serves to describe the strength of the target-specific emotional bond connecting the consumer with the human brand (i.e., idol). This has great importance in relation to its potential to affect behaviours that can generate profitability and customer lifetime value for the company (Thomson *et al.*, 2005). If one is interested in explaining why an individual is attached to one particular idol, it may appear as if the main factors behind such attachment should be related to various distinctive attributes of the idol, such as physical appearance and achievements (Lin and Lin, 2007; Raviv *et al.*, 1996). It is possible that such idol attributes are likely to have an impact on attachment. In Study 1, however, we take another approach. Instead, we search for explanations related to the individual fan, since several recent studies have found evidence that brand attachment focusing on emotional bonds may be significantly influenced by self-congruence of consumers' self-concept (Malar *et al.*, 2011) and consumer personality (Orth *et al.*, 2010).

However, a review of the relevant literature shows that other factors or relationships such as the relationships between human needs and idol attachment remain to be thoroughly addressed (Thomson, 2006).

Justifications for this research

More so than ever before, idols are now using their own names to capitalise on their brands; hence, it is imperative to conduct research in order to understand how human brands are built. This will be answered through the following three key research objectives of this research study by: (1) examining the concept of idol attachment; (2) modelling the antecedents and moderators of idol attachment and relating that construct to variety seeking, peer norms, and vanity traits; and (3) measuring the influence of idol attachment on human brand loyalty.

This study adds to the literature on idol attachment in several ways. First, by drawing upon attachment and self-determination theories, we integrate the extant human brand attachment literature to develop a theoretical framework that shows how and why human needs proxies (i.e., variety seeking, peer norms, and vanity traits) enhance idol attachment as well as their impacts on human brand loyalty, which are the focus of brand attachment theorists (Park *et al.*, 2010; Thomson, 2006). Second, we provide further understanding of how marketers can enhance brand attachment to a specific

human brand (Park *et al.*, 2010; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Third, past studies do not explicitly examine closely the relationship between idol attachment and human brand loyalty. While prior research on idol attachment has focused on certain antecedents relating to consumer characteristics, the model developed for this study integrates human needs proxies and idol attachment in order to explain consumers' human brand loyalty.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Attachment theory states that idol attachment can be defined as the intensity of an individual's target-specific emotional bond with a human brand (Bowlby, 1982; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). While the theory was originally applied to infant–mother relationships, it has been extended to the study of adolescents' and adults' functioning in their current relationships (Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Thomson, 2006). In marketing terms, consumers' idol attachment, for example, might lead them to become worshippers, imitate the idol's appearance, and be more willing to purchase or continue purchasing the idol's related products such as music albums (Raviv *et al.*, 1996; Wang *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, an individual's idol attachment is positively related to his or her level of obsession in terms of seeking physical and psychological closeness and security from the idol (Thomson, 2006; Thomson *et al.*, 2005).

Such an individual–idol relationship occurs because it represents who they are or because it is meaningful in light of goals, personal concerns, or life projects (Park *et al.*, 2010). This implies that young adults may experience idol attachment while at the same time initiating a gradual movement towards human needs (Giles and Maltby, 2004; Thomson, 2006). The notion that such human relationships affect attachment is suggested by a variety of emotions (e.g., liking, involvement, affective commitment, brand trust, and brand love) that characterise consumers' feelings towards specific brands (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). However, the central argument of this study is that young people use idols as attachment figures to worship and model the idols to fulfil their human needs (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Raviv *et al.*, 1996; Thomson, 2006). A central tenet of self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) is that there are three innate psychological needs that are essential for optimal functioning: autonomy (i.e., need to perceive origin of source of one's own behaviour), relatedness (i.e., need to feel connected with others), and competence (i.e., need to have an effect on one's outcomes and surroundings). The satisfaction of these psychological needs is associated with high levels of intrinsic motivation, which relate to favourable outcomes (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

This study thus proposes three measures as proxies for these basic psychological needs: variety seeking, peer norms, and vanity traits. Variety seeking, as a proxy for autonomous need, is defined as the tendency of individuals to seek diversity in their choice of services or goods (Kahn, 1995) and is a key element of consumer innovativeness (McAlister and Pessemier, 1982). Variety seeking represents a young adult's desire to explore and adopt a new human brand for the purpose of decreasing boredom or obtaining a change of pace (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992). Peer norms, as a proxy for need for relatedness, are defined as those perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours that are approved by the peer group and expected of its members (Fisher and Ackerman, 1998). Vanity traits, as a proxy for need for competence, refer to an excessive concern with or view of one's own physical appearance and personal achievements (Netemeyer *et al.*, 1995).

Previous research provides support for using proxies to represent the three psychological needs. According to attachment theory, a young adult's attachment to an idol has been regarded as the secondary attachment that reflects the transition from parental attachment to idol attachment. For example, the attachment to a music artist

