

CORVINUS UNIVERSITY OF BUDAPEST
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

**THE ROLE OF ATTACHMENT IN THE SWITCHING DYNAMICS OF
LIQUID CONSUMPTION**

Thesis Booklet

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RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This dissertation examines how consumers' feelings of attachment and psychological ownership impacts their switching behavior in the fast-paced digitalized world. Digitalization is an organic part of consumers' lives and infuses their daily routine. Many of us start the day by scrolling through digital content on Instagram, checking the weather forecast right before getting out of bed. One uses a digital app to unlock a shared bike going to work. Others work simultaneously with the colleagues on a cloud server, order meals on the Foodora platform for the lunch break, book some tickets online for our weekend program with friends, and watch Netflix before sleeping after a busy day. By providing access almost to any good and service regardless of space or time, digitalization has left its imprint on consumers: consumers seem conditioned to get whatever, whenever and wherever their actual preference demands. Preferably immediately.

Digitalization has changed the consumption landscape. It has transformed supply by easing market entry practically for everybody (see prosumers' appearance) and resulted in the proliferation of competition. Alternatives come and go in one click, as consumers have a low switching cost and an infinite number of choices to satisfy their needs. Decisions have never before been so easy to change and lasted so short-term. These circumstances led to liquid consumption, an ephemeral, dematerialized and access-based form of consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), where consumers' relationships to possession have liquefied, attachment has weakened and temporary access over possession gained ground.

Literature suggests that the relationship between consumers and alternatives has become loose and lacks the feeling of attachment, or even ownership (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). But are consumers really not attached to their favorite video-on-demand service, where the library is tailored to our preferences? Do they really not feel their profile as their own possession? Is their dampening indeed linked to the emergence of liquid consumption and the acceleration of switching? This dissertation suggests that consumers still feel attachment and ownership over digital services. Thus, attachment does not hinder consumers from switching, while psychological ownership significantly impacts their switching behavior.

Research Phenomenon: Attachment in Liquid Consumption

Attachment, meaning an enduring psychological connectedness between a person and another person or object (Bowlby, 1969), is perhaps the most researched area of human patterns across disciplines. It may be because attachment has biological roots, and represents a social necessity, which infuses people's lives. Its importance is also reflected in consumer studies. As Belk (1988, p.139) puts it: "We cannot hope to understand consumer behavior without first gaining some understanding of the meanings that consumers attach to possessions.". While Belk (1988) linked attachment with possessions, consumer studies have also examined attachment in the abstract self-brand connection (Escalas, 2004; Thomson et al., 2005). In the last two decades, literature on consumer attachment has been extended to a wide and dense range of theoretical applications, context, antecedents and outcomes proving its relevance in consumer behavior. While in recent papers, voices are amplifying that consumers' attachment weakens in this accelerated, liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), and it is even more true for liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017).

Liquid consumption is one of the latest arising phenomena in consumer culture theories describing consumers' loosening relationships towards possession and its impact on consumption. Bardhi & Eckhardt (2017) define liquid consumption as an ephemeral, access-based and dematerialized form of consumption which reflects consumers' flexibility, detachment and mobility. Liquid consumption, first, was best studied and easy to conceptualize in the context of global mobility, digital and access-based consumption where relationships towards possessions dissolve, liquefy and consumers have low attachment towards tangible and intangible objects (Bardhi et al., 2012). And so, the most relevant liquid consumption studies focus on consumer segments of cosmopolitans, ex-patriots, digital nomads or refugees (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021; Bardhi et al., 2012; Hokkinen, 2023). Thus, mobility, flexibility and digital and access-based consumption have conquered several more consumer segments of diverse lifestyles and social classes (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019) involving diverse product categories, from tattoos to clothing (Rosenberg et al., 2023; Steadman et al., 2023).

This thesis aims to explore whether attachment, our innate and survival pattern, is really fading out of our relationships towards digital goods, services and brands; and what role attachment plays in the accelerated, ever-switching consumption choices. To do this, first I look at societal circumstances, and start investigations on the perspective of consumer culture and its emerging phenomena of liquid consumption. This thesis aims to explore whether

attachment, our innate and survival pattern, is really fading out of our relationships towards digital goods, services and brands. To do this, first I take societal circumstances under scrutiny, and start investigations on contemporary consumer culture and its emerging phenomena of liquid consumption.

