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Does the digitalization of retailing disrupt consumers' attachment to retail places?

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ABSTRACT

This study breaks new ground in the marketing domain by extending the concept of place attachment to the study of the online retail environment. We provide empirical evidence that consumers can establish strong attachments not only with traditional offline places but also with online retail stores. Moreover, we assessed how distinct dimensions of the place affect the formation of consumers' attachment and their behavioral loyalty. Our findings show that while consumers who feel a strong sense of attachment toward the place engage in spreading positive word-of-mouth regardless of the environment, their attachment to the store does not prevent them from switching to another provider, especially in the online environment.

“Spacious, beautiful, and an inspiring place. It is wonderful that you are allowed to drink free coffee from the machine in the store. Most of the staff members are very friendly and eager to serve. I visit the store with a few friends at least once a month to see what new or discounted products are for sale. It is lovely to sip a hot cappuccino and browse all the beautiful tableware. Nearly every time, I grab something from the store to buy.”

(Source: one of the responses to an open question in our questionnaire)

1. Introduction

The opening vignette illustrates how a traditional brick-and-mortar retail store triggers a variety of emotions and sensations for consumers (Das and Varshneya, 2017; Kumar and Kim, 2014). Such experiences are crucial for consumers to form a long-term positive relationship—an attachment with the retail place (Debenedetti et al., 2013). However, due to technological advancements and the recent Covid-19 pandemics, consumption is shifting from traditional brick-and-mortar establishments to a digitalized online environment (Beckers et al., 2021). With the shift from tangible physical shopping places toward intangible digital virtual spaces, consumers can no longer rely on the resources provided in the physical settings of a shop (Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017). In the online environment, the retailer can no longer offer treats such as

free coffee, and instead of encounters with other customers and staff, all social interaction is limited to the few messages that we exchange with an algorithm-operated chatbot in a pop-up window. This raises the question of how consumers form ties to online places and whether and how they form strong attachments and pleasurable relationships in online retail environments.

Despite the fact that recent studies have acknowledged the substantiality of the changes that places are experiencing (Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017; Chatzidakis et al., 2018), there have been no studies venturing into the online waters of place attachment. Even the most recent studies on place attachment (Plunkett et al., 2019; Rosenbaum et al., 2020) still ignored the shift from traditional physical establishments to the digital world. They argued that traditional brick-and-mortar stores are not likely to close down and disappear. However, during the recent Covid-19 pandemics, government restrictions forced many retail stores and service establishments to close down. This raised an interesting question about how the digitalization of the consumption environment affects the relationships that consumers establish with commercial places (Borghini et al., 2021). It is therefore essential to reconsider the traditional approaches to places in general and commercial places in particular and gain a deeper understanding of how consumers relate to physical and online places.

In this study, we address the gap in the marketing research on place relationships and reflect on the changes that commercial places have

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gone through in the recent years (Pantano and Viassone, 2015). The aim is to provide a deeper understanding of how these changes affect consumers and their bonds with commercial places. We used the concept of place attachment (Altmann and Low, 1992) to examine how the changing nature of the shopping environment, from physical shops to online stores, affects the relational bonds that consumers form with retail places. Place attachment in this study denotes the emotional ties that consumers form with retail places. Various studies have shown the importance of emotional attachment and close ties between consumers and various consumption objects, such as brands (Park et al., 2010), products (Mugge et al., 2010), retail stores (Brocato et al., 2015), or service establishments (Debenedetti et al., 2013). Importantly, according to these studies, consumer attachment predicts consumer loyalty to the brand (Vlachos and Vrechopoulos, 2012). We therefore explored how the place attachment bond affects consumers' behavioral loyalty toward the store, that is, the switching intentions and the spread of a positive word of mouth (WoM) in the context of a digitalizing shopping environment. We also aim to provide a deeper understanding of how distinct dimensions of offline and online places contribute to the creation of attachment bonds and consumers' behavioral loyalty.