may enable a young adult to enact an imaginary adult relationship from a safe distance as some sort of full uninterrupted rehearsal in costume (Steele and Brown, 1995). Therefore, an attachment relationship can be intensified by a person's needs for variety seeking, peer norms, and vanity traits, which specify the necessary conditions for the psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence during the period of youth life (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Thomson, 2006). The need for autonomy motivates individuals to experience their behaviour as expression of the self (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Thus, the need for autonomy can be represented by variety seeking because young variety seekers are likely to form attachments to their idol figures. Young variety seekers often have the desire to choose something different from what others had chosen before in order to allow them to assert their uniqueness from established norms (Ariely and Levav, 2000). The peer group's approval of the idol attachment of young people may increase referents' support and praise towards their attachment relationships with idols. Such support reinforces consumers' feelings of being connected and joined with their peers, satisfying their sense of relatedness with others (Thomson, 2006). An idol, as an artificial object, is typically someone whose talents, achievements, status, or physical appearance are especially recognised and appreciated by his or her worshippers (Lin and Lin, 2007; Wang *et al.*, 2009). Thus, young people regard idols as their model figures and hence satisfy their needs of competence. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework. We argue that the influence of an individual's idol attachment may arise from the three proxy measures of human needs, namely vanity traits, and variety seeking, peer norms.

~~~~Insert Figure 1 here~~~~

#### *Vanity traits and idol attachment*

Vanity traits are apparent when a person is excessively concerned with his or her physical appearance and social achievements (Durvasula *et al.*, 2001; Netemeyer *et al.*, 1995). Mason (1981) argued that vanity is a secondary psychogenic trait much like conspicuous consumption, and therefore is largely influenced by one's external environment (social and economic). Vanity is widely recognised as part of one's self-concept and as a powerful variable influencing consumer behaviour (Netemeyer *et al.*, 1995). Vain individuals may over-emphasise their ideal self-concept, taking reference from the media and communication related to their idols. Based on social comparison processes, individuals usually compare themselves with others (Festinger, 1954), and this can lead to them creating a sense of negative personal well-being when the person they are comparing themselves with is more beautiful or successful than themselves (Watchravesringkan, 2008). Television programs, magazines, and advertising that include idols as endorsers offer young people a precise evaluation of these attributes, resulting in the enhancement of their ideal self-concept about physical appearance and achievement (Durvasula *et al.*, 2001; Netemeyer *et al.*, 1995). Thus, young people are likely to be attracted to idols if they see their ideal self-concept embodied in them (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2009).

Attachment theory has identified two dimensions of attachment style, namely anxiety and avoidance, and these are based on the individual's view of self, and view of others. Individuals with attachment anxiety usually experience excessive anxiousness or fear regarding rejection or separation from idols with whom they have a strong attachment (Hazan and Shaver, 1994). Following attachment theory, consumers who are anxious usually possess a negative view of self-concept (i.e., low self-congruity), which generates a fear of abandonment by loved idols, leading them to imitate their idols'

appearance and achievements (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2009). This generally occurs when young people constantly compare themselves to idols, which may lead to greater physical appearance concerns and higher personal investment in their physical appearances as well as, for some, deeper body dissatisfaction (Swami *et al.*, 2011). Bamford and Halliwell (2009) found that those with high attachment anxiety tend to exhibit greater body image concerns about their idols. Similarly, it has been found that focusing on an idol's achievements can have a positive impact on young people's attachment to the idol (Yue *et al.*, 2010). Ahmed *et al.* (2014) found that idol endorsement has a positive impact on consumer's achievement vanity traits which in turn, can lead to high level of idol attachment. Drawing upon the findings of the previous studies reviewed, it is hypothesised that:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** *Physical vanity traits have a positive effect on idol attachment.*

**H<sub>2</sub>:** *Achievement vanity traits have a positive effect on idol attachment.*

#### *Variety seeking and idol attachment*

Variety seeking has generated considerable interest in the consumer behaviour literature. Buying behaviour of variety seeker is a means of seeking one's optimum sensation level by moving from one brand to another simply for the sake of change (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992). The optimal stimulation level (OSL) theory has been used to explain variety seeking in consumers and the main premise of the OSL theory is that consumers prefer a certain level of stimulation (McAlister and Pessemier, 1982). Consumers often seek to maintain that OSL in order to obtain the highest level of psychological pleasantness. Repeated choice of a brand loses its stimulation potential for the consumers and may result in a perception of boredom since the behaviour is no longer complex or novel to the consumers (Berlyne, 1960). To increase stimulation, consumers may switch to something different or new in the choice of brand. Consumers who have high variety seeking levels may seek new stimulation and are quick to switch to other brands (Kim, 2009). We argue that intense attachment to specific human brands may lead to a perception of boredom for the young people with high levels of variety seeking. These young people are more likely to seek exploratory behaviours because they need more stimulation to maintain their OSL. Likewise, they may choose an alternative idol they are already familiar with or a novel alternative they have never experienced before. Accordingly, there should be a negative relationship between variety seeking and attachment to one specific idol.

Drawing upon the findings of the previous studies reviewed, it is hypothesised that:

**H<sub>3</sub>:** *Variety seeking has a negative effect on idol attachment.*

#### *Peer norms and idol attachment*

Peer norms are based on the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and the social norm perspective (Fisher and Ackerman, 1998). The former theory indicates that an individual's intention to perform a given behaviour is determined by his or her attitude towards the behaviour and the social normative perceptions regarding it. The social norm perspective argues that reference groups can choose to regulate the conduct of their members through the establishment and reinforcement of norms. Norms are reinforced within groups as the outcomes fall into either rewards or punishments (DeRidder *et al.*, 1992). Therefore, peer group approval may increase referents' support towards young people's attachment relationships with idols. Young people with high peer norms are more motivated to increase efforts towards social comparison processes based on the behaviours in performing a certain act on worshipping an idol. Chan and Prendergast (2008) found peer norms had a positive

impact on respondents' engagement in social comparison, which in turn, trigger desires to imitate their idols' standards of living and materialistic possessions. This enables young people to generate a greater personal connection between themselves and their idols, resulting in stronger idol attachment. In turn, this pressures people within the peer group to generate a greater personal connection between themselves and their idols, resulting in stronger idol attachment. Thus:

**H4:** *Peer norms have a positive effect on idol attachment.*

#### *Idol attachment and human brand loyalty*

Self-expansion theory posits that people possess an inherent motivation to incorporate others (e.g., idols) into their conception of "self", and implies that the more an entity (idol) is included in the self, the closer the emotional bond (Malar *et al.*, 2011; Park *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, young people with a high level of idol attachment may repeatedly purchase their idols' music products to maintain a parasocial relationship with their idols. Further, they may also imitate idols by, for instance, copying their dress, hairstyle, speech, voice, and any other social behavioural patterns to achieve more intimate proximity to their idols (Raviv *et al.*, 1996; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). This implies that the appealing vocal skills, pro-social behaviours, and traits of a star singer can contribute to young people's fantastical and emotional bond strength, increasing their fondness and attachment to their favourite idols. That is, idol attachment will be positively related to human brand loyalty. The measures for brand loyalty have been used for the human brand loyalty construct in this study. There has been a lot of discussion in the literature about how to measure or define brand loyalty. However, the most dominant loyalty indicator in the literature is the intention (and behaviours) towards making a conscious decision to think about and continue purchasing the same brand (Merisavo and Raulas, 2004). Therefore, this research expects idol attachment to be positively related to loyalty to a human brand. Drawing upon the findings of the previous studies reviewed, it is hypothesised that:

**H5:** *Idol attachment has a positive effect on future loyalty to a human brand.*

## **STUDY 1: IMPACT OF ANTECEDENTS OF IDOL ATTACHMENT ON ATTACHMENT AND LOYALTY**

### ***Sample selection***

Hypotheses 1 to 5 were tested in study 1 with the help of a survey study. Young people who love to listen to pop music were the target for this study because they are the main group engaged in buying pop music CDs (Wang *et al.*, 2009). Different definitions of "young people" have been adopted in the literature and it has often been used interchangeably with terms such as youths, adolescents, teenagers, and kids. The United Nations (2013) defines those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 as young people, and is the age range employed in this study.

Data were collected during the period of April 2010 to June 2010 around several metropolitan areas in Australia (Aus) and Taiwan (Twn). A mall-intercept method using self-administered questionnaires was used in areas where young people (aged 15–24) gather for entertainment purposes (including places where singers appear, such as autograph and music events). A total sample of 1,135<sub>Aus</sub> and 736<sub>Twn</sub> subjects was collected, demonstrating a narrow age bracket (16 to 22 years) to exclude as many potentially distorting effects of personal variables as possible and reflect the target segments of idol attachment. These samples may not fully represent the overall population of the studied countries but are relatively homogeneous in a matched samples sense. The mean ages were 18.80<sub>Aus</sub> and 18.81<sub>Twn</sub>, and the standard deviations

were 1.26<sub>Aus</sub> and 1.24<sub>Twn</sub>. The male/female split was close to 51/49.

### *Questionnaire design*

To ensure the accurate translation of the original questions in Chinese for Taiwanese participants, a bilingual colleague translated the draft questions from the original English and then a second translated them back to English. A comparison of the original and back-translated versions resulted in some modifications to ensure comprehension by the eventual respondents. Respondents used seven-point Likert scales to express their agreement or disagreement

(1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree) with statements relating to the six constructs shown in Figure 1. The sequence of the questions followed that in a research study of consumer aversion to foreign goods by Klein (2002), to reduce possible bias in respondents' intention to repurchase if questions about a specific idol came earlier in the questionnaire. Respondents were randomly assigned questionnaires.

Questionnaires differed in order and combinations of two groupings measuring: (a) variety seeking, peer norms, physical vanity, and achievement vanity; and (b) idol attachment and human brand loyalty. A demographics section succeeded each questionnaire. Two conditions were formed (letters correspond to order of item groupings a to b in a given questionnaire): (1) ab and (2) ba. We then applied a series of T tests between the two conditions and no significant difference was found both in Australian and Taiwan samples ( $p=0.10\sim 0.78_{\text{Aus}}$  and  $p=0.15\sim 0.89_{\text{Twn}}$ ).

### *Operationalising the constructs*

The scales used were from established sources with acceptable reliabilities. Most were adapted in response to the outcome of pilot studies and semi-structured interviews with Australian and Taiwanese consumers.

**Vanity traits.** This study adopted the vanity construct as measured by Netemeyer *et al.* (1995). Since attachment theory is mostly based on the individual's view of self in which concerns for physical appearance and personal achievement are expected to influence the attachment relationship between the worshipper and the idol (Swaminathan *et al.*, 2009), both concern for physical vanity and concern for achievement vanity were chosen as proxies for measuring the vanity traits of young consumer (Netemeyer *et al.*, 1995). Concern for physical appearance consisted of five items and was revised to four statements: (1) "The way I look is extremely important to me"; (2) "I am very concerned about my appearance"; (3) "Looking my best is worth the effort"; and (4) "It is important that I always look good." Concern for personal achievement consisted of five revised items: (1) "Good singing skills are an obsession for me"; (2) "I want others to look up to me because of my professional vocal acclamation"; (3) "I am most concerned with professional success on vocal acclamation than most people I know"; (4) "Achieving greater success on fame than most people is important to me"; and (5) "I want my artistic talents to be recognised by others."

**Variety seeking.** The statements relating to this construct were adapted from Trijp *et al.*'s (1996) six-item measure on variety seeking: (1) "I would rather stick with an idol I really like than try other idols that I am not familiar with (R)"; (2) "When I want to buy an album, I feel it is safer to purchase one from the idol that I really like (R)"; (3) "If I really like an idol, I rarely switch from him/her just to try something different (R)"; (4) "I am very cautious in buying new or different albums/songs (R)"; (5) "Even though other idols' have released their own albums/songs, I tend to buy those released by the idol I really like (R)"; and (6) "I enjoy taking chances in buying unfamiliar singer's albums/songs just to get some variety in my purchases."

**Peer norms.** The statements relating to this construct were adapted from Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) normative beliefs scale and Fisher and Ackerman's (1998) expectations of social approval scale. The scales were developed to measure respondents' beliefs regarding how their peer group would feel/react if they performed or not a certain act. They were adapted to three statements: (1) "If you worshipped an idol, your best friend would approve of your conduct"; (2) "If you worshipped an idol, your best friend would regard it as wise"; and (3) "If you worshipped an idol, your best friend would regard it as alright."

**Idol attachment.** For this construct, the study followed the procedures used by Thomson (2006). First, respondents were asked to indicate their favourite singers, including solo artists and bands, with a series of idol cues for reminders. Second, they were asked to indicate their single most favourite singer from the above list (the singer was denoted as idol "XYZ"). Third, the authors adapted the statements from the questionnaires used by Park *et al.* (2010) and Thomson's (2006) attachment strength scale and reduced them to a four-item scale: (1) "I feel better if I am not away from or without XYZ"; (2) "My thoughts and feelings towards XYZ are natural and instant"; (3) "I feel personally connected to XYZ"; and (4) "I miss XYZ when he/she is not around." **Human brand loyalty.** A two-item measure of this construct was adapted from Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2006). Respondents were asked to rate their intention to continue buying music products related to their favourite idols in the future by responding to these statements: (1) "I will purchase other legal music products released by XYZ in the future" and (2) "I plan to purchase the next new release of legal music products of XYZ."

#### *Data analysis*

Reliability analysis was conducted on the six constructs to be measured, as shown in Figure 1. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was greater than 0.80 in every case, indicating acceptable internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978). Table 1 presents the reliability and validity statistics for the six constructs investigated.