Consumers' detachment in liquid consumption enhances a more frequent and fast-paced switching enabled by the low switching cost and the expanding availability of digital and other access-based objects (Kisfürjesi & Hofmeister-Tóth, 2022). This switching behavior is cited as a common fact in recent literature thus, it might require clarification in frequency and what fast-paced means. Similarly, low level of attachment is also an elusive definition. Attachment is strongly related to the perception of ownership (Morewedge et al., 2020), which is considered the critical distinguishing feature between liquid and solid consumption. Researchers argue that attachment is decreasing or lacking in liquid consumption. Thus, consumers can develop attachment towards digital objects (Koles & Nagy, 2021), and access-based and intangible objects can replace consumers' sense of ownership arising psychological ownership similar to real possession (Morewedge et al., 2020). Literature also describes attachment as an underlying process of psychological ownership (Morewedge et al., 2020). In this regard, attachment might have similar strength in liquid consumption as solid one despite the detachment characteristics of this novel consumption form. Based on these insights I formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: how has consumer attachment adjusted in the changing consumer culture in the solid-liquid continuum?

RQ2: what is the relationship of attachment with the dynamized switching behavior fueled by liquid consumption like?

In sum, the subject of my investigation is the presence and the role of attachment in switching intention when consumers consume in a liquid way. This thesis addresses a gap in "understanding of the meanings that consumers attach to possessions" Belk (1988, p.139) by investigating attachment towards intangible, non-owned goods consumed ephemerally. In this way, my thesis contributes to consumer attachment literature revising attachment through the lens of liquid consumption, an emerging consumer cultural phenomenon.

METHODOLOGY

This dissertation intends to contribute to existing consumer behavior theories by extending them both on conceptual and empirical levels. For this, a mixed-methods design will be applied: I used two qualitative methods, phenomenology and in-depth interviews, and quantitative PLS-SEM modelling method. This design corresponds to the explorative and explanatory nature of my research questions (Table 1).

1. Table: Summary of research questions

Exploratory phase		Explanatory phase	
RQ1: how has consumer attachment adjusted in the changing consumer culture in the solid-liquid continuum?		RQ2: what is the relationship of attachment with the dynamized switching behavior fueled by liquid consumption like?	
Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
<p>RQ1a: How do consumers perceive the emerging phenomenon of liquid consumption?</p>	<p>RQ1b: How is the cultural phenomenon of liquid consumption reflected in daily consumer behavior?</p> <p>RQ1c: How do consumers navigate on the solid-liquid continuum in their daily life?</p>	<p>RQ2a: How does psychological ownership relate to monogamous loyalty in on-demand and highly personalized hedonic digital services?</p> <p>RQ2b: How does psychological ownership impact the perceived attractiveness of alternatives in the competitive market of hedonic digital services?</p> <p>RQ2c: What is the relationship between monogamous loyalty and perceived control, the key factor of psychological ownership, in algorithm-based, customized hedonic digital services?</p>	<p>RQ2d: How does attachment relate to the different switching intentions in the liquid consumption of video-on-demand services?</p> <p>RQ2e: How does psychological ownership relate to the different switching intentions in the liquid consumption of video-on-demand services?</p> <p>RQ2f: What is the relationship between attachment and attractiveness of alternatives and overall satisfaction, as antecedents of the different switching intentions on the highly competitive video-on-demand market?</p>

Source: own elaboration

First, a solid understanding of theories is needed to be able to revise and amend them by using other theories as well. In this phase, I use theory adaptation as a conceptual method (Jaakkola,

2020). Theory adaptation includes the shift of perspective, where the starting point is the problematization of the theory or concept. For this, I used a literature review, already embedded in Chapter 2. Theoretical Background based on which I extended the concept of liquid consumption to cases of ownership-based consumption, arguing with the fast-paced change of consumer preferences and needs observed in the case of solid consumption as well (for example, the success of easy-to-change IKEA furniture or enhanced upgrading of IT devices). The literature review led to the idea of using liquid consumption theory as a domain theory, as a substantive topic area and switching behavior theories as method theories to bring new insights into the domain theory, to provide an alternative frame and to shift the level of analysis from macro- (consumer culture) to micro level (consumer decision-making) (Jaakkola, 2020; Lukka & Vinnari, 2014).