2. Theoretical background

Commercial places have enjoyed the attention of marketing researchers for decades. Indeed, place plays an institutionalized role as one of the fundamental elements of the marketing mix. Despite the extensive debate that the shopping environment has provoked (Laroche et al., 2005; Pantano and Viassone, 2015), the body of research on this topic has certain shortcomings. The advances in digital technology in the past (Grewal et al., 2021; Paul and Rosenbaum, 2020) denounce the traditional conceptualization of place as a physical location of shopping. The boundaries between physical and digital environments are blurred as retailers transition from traditional physical settings to online spaces. The stability of places is disrupted by increasing mobility (Di Masso et al., 2019), dematerialization (Arcuri & Veludo-de-Oliveira, 2018), and liquidity of relational bonds (Bardhi et al., 2012). Despite the fundamental changes that the shopping environment is undergoing, only a few studies have acknowledged the importance of studying the changing character of places in general (Di Masso et al., 2019), and commercial places in particular (Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017).

Recent studies focusing on different retail settings have explored consumers' experiences in omnichannel environments (Hickman et al., 2020) and channel integration (Acquila-Natale and Chaparro-Peláez, 2020). However, the lack of conceptualization of digital places in the marketing literature is staggering and calls for a thorough revision of the existing concept of place. We draw on Rosenbaum et al.'s (2017) conceptualization of place as a repository of resources facilitating exchange rather than just being simply a physical location (Relph, 1976) and a point of distribution (Kotler et al., 2013). Not only traditional physical stores but also digital spaces and platforms act as intermediaries between the different marketplace actors (Madsen and Petermans, 2020) and facilitate the function of making resources available for exchange.

2.1. Place attachment in a digitalizing environment

Previous studies have defined place attachment as an emotional bond between an individual and a specific location (Altman and Low, 1992; Williams et al., 1992). This bond is based on physical, social, historical, and cultural meanings that are associated with the place (Altman and Low, 1992), and it is characterized as a positive (Brocato et al., 2015) and functional (Droseltis and Vignoles, 2010) connection, which evokes a tendency to stay close to the place (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001). The places that people are attached to are usually perceived as extensions of the self (Droseltis and Vignoles, 2010) and often reflect the individual's personality and lifestyle (Brocato et al.,

2015). Moreover, the relational bonds may be multiple and extensive, and their benefits for consumers range from emotional feelings of belongingness to seeking new experiences (Borghini et al., 2021).

The concept of place attachment has been previously researched in different fields, such as geography (Altman and Low, 1992), environmental psychology (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001; Raymond et al., 2010), and tourism (Kyle et al., 2005; Lee and Shen, 2013). However, the understanding of how consumers form attachments to commercial settings is limited. Lewicka (2011) even mulls over the ability of so-called "non-places," such as shopping malls, to trigger people's attachment. According to Relph (1976), commercial places lack authenticity and place identity because they are a construct of mass media and mass culture that serve a fabricated public purpose. However, more recent studies (Brocato et al., 2015; Debenedetti et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2015) have shown that consumers can also establish meaningful relationships with places such as shops, service firms, or retail stores. These studies provide evidence that forming an attachment to commercial establishments has a positive effect on consumers' loyalty and revisit intentions (Brocato et al., 2015; Plunkett et al., 2019). But do online places have the same potential of arousing consumers' emotions, or are they some kind of non-places that reflect the placelessness (Relph, 1976) of contemporary society?

Understanding the essence of the complex relationships that consumers establish with places requires a thorough consideration of all attributes that constitute the place, as well as how distinct attributes contribute to the formation of the relationship. Place extends well beyond a mere physical location. It encompasses multiple dimensions, ranging from physical and functional elements to the social aspects and meanings of the place. To provide deeper understanding of how distinct elements of the place contribute to the formation of place attachment bonds in both offline and online environments, we draw on the existing theorization of place attachment as a multidimensional concept (Raymond et al., 2010; Williams and Vaske, 2003). We define place attachment as a three-dimensional construct consisting of place identity, place dependence, and social bonds (see Fig. 1).

2.1.1. Place identity

Rather than being a characteristic of a particular place, place identity is part of an individual's self-identity (Lewicka, 2008) and a means to construct and cultivate one's self (Williams et al., 1992). It incorporates dimensions of ourselves that define who we are (Raymond et al., 2010) and encompasses feelings, emotions, and experiences, as well as more abstract beliefs and symbolic connections that individuals have with a particular place (Proshansky et al., 1983; Williams et al., 1992). In the offline environment, physical evidence of the servicescapes (Bitner, 1992) and the atmosphere of the place (Kotler, 1973) provide important sensory stimulation for the individual and elicit feelings and emotions