~~~~Insert Table 1 here ~~~~

Data were analysed by structural equation modelling (SEM). Prior to conducting the analysis, they were screened for possible outliers and missing or out-of-range values. No outliers were found. With the preliminary checks complete, the data were analysed by LISREL 8.72. All measures were analysed for reliability and validity in accordance with the guidelines set out by Joreskog and Sorbom (1993).

Confirmatory factor analysis was then used to construct a measurement model composed of the antecedent constructs of loyalty and human brand loyalty using maximum likelihood in LISREL 8.72. All constructs within the model were regarded as separate reflective measures. Overall, the resulting fit indexes indicated that the measurement model fitted the data well: chi-square (χ^2)=246.930_{Aus} and 251.466_{Twn} (183_{Aus} and 188_{Twn} degrees of freedom (d.f.)), $p=0.054_{Aus}$ and 0.063_{Twn} , comparative fit index (CFI)=0.998_{Aus} and 0.998_{Twn}, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)=0.018_{Aus} and 0.021_{Twn}, normed fit index (NFI)=0.993_{Aus} and 0.991_{Twn}, goodness-of-fit index (GFI)=0.982_{Aus} and 0.972_{Twn}, and adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI)=0.971_{Aus} and 0.956_{Twn}. The value of (chi-square/degree of freedom) was less than 2 and the CFI, NFI, GFI, and AGFI values were all equal to or greater than the acceptable value of 0.900 (Hair *et al.*, 2006). The above figures imply a good model fit and the ranges of all factor loadings and measurement errors were acceptable and significant at $\alpha=0.001$, which provided evidence of convergent validity.

Given the use of self-reported items throughout, mono-method bias might be a threat to validity. Therefore, two measurement models were conducted using the single method factor approach in accordance with the guidelines set out by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003). The first model followed the model in Figure 1 and the second model allowed all items to load on a single method factor. The second model (mono-method) resulted in chi-square values of 504.851_{Aus} and 524.956_{Twn} (d.f.=246_{Aus} and 246_{Twn}, $\chi^2/d.f.=2.052_{Aus}$ and 2.133_{Twn}). The relative fit indices were as follows: pvalue=0.000_{Aus} and 0.000_{Twn}, NFI=0.989_{Aus} and 0.985_{Twn}, CFI=0.994_{Aus} and 0.992_{Twn}, GFI=0.968_{Aus} and 0.950_{Twn}, and RMSEA=0.031_{Aus} and 0.039_{Twn}. The first model was in line with the proposed structure. Compared with the second model, the first model resulted in lower values of ($\chi^2/d.f.$) with 246.930_{Aus} and 251.466_{Twn} (d.f.=183_{Aus} and 188_{Twn}, $\chi^2/d.f.=1.349_{Aus}$ and 1.338_{Twn}). The first model also had superior fit indices, as shown previously: GFI=0.982_{Aus} and 0.972_{Twn} and RMSEA=0.018_{Aus} and 0.021_{Twn}. Hence, the second model was rejected in favour of the first model. It was concluded that common-method bias was not a likely threat to the findings of this study. Furthermore, three types of validity were assessed to validate the measurement model: content validity, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Convergent validity was confirmed in all cases by the ranges of all factor loadings and measurement errors, which were both acceptable and significant at alpha=0.05. Content validity was established by ensuring consistency between the measurement items and the extant literature. This was achieved by interviewing experts and pilot-testing the questionnaire. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 music industry professionals to explore their understanding of each of the questions in the draft instrument. Interviewees were asked to give suggestions for improving the instrument and, based on their recommendations, the instrument was modified. Second, a pilot test was then administered to participants at the Third Music Industry Conference held in Taiwan in March 2011. Thirty-six music industry experts or professionals in the field of popular music marketing returned their surveys. The time taken to complete the instrument ranged between 21 and 36 minutes and the questions were found to be easy to read and understand. The pilot showed no significant problems with the instrument. Following the recommendation of Churchill (1979), convergent and discriminant validities were also tested for the antecedent constructs. The former was assessed by examining the composite reliability of the measures (Hair *et al.*, 2006), which ranged from 0.79 and 0.94 against Hair *et al.*'s (2006) recommended minimum values of 0.70. Discriminant validity was assessed by measuring the average variance extracted statistic (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), which varied between 0.54 and 0.83, higher in every case than the largest squared pairwise correlation of 0.41_{Aus} and 0.44_{Twn} between each construct. In summary, the items and scales exhibited acceptable levels of reliability and validity, as confirmed by the summary statistics shown in Table 1.