Second, theory adaptation is backed up with four empirical studies. These four studies explore the role of consumer attachment in the dynamized switching behavior in liquid consumption (Table 2). Study 1 used a phenomenological analysis of 6 semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore how consumers perceive and practice liquid consumption. This empirical research delivered deeper insights into how consumers find the place of solid and liquid alternatives in their daily life and guided my attention towards alterations in switching behavior. Study 1 revealed a strong affection from consumers' side towards their liquid alternatives, which challenged or even contradicted some of my conceptual proposals based on the literature review. This knowledge gap led me to focus on the role of attachment in the following empirical research. Study 2 showed a deeper understanding of consumers' liquid switching behavior and which part of the process consumer attachment links to through findings of 23 semi-structured in-depth interviews. Study 3 measured the role of psychological ownership in switching intention and served as a pilot to test scales for future research with PLS-SEM. In this research, I have validated the presence of attachment in liquid consumption through statistical methods first. Study 4 operationalized the role of attachment in liquid switching with PLS-SEM. These enabled me to examine how consumer attachment adjusted in the changing environment of consumer culture in the solid-liquid continuum and what the relationship of attachment with the dynamized switching behavior fueled by liquid consumption is like.

2. Table: Overview of studies

Study	Research Objective	Methodology	Key Findings
Study 1	Explore consumers' perception of liquid consumption	Phenomenology (n=6)	Liquid consumption is perceived as a repetitive on-demand consumption of access-based (not-owned) goods and services which prompts different consumer behavior from the one in solid (ownership-based) consumption.
Study 2	Explore how consumers navigate on the solid-liquid continuum in daily consumption	In-depth interview (n=23)	Liquid switching, as a continuously renewing switching cycle, is conceptualized and differentiated from complete and partial switching.
Study 3	Explain the role of psychological ownership in loyalty	Online questionnaire (n=248)	Psychological ownership and perceived control influence positively monogamous loyalty in liquid consumption.
Study 4	Explain the role of psychological ownership and attachment in switching intention	Online questionnaire (n=311)	Switching intention in liquid consumption is impacted by consumers' psychological ownership and not impacted by attachment.

Source: own elaboration

RESULTS

This thesis work aimed to examine the role of consumer attachment in the switching dynamics in liquid consumption and contribute to switching behavior theories within consumer behavior theories. While the concept of liquid consumption has gained increasing attention in consumer culture theory, empirical studies remain scarce. This dissertation extends the application of liquid consumption theory to a previously unexamined territory of switching behavior and contributes to the academic discourse and the understanding of contemporary consumer behavior by offering novel insights into cultural, social, and economic dimensions. Furthermore, this thesis work has facilitated the introduction and academic integration of liquid consumption theory within the Hungarian academic landscape.

Besides its novelty in the Hungarian academic field, the theoretical implications of presented empirical studies support some past studies and introduce new perspectives to the

literature on switching intention through the lens of psychological ownership theory and attachment theory. The presented four studies add to the global academic literature one by one whose theoretical contributions are introduced as follows.

Perception of Ownership Results in Consumer Behavior Differences

Study 1 confirms prior research studies about how consumers' relationships have loosened and how liquid and solid consumption coexist in consumers' lives (Bardhi et al., 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). This phenomenology study revealed that respondents have a different attitude and behaviour towards solid and liquid alternatives during consumption. This difference is routed, in line with literature, mainly in the question of ownership, thus, this study revealed a differentiation in feelings as well. While there is a fundamentally negative attitude towards ownership (overconsumption, resource consumption), access-based consumption is surrounded by positive emotions both about the model principle (resource sharing, recycling) and its use, consumer experience (customisable, individualised). The group of access-based consumption situations is most often defined as shared, mutual consumption, and described as a more modern, sustainable, environmentally friendly alternative to traditional consumption.

Due to the positive emotions about access-based consumption, there is a remarkable consumer attachment to access-based platforms or providers. Although liquid consumers are tied to fewer objects, there may be a greater attachment to objects that provide access or liquidity (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). This research finds that liquid consumption is considered as a smart decision, which consumers are proud of, and nurture positive emotions towards certain service providers. Exclusive brand preference has also emerged. In this case, the material objects have an emotional surplus, gaining a privileged role in consumers' lives by possessing them.