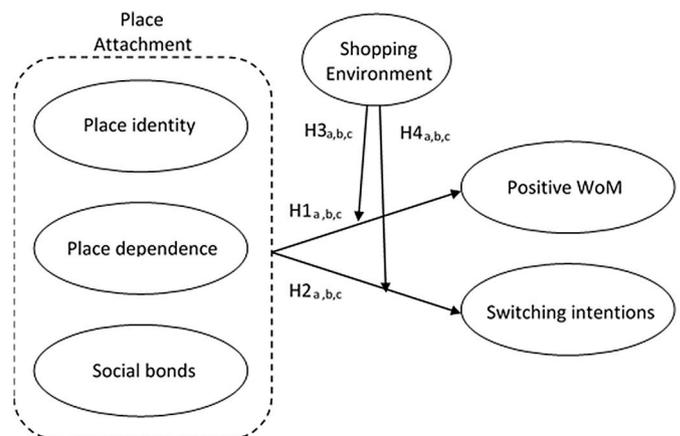


Fig. 1. Theoretical model of place attachment.

that, in the long run, may turn into strong relational bonds, such as attachment.

In the digital environment, sensory stimuli are limited by the technology mediating the interaction between the consumer and the place. The ambient, design, and social cues of the traditional brick-and-mortar atmospherics are replaced by the symbolism of web atmospherics and digital platforms. Multiple sensory stimuli such as touch, smell, and taste that affect how consumers form experiences during interactions with retail places (Pecoraro et al., 2020) are absent in the digital environment. However, despite the lack of these cues, the atmosphere created by tools available on websites or digital platforms can have a significant influence on consumers' experiences and behaviors (Dailey, 2004; Mari and Poggesi, 2013). E-servicescape dimensions that positively influencing customers' attitudes include ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, signs, symbols, and artifacts (Hopkins et al., 2009). Online store design using atmospheric stimuli, such as color, layout, interactivity, and animation, can enhance store visits, customers' attitudes toward the store, customer satisfaction, purchase intention, and behavior (Manganari et al., 2009). In the digital environment, consumers can evaluate goods and services, compare alternatives and search for a large amount of stores and brands (Laroche et al., 2005). Moreover, unlike in traditional brick-and-mortar stores, the online environment allows for personalization of the design and various aesthetic appeals to tailor the digital servicescapes to achieve the desired outcome (Mari and Poggesi, 2013). Personalizing the design of the store, as well as the content that the consumers get to see, is likely to appeal to the consumers and elicit positive feelings and emotions that can contribute to the formation of place identity and evolve into an attachment over time.

2.1.2. Place dependence

Place dependence represents a functional dimension of attachment, which is linked to the physical characteristics of a particular place (Williams and Vaske, 2003) and is based on the ability of the place to satisfy one's needs (Williams et al., 1992). However, the dependence on a particular place is often defined relative to other places that possess similar qualities and satisfy the same needs. It reflects how a specific place stands out from similar settings within the variety of available alternatives at hand (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001). In the traditional offline environment, spatial and time constraints play a major role in creating dependency since they limit the number of options that consumers can choose from. An online environment, by contrast, relies on intangible elements that allow consumers to browse various stores in a matter of several mouse clicks (Laroche et al., 2005). Place dependence is therefore likely to play a much more significant role in the offline environment than in novel online settings. The global internet network presents consumers with an endless amount of alternatives that they can easily access any time, without ever leaving their homes.

2.1.3. Social bonds

While place identity and place dependence refer to the relationship between an individual and a particular place, social bonds refer to the interpersonal relationships that develop within the place. These relationships may arise both between customers and employees as well as among customers (Brocato et al., 2015). Early conceptualizations considered place attachment to be a two-dimensional construct consisting of place identity and place dependence (Williams et al., 1992; Williams and Roggenbuck, 1989). However, in understanding the retail environment from the consumer's perspective, it is crucial to understand the social influences in the retail environment as well (Argo and Dahl, 2020). Recent studies (Brocato et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2015; Kyle et al., 2005) have found social interaction to be an important aspect of place attachment, in some cases extending beyond the importance of the physical characteristics of the setting.