Results

The fit indices shown in Table 2 (e.g., χ^2 , CFI, and GFI) offer convincing evidence, suggest that the overall fit of the model in Figure 1 is satisfactory. The estimates, standard errors, and t-values shown in row 1 of Table 2 demonstrate that the physical vanity of respondents has an insignificant impact on the strength of idol attachment displayed by the responding young people. Thus, H₁ is not supported. Support for H₂ is furnished by the statistics in row 2 of Table 2, which show that achievement vanity has a significant and positive impact on idol attachment. In other words, concern with achievement play a crucial and dominant role in the generation of idol attachment while physical appearance does not.

As predicted, the level of variety seeking is negatively related to the strength of idol attachment. This finding provides support for H₃. In other words, respondents who

desire to switch music artist would weaken their attachment focus on a favourite idol. Likewise, the statistics in row 4 demonstrate that peer norms for respondents have a significant positive impact on idol attachment. Thus, H₄ is supported. In other words, the respondents' beliefs in gaining approval and support from peers play a crucial and dominant role in the emotional bond to a favourite idol. Moreover, the corresponding statistics in row 5 show that idol attachment has a significant and positive impact on human brand loyalty. Thus, the strength of idol attachment displayed by respondents was a significant factor in their brand loyalty towards musical idols. Therefore, H₅ is supported.

Discussion

The testing of five specific hypotheses, except for H₁, mostly confirmed the expectations and provided several insights into the applicability of the idol attachment model of human brand loyalty behaviour. It was found that achievement vanity was positively related to consumers' idol attachment towards their favourite idols. This suggests that a high level of achievement vanity in young people played a significant role in idol attachment. However, it was also found that among young people physical vanity was not positively related to idol attachment.

The OSL theory predicts that the effect of variety seeking is to weaken idol attachment in young people who attempt to increase stimulation by switching to something different or novel in the choice of idol brand. This finding supports the theoretical framework and suggests that young people would adopt exploratory variety seeking behaviours on music artists and this acts as a catalyst assisting in their decision regarding idol attachment.

Peer norms were found to be the significant antecedent of idol attachment. Drawing on the extant literature on the theory of attachment and norms, the theoretical framework developed showed the underlying reasons why perceived peer norms were considered as obtaining approval and support from their peer group. This normative influence enhanced idol attachment for the two groups of young people.

Based on attachment theory, the study found the positive effect of idol attachment on young people's human brand loyalty. Moreover, the path relationship of idol attachment between its antecedents and human brand loyalty was found not to differ between Australia and Taiwan (see Table 2). This suggests that the cultural differences of idol attachment may not be significant because idol attachment has become increasingly common among young people around the world.

STUDY 2: THE MODERATING EFFECT OF IDOL ATTRACTIVENESS

Past research studies have shown that idols' distinctive features such as physical appearance and achievements are often recognised and appreciated by their worshippers (Lin and Lin, 2007; Raviv *et al.*, 1996). Drawing on such prior studies, we suspect that the lack of a moderator like idol attractiveness was one of the reasons that H₁ was not supported in study 1. As outlined in H₁ and H₂, vain individuals increase idol attachment because people seek to get close to their ideal self-concept in order to decrease their attachment anxiety. This may be explained by the individuation theory in which fulfilment of a developmental need for identification and intimacy is essential for positive self-development during adolescence (Grotevant and Cooper, 1986). Idol worship which is crucial to the formation of self-identity implies that feeling close to idols encourages young people to seek information or distinctive features about their idols which they are attracted to, as well as to prepare them for adulthood (Erikson, 1968). Higher level of idol attractiveness is likely to result in higher level of young people's self-concept or attachment anxiety. This, in turn, would encourage young

people to seek to get close to their idol in order to achieve self-congruity or decrease their attachment anxiety. Thus, building on the findings from study 1, the second study investigates whether idol attractiveness is likely to positively moderate the relationship between vanity traits and attachment. Thus:

H_{6a}: The appearance dimension of idol attractiveness strengthens the relationship between physical vanity traits and idol attachment.

H_{6b}: The achievement dimension of idol attractiveness strengthens the relationship between achievement vanity traits and idol attachment.

Design and Participants

A 2(physical vanity: high versus low)×2(achievement vanity: high versus low) between-subjects experiment was employed in this study. One hundred and eighty university students participated in this study (average age was 21 years, and 54% were women).