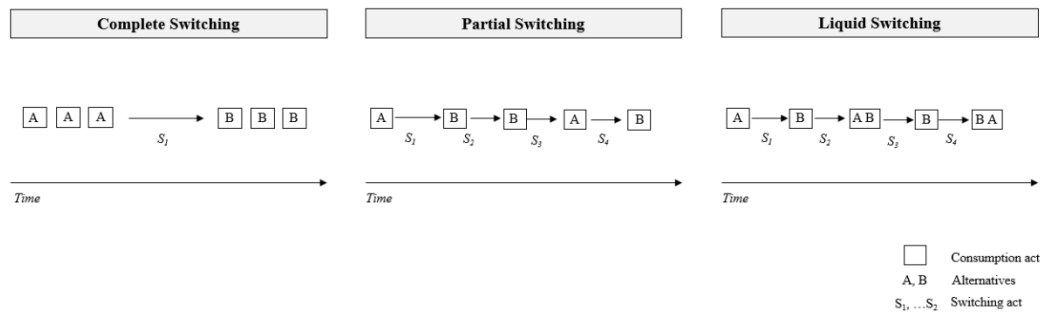
The positive attitude towards access-based services and the high level of parallel and combined usage of solid and liquid consumption might forecast a further increase in liquid consumption.

Conceptualization of Dynamized Switching Behavior in Liquid Consumption

Study 2 findings led to conceptualizing dynamized switching behavior in liquid consumption and introduced the notion of liquid switching beside complete and partial switching (Figure 1). With this, Study 2 presents three updates on switching behavior theories. First, motivations behind switching prioritize on-demand needs and situational value over dissatisfaction and novelty seeking. Dissatisfaction and novelty seeking don't necessarily lead to discontinuation but give more space to another alternative within a consumer's set. The attraction of novelties can divert consumers from their loved service provider, but this diversion might be periodical and does not entail the cancellation of their subscription. Second, liquid switching is not limited to liquid goods. It accelerates the switching of solid alternatives in terms of their temporary substitution with liquid alternatives. Third, liquid switching is noticeably linked to ephemerality of liquid consumption, thus it is essential to understand their ephemeral nature. Long-term commitment and loyalty are detectable towards access-based services and manifested in long-term or permanent subscriptions. However, they are vulnerable to the constant lure of other attractive alternatives. Liquid switching allows consumers to swing back and forth among alternatives in a consideration set and ephemerality refers to the length of consumption act instead of commitment (Table 2).

Findings also add to the liquid consumption theory by incorporating consumers' general attitudes towards mobility through their liquified switching behavior. From a materialistic point of view, liquid consumption is defined as a non-materialistic style of consumption where acquisition is not a priority (Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021). Thus, owning a wide set of solid and liquid alternatives available is a priority for consumers. Liquid consumption is characterized by a liquid switching behavior, and in this sense, liquid consumption represents consumers' attitudes towards goods and services, where mobility and temporality are the key features and liquid consumption appear in solid goods as well. This finding answers on the first research question about how consumer attachment adjusted in the changing consumer culture in the solid-liquid continuum.

1. Figure: Visualization of switching types



Source: own elaboration

3. Table: Comparison of switching types described in the interviews

Classification of characteristics	Switching type		
	Complete	Partial	Liquid
<i>Motivation</i>	Dissatisfaction, novelty seeking	Mobility, flexibility, on-demand needs, sense of control	Mobility, flexibility, on-demand needs, sense of control
<i>Relationship among alternatives</i>	Exclusivity of one alternative for one need	Cross-consumption of alternatives for one need	Cross- or Complementary consumption of alternatives for one need
<i>Consumer relationship</i>	Relatively high commitment towards goods or service providers	Relatively low commitment towards goods or service providers	Relatively or explicitly low commitment towards goods or service providers
<i>The set of alternatives</i>	Fixed, one alternative in, one alternative out	Can expand after consumers' careful consideration (based on financial or hedonistic motives, like e.g., convenience, pleasure etc.)	Can expand after consumers' careful consideration (based on financial or hedonistic motives, like e.g., convenience, pleasure etc.)
<i>Impact on business</i>	Lost consumers of discontinued service Gained consumers of new service	Decrease or increase in buying frequency Decrease or increase in volume per consumption act	Decrease or increase in buying frequency Decrease or increase in volume per consumption act
<i>Time features of switching</i>	Switching is a one-off, permanent or temporary act.	Switching is a repetitive, temporary and periodical act.	Switching is a repetitive, ephemeral and periodical act.

Source: own elaboration

The Role of Psychological Ownership in Monogamous Loyalty

Monogamous loyalty and its pursuit are a less studied area in academic research, especially in the context of highly competitive hedonic digital services. Study 3 findings extend loyalty literature on its finite area of monogamous loyalty with three key contributions.