Traditional servicescapes facilitate various kinds of social relations (Brocato et al., 2015) that can have positive or even restorative benefits

for consumers (Rosenbaum et al., 2020). Commercial places can provide a social retreat for consumers who experience loneliness and therefore have a major impact on consumers' well-being (Rosenbaum et al., 2020). However, with the shift from traditional brick-and-mortar establishments to online environments, the nature of the social relations established in the place is changing. In the online environment, communication is mediated by technology and social media, and traditional social interaction is replaced by parasocial forms of relationships (Rasmussen, 2018). Consumers no longer have a chance to connect with other consumers' face to face; instead, they interact only with virtual representations of other consumers (Yuksel and Labrecque, 2016), and the traditional interaction between consumers and staff is replaced by an anthropomorphized chatbot driven by artificial intelligence (Sheehan et al., 2020). Moreover, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has made limiting social contacts favorable and has shown that consumers avoid physical places due to the fear of physical, face-to-face social interactions. Thus, the social dimension of places has been undergoing substantial changes, and it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of how the changes in social interaction affect consumers' perceptions of places and the formation of the attachment bond.

2.2. Place attachment and behavioral loyalty

Previous literature provides evidence that consumers' attachment to places results in favorable outcomes for retailers (Vlachos and Vrechopoulos, 2012). Studies have found positive impacts on consumers' loyalty (Johnson et al., 2015), future visit intentions (Plunkett et al., 2019), and spreading positive WoM (Brocato et al., 2015). Customer loyalty has generally been operationalized as a two-dimensional concept that measures both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2003; Kwon and Lennon, 2009). Although it is common knowledge that a strong emotional bond, such as attachment, can have a positive impact on consumers' loyalty and patronage of the place, there is little knowledge about how the distinct elements of the place strengthen the relationship between consumers and the store and contribute to the formation of the attachment and the gained loyalty. Therefore, in this study, we examine the effect of individual dimensions of place attachment on consumers' switching intentions and engagement in spreading positive WoM as indicators of customer behavioral loyalty. We hypothesize the following:

H1. Place identity (H1_a), place dependence (H1_b) and social bonds (H1_c) each has a positive effect on spreading positive word of mouth.

H2. Place identity (H2_a), place dependence (H2_b), and social bonds (H2_c) each has a negative effect on consumers' switching intentions.

Furthermore, we adopted an exploratory approach to examine the shopping environment as a potential moderator of the relationship between place attachment and behavioral loyalty. We not only examine the relationship between place attachment and behavioral loyalty in offline and online environments, but we also seek a deeper understanding of how distinct dimensions of the place affect the outcome variables in different shopping environments. In line with previous studies examining the effect of emotional attachment to places on the spread of positive WoM (Brocato et al., 2015; Strandberg et al., 2020), we hypothesize the following:

H3. The individual effect of place identity (H3_a), place dependence (H3_b), and social bonds (H3_c) on the spread of positive word of mouth will be significantly different in offline and online environments.

Studies on place attachment in the offline environment suggest that forming a strong emotional bond with the store positively affects consumer loyalty (Johnson et al., 2015) and revisit intentions to the place (Plunkett et al., 2019), and therefore lowers the likelihood of switching to another provider (Brocato et al., 2015). However, the cost of switching is extremely low in the online environment; therefore,

creating and maintaining customer loyalty is more challenging (Kwon and Lennon, 2009). Not limited to physical places, consumers can browse several online shops with a few clicks (Dholakia et al., 2005). We therefore hypothesize the following effects:

H4. Place identity (H4_a), place dependence (H4_b), social bonds (H4_c) each has significantly stronger negative effect on the switching intentions of consumers in the offline retail environment compared to the online environment.

3. Methodology

Data were collected from a panel of Finnish consumers using an online survey. In the questionnaire, the consumers referred to their experience with either the offline or online shopping environment of a selected retailer. To gain insights into the formation of consumers' attachments to offline and online retail stores, we included retailers that are likely to arouse emotional bonds with consumers. We chose two small specialty design stores that sell glassware, kitchen equipment, and home decor products. We then selected two big stores, one global furniture seller and an upscale Finnish department store, which had traditionally invested in offline store customer experiences and fancy shopping environments but struggled to compete against new online stores.