Pretest

A pretest (n=35) was conducted to select an appearance-related idol and an achievement-related idol for inclusion in videos. Digitally modified versions of one-minute clips of ten well-known Taiwanese pop music videos were shown to respondents in a digital classroom. These one-minute clipped videos featured tunes, lyrics, song titles, and artist names to help respondents identify appearance, sound, and motion of each singer. Each respondent viewed videos with evaluating singers in attractiveness attributes based on scales adapted by Raviv *et al.* (1996) (“Causes for idolization”) and Lin and Lin (2007) (“Reasons for Idolization”). Based on the results of the pretest, the appearance-related idol selected for study 2 was a female singer (i.e., good-looking and body shape) and achievement-related idol was a male singer (i.e., voice/singing skills, talents, and fame), and they were rated as low (M=3.43) and high (M=5.89) in the appearance dimension, respectively (t=8.399, p<.001). With regard to the idol’s achievement dimension, the male singer was rated high (M=6.02) and female singer was rated low (M=3.64); this difference was also significant (t=7.872, p<.001).

Measures

Consistent with Study 1, idol attachment (Cronbach alpha=0.90) was measured as the dependent measure, and the same four items were used to measure the construct. In addition, two independent variables, physical vanity (alpha=0.87) and achievement vanity (alpha=0.81) were included. Both Studies 1 and 2 employed the same two variables in which the measures were developed by Netemeyer *et al.* (1995).

Procedure

Half of the sampled students were randomly assigned to view the first video for one minute while the remaining half watched the second video. They were provided with a self-administered questionnaire and were informed that they would view a video for an upcoming famous singer and would be asked for their overall impressions about the singer. While viewing the full-screen video, respondents completed the questionnaire containing items measuring independent and dependent variables and demographic characteristics.

Results

The responses from the vanity scales were rank ordered and divided into low and high groups, using the scale midpoint (i.e., rated 4.0 in the seven-point scale). After dividing the sample using physical vanity scores, low physical vanity respondents rated an