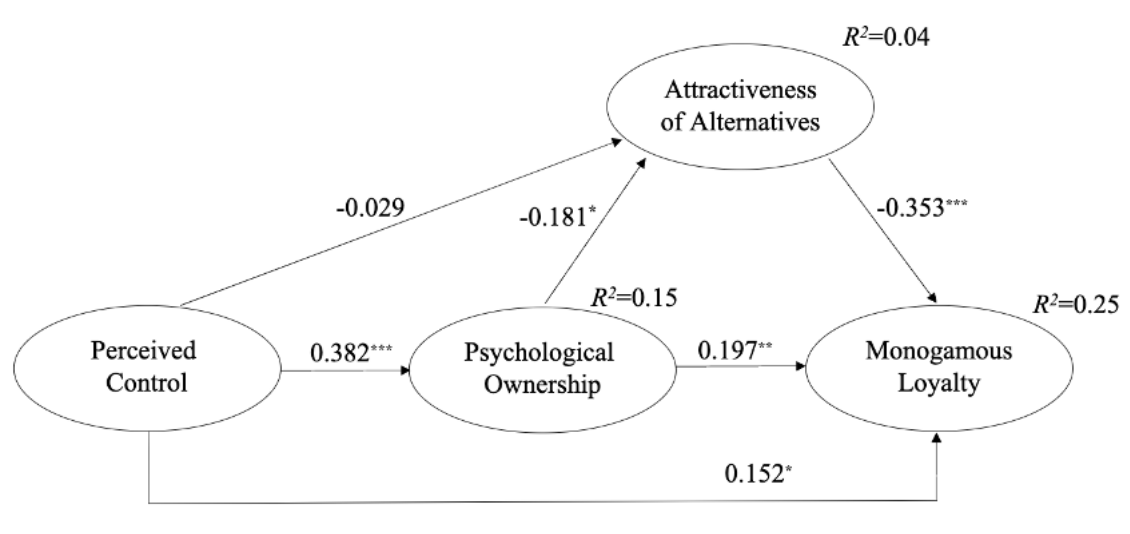
First, Study 3 findings contribute to psychological ownership theory by empirically proving its positive relation to monogamous loyalty. Previous studies proved the positive impact of control on loyalty but not on monogamy (Joosten et al., 2016; Namasivayam, 2005; Namasivayam & Hinkin, 2003; Namasivayam & Mount, 2006). Psychological ownership is of particular importance as it directly affects monogamous loyalty and can reduce the impact of the attractiveness of alternatives. These findings answer our research questions one and two. The impact of psychological ownership on the perception of alternatives is important since we also confirm Ryu et al. (2023) suggestion that attractive alternatives divert consumers from their favorite service provider. Our finding, in line with previous studies, proves the weakening mediating effect of the attractiveness of alternatives on loyalty. Thus, we suggest that psychological ownership can keep consumers in a monogamous, loyal relationship with their favorite hedonic service provider even in a tempting environment of attractive alternatives. The relationship between psychological ownership and the attractiveness of alternatives in digital services, to the best knowledge of the authors, has not been described yet. Similarly, the positive impact of psychological ownership on monogamous loyalty in digital services has not been examined previously.

Second, monogamous loyalty improves as the result of perceived control, the key factor of psychological ownership, in algorithm-based, customized hedonic digital services. Perceived control has a positive effect on consumers' sense of psychological ownership. It means, the more a user feels having control over service, the more he feels it "his own". Although perceived control cannot reduce the impact of alternatives' attractiveness directly, it can do it through psychological ownership. This model validates that perceived control in mediation through psychological ownership negatively impacts the attractiveness of other alternatives. Reaching psychological ownership through perceived control is empirically proven (Danckwerts et al., 2019; Danckwerts & Kenning, 2019). Thus, the role of perceived control in reducing the temptation of competitors, especially in the highly competitive market of hedonic digital services, hasn't been examined yet. As psychological ownership is a domain of increasing research interest in digital and experiential consumption, our study contributes to the theory by empirically proving the positive impact of perceived control on the sense of

psychological ownership and highlighting the relation between perceived control and the attractiveness of alternatives in the context of hedonic digital services.