3.1. Questionnaire design

All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (I strongly disagree) to 7 (I strongly agree). Independent variables for place dependence and place identity were measured on three-item scales adapted from Johnson et al. (2015). The social bonds construct was measured on a five-item scale adapted from Hsieh et al. (2005). Dependent variables for positive WoM and switching intentions were measured on three-item scales adapted from Brocato et al. (2015). One of the items measuring switching intentions was discarded later during the validation phase because it exhibited a factor loading lower than the suggested threshold of 0.4 (Hair et al., 2011). The wording of the original measures was slightly adapted to suit the distinctions between online and offline environments, resulting in two versions of the questionnaire. The questionnaire also included an open question in which the respondents had a chance to express their relationship to the particular shop in their own words.

3.2. Data collection and sample

The online respondent panel from which the data were drawn consisted of 80,000 voluntary participants. An invitation was sent to those participants who lived in the catchment area of at least one of the stores chosen for examination. By voluntarily giving responses to surveys assigned to them by the firm, participants were able to earn points, and after accumulating enough points, they were awarded a prize. Respondents were also free to choose whether they wanted to complete the questionnaire regarding offline or online environments and to choose which of the four retailers they wanted to reference.

The data collection resulted in 1169 valid responses, 873 responses regarding the offline environment, and 296 responses regarding the online environment. In the sample, 45.6% of the respondents were male and 54.4% were female. The distribution among age and yearly income groups was even. More than half of the respondents (58%) were between the ages of 25 and 54 years old. When compared to the average salary in Finland, slightly more than half (52.6%) reported earning less than the average salary, while 30% reported earned a higher-than-average income, and 17.4% chose not to disclose any information regarding their income.

4. Results

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics and Amos 24 software. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to validate the measurement model. In Table 1, the mean values, standard deviations, composite reliabilities, average variance extracted, and between-factor correlations are shown. The composite reliabilities (CR) indicating the factor's internal consistency were well above the suggested threshold of >0.7 (Hair et al., 2011). The average variance extracted (AVE) values measuring the convergent validity of the factors were >0.50 cut-off value (Hair et al., 2011). The measurements were, therefore, all within the range of acceptance, suggesting an acceptable level of reliability and validity.

After validating the measurements, we tested a structural equation model in SPSS Amos. The structural model fit was assessed based on Hu and Bentler's (1999) suggestions for cutoff criteria. Even though the CMIN/DF value of 3.374 were slightly elevated, other model fit indices indicated a good model fit (NFI = 0.959; RFI = 0.950; IFI = 0.971; TLI = 0.964; CFI = 0.971; RMSEA = 0.045), as shown in Table 2.

A summary of the results of the hypotheses testing is provided in Table 2. Although the constructed model accounts well for positive WoM (R^2 0.57), the low explanation power of switching intentions (R^2 0.08) suggests that place attachment played only a minor role in consumer switching intentions. The standardized beta-coefficients further showed that place identity (β 0.39, $p < 0.001$) and place dependence (β 0.40, $p < 0.001$) positively affect WoM, supporting hypotheses H1_a and H1_b. However, social dimension has no significant effect on either positive WoM or switching intentions. Therefore, hypotheses H1_c and H2_c were not supported. The only variable with a significant negative effect on consumers' switching intentions was place dependence (β -0.18, $p < 0.01$), thus supporting H2_b. The effect of place identity on switching intentions was non-significant, and thus, H2_a was not supported.

Hypotheses H3 and H4 concerned the differences in the effect of place attachment on WoM and switching intentions between offline and online stores. The results (Table 2) showed that the dimensions of place attachment account well for positive WoM in offline (R^2 0.59) and online (R^2 0.53) store environments. However, in terms of switching intentions, the model only accounted for significantly in offline environments (R^2 0.14) and not in the online environment (R^2 0.004). The results further showed a significant difference between online and offline stores and the effect of place dependence on positive WoM (R^2_{offline} 0.43 vs. R^2_{online} 0.16, $t = 2.93$, $p = 0.01$) and switching intentions (R^2_{offline} -0.20 vs. R^2_{online} 0.06, $t = 2.28$, $p < 0.05$). The difference detected in the effect of place identity on WoM (R^2_{offline} 0.39 vs. R^2_{online} 0.60, $t = 1.92$, $p > 0.056$) was quite high, although not statistically significant. Therefore, only hypotheses H3_b and H4_b were supported.