average of 3.45 (n=79) and high physical vanity respondents rated 5.54 (n=101) in the seven-point scale (ranging from 1 to 7). Similarly, average figures for achievement vanity were rated 3.11 (n=93) and 5.19 (n=87) respectively. H_{6a} would be supported if respondents with high physical vanity generated more attachment than those with low physical vanity, after viewing the “appearance attractiveness” video. H_{6b} would be supported if respondents with high achievement vanity generated more attachment than those with low achievement vanity, after viewing the “achievement attractiveness” video. As expected, there was a significant interaction effect between the appearance dimension of idol attractiveness and physical vanity on idol attachment ($F(1,176)=4.89, p<0.05$). There was also a significant interaction effect between the achievement dimension of idol attractiveness and achievement vanity on idol attachment ($F(1,176)=6.07, p<0.01$). There was a significant main effect of the achievement dimension of idol attractiveness on idol attachment ($F(1,176)=14.66, p<0.01$). However, there was no significant main effect of the appearance dimension of idol attractiveness on idol attachment ($F(1,176)=2.99, p>0.05$). Follow-up contrasts showed that in the low vanity condition, the effects of idol attractiveness was not significant (for the appearance dimension, $M_{\text{no attract}}=3.98$ vs. $M_{\text{attract}}=3.85, p>0.05$; for the achievement dimension, $M_{\text{no attract}}=3.60$ vs. $M_{\text{attract}}=3.91, p>0.05$). However, the effects of idol attractiveness was significant in the high vanity condition (for the appearance dimension, $M_{\text{no attract}}=3.90$ vs. $M_{\text{attract}}=4.90, p<0.05$; for the achievement dimension, $M_{\text{no attract}}=3.65$ vs. $M_{\text{attract}}=5.11, p<0.01$). Table 3 presents the cell means. As can be seen from Table 3, while the idol attachment means were generally greater for the attractiveness sub-groups, the differences were of even greater magnitude within the high vanity group. This indicated that there was a significant interaction effect between attractiveness and vanity on idol attachment and thus, both H_{6a} and H_{6b} were supported.

~~~~Insert Table 3 here ~~~~

### *Discussion*

Study 2 extended the findings of Study 1 by examining the idol attractiveness as an important moderator between vanity traits and human brand attachment. The results of main and interaction effects shown in Table 3 revealed that when the level of idol attractiveness is high, young people are more likely to regard idols as their point of reference for self-concept, and in turn they are likely to feel a higher level of ideal selfconcept or attachment anxiety with their favourite idol. This suggests that young people are likely to be elevated to model or act like their idols, leading to a stronger relationship between vanity traits and idol attachment.

## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

### *Summary and conclusions*

The key contribution of this research is that it applies the established theory of idol attachment and examines how it behaves in an under-researched empirical context. This is carried out by modelling its antecedents and moderators as well as assessing its influence on human brand loyalty. While prior studies have focused on the attachment between consumers and product brands (e.g., Malar *et al.*, 2011; Park *et al.*, 2010; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2009), this research is the first one to show that the effects of human brand attachment are influenced by human needs, and whether consumers are attracted on the appearance and achievement of idols. Drawing on attachment and selfdetermination theories, Study 1 integrated the extant human brand attachment literature and developed a theoretical framework that shows how and why human

needs proxies enhance idol attachment strength as well as their impacts on idol worship and human brand loyalty, which are the focus of brand attachment theorists (Park *et al.*, 2010; Thomson, 2006). The results of Study 1 add credence to previous findings that idol attachment derived from various human needs engenders human brand loyalty. The moderating effects of idol attachment on the relationship between its antecedents and human brand loyalty, except for physical vanity, appear to be worth noting, despite the fact that the previous literature has not indicated the relationship clearly. This implies that idol attachment results in an intention towards human brand loyalty, probably due to a higher level of ideal self-concept or attachment anxiety, and that the eventual outcome will be continuous loyalty to idols.

Study 2 extended the empirical findings from H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>. The results of H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub> have found that achievement vanity generated more idol attachment than physical vanity. Findings from Study 2 have found that idol attractiveness could enhance the effects of vanity traits on idol attachment. In other words, young people with high level of physical vanity and strong idol attachment could be influenced by appearance attractiveness of idol, when physical vanity alone did not have significant impact on idol attachment. Fantastic idols that are present in a consumer's mind can be realised from modelling idols' appearance and talents, and this sparks the desire to achieve the beauty and fame that the idols possess. The moderating effect of idol attractiveness on the relationship between vanity and attachment suggests that positive emotional bonds and attitudes can be enhanced by manifesting idols' attractiveness.

#### *Marketing implications*

A stronger human brand can be created by enticing young people to generate interest in their personal concern on appearances and achievements and by enhancing young people's attractiveness to idol's appearances and achievements. It is likely that young people have high aspirations to achieve their idols' success – a success that was once unattainable in their status since idol attachment is positively influenced by achievement vanity. The findings show that there are moderating circumstances in which music marketers could emphasise vanity traits relating to physical attractiveness of the idols. The perspectives these young people see today in the media (e.g., American Idol or MTV channels) and Internet provide them with goals and a platform on which to emulate the beauty and success of their idols. These images may encourage them to express their identities through eye-catching appearance and various achievements. For example, virtual chat rooms for their music idols/artists can be set up by music companies so that their fans can interact and discuss with their idols about their achievements and other topics (particularly those on style and fashion) in a much more personal and friendly environment. Thus, the media and Internet can create news and reports on idols' personality and physical traits such as dress style, body shape, and talents in order to attract young people's admiration as well as to regard them as role models.

Music marketers should also pay more attention to the ways of lessening the variety seeking impact and not focusing only in enhancing idol attractiveness to vain consumers. Variety seeking behaviour of consumers might be stimulated by boredom. Music marketers can increase their customer base and at the same time, reduce boredom by, for example, offering some alterations in appearance or achievement of their idols as well as by providing various dress and performing styles or expanding idol's career to other fields, such as movie and TV program. Furthermore, music marketers can develop apps for smart phones so that young consumers can enhance and personalise their music to suit their music experience and lifestyle needs and to avoid boredom (e.g., to maintain that OSL in order to obtain the highest level of psychological pleasantness).

It is clear from the findings that idol attachment is positively influenced by peer norms.