In sum, Study 3 empirically proves that consumers' perceived control in hedonic digital services positively impacts monogamous loyalty in the tempting environment of attractive alternatives. With this finding, this study extends the literature on monogamous loyalty, which is an unfairly disregarded domain in behavioral research.

2. Figure: The structural model and results



Source: own elaboration

4. Table: Study 3 – Direct effect in the model

The hypothesis path	Standard bootstrap results			Percentile bootstrap quantiles	
	β	t-values	p-values	2.5%	97.5%
Psychological Ownership – Monogamous Loyalty (H ₁)	0.1969	2.9686	0.0015	0.0635	0.3231
Attractiveness of Alternatives – Monogamous Loyalty (H ₂)	-0.3529	-7.1478	0.0000	-0.4472	-0.2549
Psychological Ownership - Attractiveness of Alternatives (H ₃)	-0.1814	-2.7331	0.0061	-0.3108	-0.0523
Control of Object - Psychological Ownership (H ₄)	0.3824	6.6561	0.0000	0.2672	0.4961
Control of Object – Monogamous Loyalty (H ₅)	0.1520	2.3732	0.0177	0.0294	0.2772
Control of Object - Attractiveness of Alternatives (H ₆)	-0.0295	-0.4469	0.6552	-0.1564	0.1530

Source: own elaboration

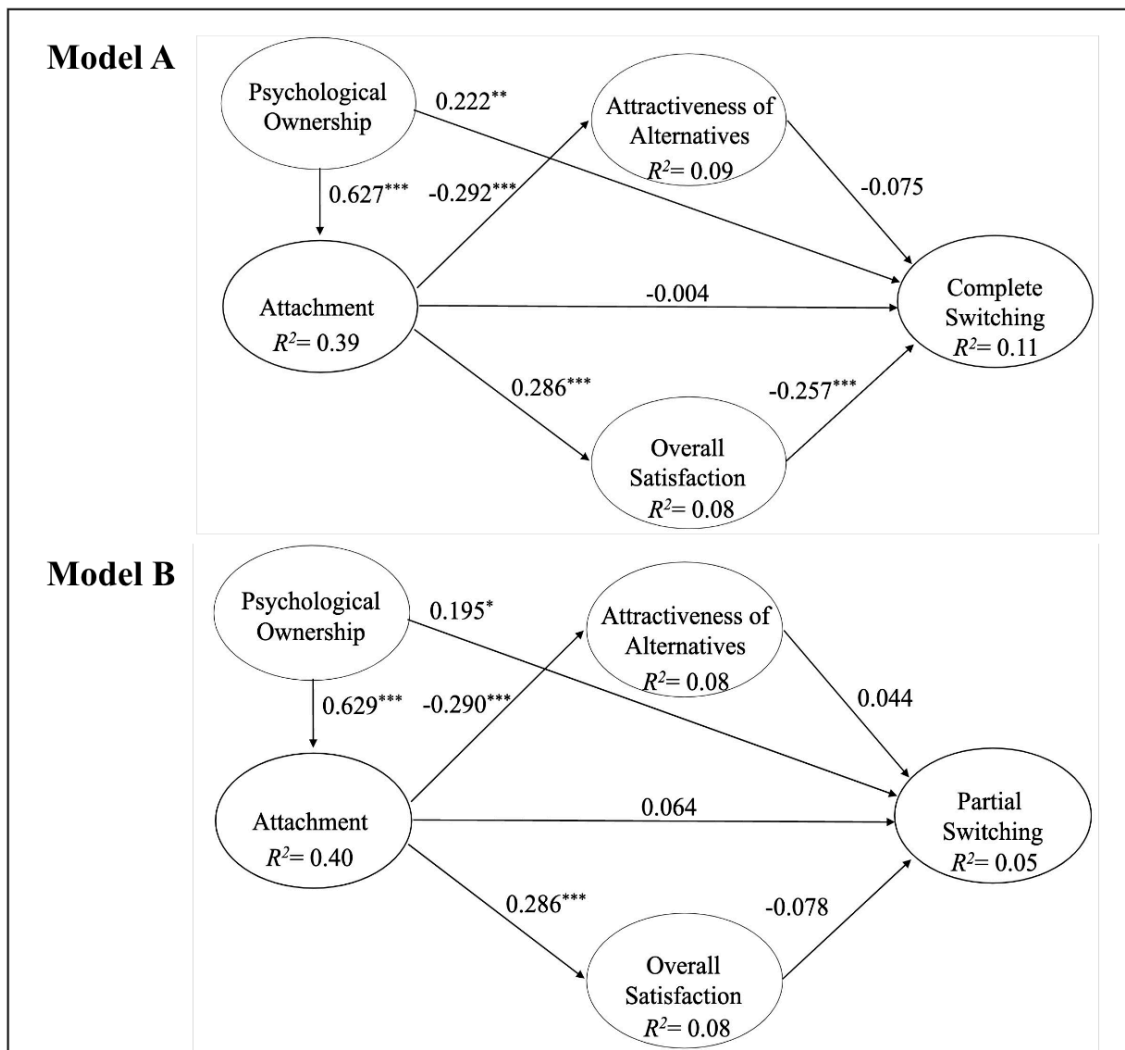
The role of attachment in complete and partial switching

Attachment is a positive emotional bond, a self-connectedness with another person, object or digital object (Bagozzi et al., 2017; Koles & Nagy, 2021; Thompson et al., 2006; Whan Park et al., 2006). This emotion is present in video-on-demand service consumption and has significant impact on how consumers evaluate the service and its alternatives. This finding fits prior literature (Dwivedi et al., 2019; R. VanMeter et al., 2018; R. A. VanMeter et al., 2015).

Attachment leads to long-term relationship and loyalty (Dwivedi et al., 2019; Levy & Hino, 2016; Shabani Nashtae et al., 2017). Loyalty is frequently considered as the opposite of switching. Thus, I suppose switching intention requires a dedicated measurement in research and there are few studies examining it (Alnawas & Hemsley-Brown, 2018; Hemsley-Brown, 2023; Lee & Hyun, 2016). Study 4 is filling this gap by examining the role of attachment in two switching types. Attachment has no influence on consumers' switching intention. The

emotional bond does not prevent service providers being left or being cheated. Thus, the trident of psychological ownership, attachment, and satisfaction can hinder the break-up between consumers and service providers. Sánchez García & Curras-Perez (2019) also confirms that satisfaction alone is not sufficient to prevent switching in video-on-demand services. These findings give answer on this thesis' second research question about the relationship of attachment with the dynamized switching behavior fueled by liquid consumption like.

3. Figure: Study 4 – The structural models and results



Source: own elaboration

5. Table: Study 4A – Direct effect in the model

The hypothesis path	Standard bootstrap results			Percentile bootstrap quantiles	
	β	t-values	p-values	2.5%	97.5%
Attachment – Complete Switching (H ₁)	-0.0045	-0.0568	0.4773	-0.1554	0.1531
Attachment – Overall Satisfaction (H ₂)	0.2861	4.8899	0.0000	0.1729	0.3987
Attachment – Attractiveness of Alternatives (H ₃)	-0.2920	-5.7659	0.0000	-0.3974	-0.1975
Psychological Ownership – Attachment (H ₄)	0.6274	16.2568	0.0000	0.5512	0.7005
Psychological Ownership – Complete Switching (H ₅)	0.2217	2.7531	0.0030	0.0591	0.3701
Attractiveness of Alternatives – Complete Switching (H ₆)	-0.0750	-1.1508	0.1249	-0.2088	0.0442
Overall Satisfaction – Complete Switching (H ₇)	-0.2575	-3.6974	0.0001	-0.3905	-0.1140

Source: own elaboration

6. Table: Study 4B – Direct effect in the model

The hypothesis path	Standard bootstrap results			Percentile bootstrap quantiles	
	β	t-values	p-values	2.5%	97.5%
Attachment – Partial Switching (H ₁)	0.0639	0.8065	0.2100	-0.0932	0.2150
Attachment – Overall Satisfaction (H ₂)	0.2861	4.8920	0.0000	0.1731	0.3988
Attachment – Attractiveness of Alternatives (H ₃)	-0.2896	-5.8722	0.0000	-0.3960	-0.2007
Psychological Ownership – Attachment (H ₄)	0.6289	16.3716	0.0000	0.5523	0.7018
Psychological Ownership – Partial Switching (H ₅)	0.1954	2.4901	0.0064	0.0378	0.3467
Attractiveness of Alternatives – Partial Switching (H ₆)	0.0435	0.7060	0.2401	-0.0849	0.1563
Overall Satisfaction – Partial Switching (H ₇)	-0.0777	-1.3115	0.0949	-0.1946	0.0383

Source: own elaboration

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