From the music marketer's perspective, building a good brand image of the idol through advertising and promotion strategies, such as being a spokesperson for a brand or product that is congruent with the image of the idol or serving as a role model, could profitably assist in persuading and motivating peer referents to accept their idols (e.g., Bruno Mars or Taylor Swift). Through the participation of the online communities (i.e., Facebook, Flickr, YouTube) or other promotional events, this type of young consumers are likely to form a sense of identity from being a member of the idol fan group. Furthermore, a closer idol-consumer relationship can also be expanded to other offline activities such as organising concerts and running charity events by both the idols (giving away some free music and time) and the young consumers (providing ideas and support). Young consumers are aware of peer norms and naturally want to increase their attachment towards human brands that do not openly violate those norms. From a managerial point of view, this finding is important because it demonstrates that music marketing strategies can be implemented selectively. The study also shows that a positive relationship exists between idol attachment and human brand loyalty. Music marketing strategists should identify market segments containing probable worshippers in order to target them with communication strategies that generate the image of the music artists and that of their talents and distinctive features to foster variety further.

#### *Limitations and future directions*

These findings suggest that idol attachment is more complex than previously understood. The constructs chosen in this research represent an initial step in developing a coherent conceptual framework, but this is only a snapshot of a potentially larger area to study. A review of the relevant literature showed other variables such as liking, involvement, affective commitment, and brand love that may need to be taken into account. These character traits would be expected to influence brand decisions, and future research models should therefore include such variables. Variety seeking, peer norms, and vanity traits have been used as the proxy measures of the three psychological needs which may enhance an individual's idol attachment in this study. Future studies could use other constructs (e.g., religiosity, self-esteem) as the proxy measures of general needs to examine their relationships with idol attachment as well as their impacts on human brand loyalty. In addition, this study has not established unequivocally that variety seeking, peer norms, and vanity traits are indeed antecedents or moderators of idol attachment as opposed to being simply correlates. For example, it is possible that owning plenty of music products of an idol might reinforce the worship of the idol, as other authors have suggested. The model tacitly assumed antecedent relationships and demonstrated the links fairly convincingly. More research is warranted to establish whether these constructs actually result in idol attachment. A mixed factor design experiment with factors (e.g., involvement) manipulated between subjects can be used to examine the likely causal direction.

Furthermore, the measurement items used for the human brand loyalty in this study refer only to intentions to purchase. However, a fan is more likely to read about the idol and think about the idol, but not necessarily make purchases based on their idol. Finally, as in most studies, the findings of the study are derived from non-probability samples, which raise the issue of potential selection bias. While various tests have shown that the profile of the eventual respondents is not significantly different from those of the national population statistics, it is not certain that some sections of the

Australian and Taiwanese consumer population were not accidentally excluded from the sample, since the selection was not absolutely uniform. Future studies would benefit from inclusion of more independent variables and a wider geographical scope.

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Figure 1.

Research Framework

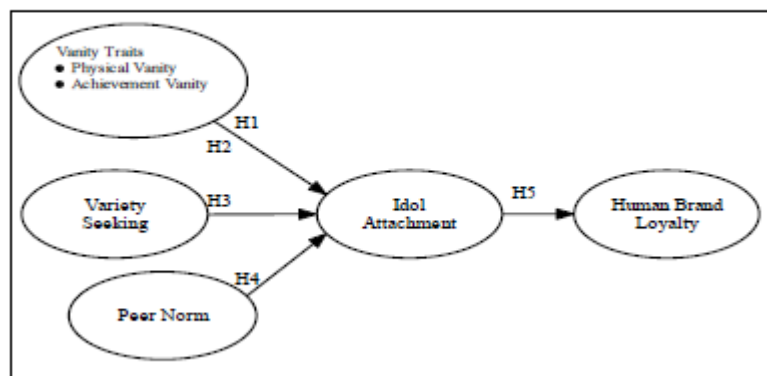


Table 1.  
Descriptive statistics: reliability, validity, and correlation coefficients

|                           | Mean | S.D. | $\alpha^a$ | CR <sup>b</sup> | AVE <sup>c</sup> | V1    | V2   | V3    | V4    | V5    | V6   | $\alpha$ | CR  | AVE | Mean | S.D. |
|---------------------------|------|------|------------|-----------------|------------------|-------|------|-------|-------|-------|------|----------|-----|-----|------|------|
| <b>Australia (N=1135)</b> |      |      |            |                 |                  |       |      |       |       |       |      |          |     |     |      |      |
| V1 Physical Vanity        | 4.91 | 1.21 | .88        | .88             | .65              |       | .46* | -.29* | .24*  | .26*  | .16* | .88      | .83 | .55 | 4.72 | 1.16 |
| V2 Achievement Vanity     | 4.42 | 1.20 | .80        | .88             | .66              | .34*  |      | -.66* | .40*  | .50*  | .36* | .80      | .79 | .54 | 4.67 | 1.10 |
| V3 Variety                | 3.55 | 1.32 | .89        | .89             | .57              | -.24* |      | -.64* | -.41* | -.51* | -.45 | .92      | .91 | .63 | 3.13 | 1.26 |
| V4 Norm                   | 4.39 | 1.42 | .93        | .94             | .83              | .12*  | .40* |       | -.44* | .31*  | .29* | .93      | .93 | .82 | 4.82 | 1.25 |
| V5 Idol Attachment        | 3.66 | 1.58 | .89        | .88             | .64              | .16*  | .47* | -.49* |       | .33*  | .35* | .92      | .91 | .71 | 3.27 | 1.52 |
| V6 Loyalty                | 4.32 | 1.56 | .86        | .80             | .66              | .19*  | .38* | -.36* | .26*  |       | .22* | .93      | .91 | .83 | 4.19 | 2.10 |

Notes:

\* =  $p < .05$

<sup>a</sup> Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

<sup>b</sup> Composite Reliability.

<sup>c</sup> Average Variance Extracted.

<sup>d</sup> Values for Taiwan are shown in italics.

**Table 2.**

**Structural parameter estimates and goodness-of-fit indices for the model**

| Paths                                             | Hypotheses            | Estimate    |        | S.E.       |      | t-value |       |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|--------|------------|------|---------|-------|
|                                                   |                       | Aus         | Twn    | Aus        | Twn  | Aus     | Twn   |
| Physical Vanity → Idol Attachment                 | H <sub>1</sub>        | 0.01        | 0.08   | 0.03       | 0.05 | 0.25    | 1.73  |
| Achievement Vanity → Idol Attachment              | H <sub>2</sub>        | 0.31*       | 0.17*  | 0.10       | 0.07 | 2.76    | 3.11  |
| Variety → Idol Attachment                         | H <sub>3</sub>        | -0.26*      | -0.60* | 0.10       | 0.06 | -2.64   | -9.41 |
| Peer Norms → Idol Attachment                      | H <sub>4</sub>        | 0.15*       | 0.21*  | 0.03       | 0.04 | 4.43    | 4.48  |
| Idol Attachment → Loyalty                         | H <sub>5</sub>        | 0.34*       | 0.54*  | 0.04       | 0.10 | 8.02    | 10.08 |
| <b>Goodness-of-fit indices</b>                    |                       |             |        |            |      |         |       |
| <i>Australia (N=1135)</i>                         |                       |             |        |            |      |         |       |
| $\chi^2$ (190 d.f.)=484.267, $\chi^2$ /d.f.=2.549 | <i>p</i> -value=0.000 | RMSEA=0.037 |        | NFI=0.987  |      |         |       |
| Standardized RMR=0.057                            | CFI=0.992             | GFI=0.966   |        | AGFI=0.946 |      |         |       |
| <i>Taiwan (N=736)</i>                             |                       |             |        |            |      |         |       |
| $\chi^2$ (181 d.f.)=490.976, $\chi^2$ /d.f.=2.713 | <i>p</i> -value=0.000 | RMSEA=0.048 |        | NFI=0.984  |      |         |       |
| Standardized RMR=0.067                            | CFI=0.990             | GFI=0.947   |        | AGFI=0.913 |      |         |       |

Notes:

All the estimates are standardized.

\* = *p* < 0.05.

**Table 3.**

**Study 2 cell means and standard deviations**

| Dependent variable                          | Low vanity         |                    | High vanity        |                    |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                                             | No attractiveness  | Attractiveness     | No attractiveness  | Attractiveness     |
| Attachment (for appearance attractiveness)  | 3.98<br>(40, 1.98) | 3.85<br>(61, 1.69) | 3.90<br>(50, 1.45) | 4.90<br>(29, 1.23) |
| Attachment (for achievement attractiveness) | 3.60<br>(47, 1.61) | 3.91<br>(46, 1.67) | 3.65<br>(43, 1.59) | 5.11<br>(44, 1.33) |

Notes:

Number of samples and standard deviations are in parentheses.