5. Discussion

Despite the fundamental differences in the characteristics of offline and online retail stores, this study found that the dimensionality of place attachment does not substantially differ between online and offline environments. These findings suggest that online places are, just like traditional brick-and-mortar stores, capable of eliciting strong emotions and arousing an attachment bond on the consumer's side. The difference between these environments, however, seems to lie in the physical dimension of place attachment (i.e., place dependence). Place dependence plays a much more important role in traditional brick-and-mortar settings than online settings. When consumers shop offline, they are attracted to the appeal of a particular place; moreover, they encounter both spatial and time restrictions (Laroche et al., 2005). When shopping online, and browsing several stores with just a couple of clicks, consumers may not perceive the uniqueness of a particular online store as a place, because they have more options at hand.

Table 1
Results of the confirmatory factor analysis.

| Measures | CR | AVE | Mean | Std | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|----------------------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| Place identity | 0.92 | 0.80 | 4.02 | 1.49 | 0.89 | | | | |
| Place dependence | 0.88 | 0.71 | 3.97 | 1.50 | 0.81 | 0.84 | | | |
| Social bonds | 0.93 | 0.71 | 3.31 | 1.50 | 0.05 | 0.02 | 0.85 | | |
| Positive WoM | 0.95 | 0.86 | 4.64 | 1.56 | 0.72 | 0.72 | -0.01 | 0.93 | |
| Switching intentions | 0.82 | 0.70 | 3.48 | 1.51 | -0.25 | -0.26 | 0.00 | -0.37 | 0.84 |

Table 2
Structural Model Fit and Hypotheses testing.

| | CMIN/DF | NFI | RFI | IFI | TLI | CFI | RMSEA | | | |
|---|---------|-------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------|---------------|-------|---------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Model fit | 3.374 | 0.959 | 0.950 | 0.971 | 0.964 | 0.971 | 0.045 | | | |
| | | | R² | β^a | S.E. | Sig. | | Hypothesis | | |
| Dependent variable: Positive WoM | | | 0.57 | | | | | | | |
| Place identity | | | - | 0.427 | 0.046 | 0.000 | | H1a supported | | |
| Place dependence | | | - | 0.371 | 0.039 | 0.000 | | H1b supported | | |
| Social bonds | | | - | -0.034 | 0.021 | 0.108 | | H1c not supported | | |
| Dependent variable: Switching intentions | | | 0.079 | | | | | | | |
| Place identity | | | - | -0.097 | 0.052 | 0.065 | | H2a not supported | | |
| Place dependence | | | - | -0.134 | 0.045 | 0.003 | | H2b supported | | |
| Social bonds | | | - | 0.008 | 0.024 | 0.735 | | H2c not supported | | |
| | | | | offline | | online | | t- statistic | p- value | Hypothesis |
| Dependent variable: Positive WoM | | | 0.593 | | | 0.533 | | | | |
| Place identity | | | - | 0.39 | | 0.599 | 1.915 | 0.056 | | H3a not supported |
| Place dependence | | | - | 0.425 | | 0.16 | 2.93 | 0.003 | | H3b supported |
| Social bonds | | | - | -0.027 | | -0.052 | 0.522 | 0.602 | | H3c not supported |
| Dependent variable: Switching intentions | | | 0.142 | | | 0.004 | | | | |
| Place identity | | | - | -0.102 | | -0.084 | 0.129 | 0.897 | | H4a not supported |
| Place dependence | | | - | -0.199 | | 0.061 | 2.284 | 0.023 | | H4b supported |
| Social bonds | | | - | -0.002 | | 0.005 | 0.141 | 0.888 | | H4c not supported |

^a Standardized beta coefficients.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Although place is considered one of the basic elements of marketing mix and researchers have recognized the digital transformation that (retail) places are undergoing, a clear conceptualization of online retail places is missing. This study adds to recent studies on places (Di Masso et al., 2019) and commercial places (Ballantyne and Nilsson, 2017) by providing an understanding of how the changes that places are undergoing influence consumers and their behavior in and beyond the commercial places. We draw on Rosenbaum et al.'s (2017) conceptualization of place as a repository of resources, and we argue that not only physical places but digital spaces and platforms act as an intermediary between the different marketplace actors (Madsen and Petermans, 2020) and facilitate the function of making resources available for exchange. Rosenbaum et al. (2020) called for further research on how the construction of online places can influence consumers' well-being and behavior. This study brings insight into the formation of place attachment bonds and their consequences for consumers' behavioral loyalty in online retail environments. Likewise, our results suggest that an element such as place dependence has a visible influence in the outcomes studied.

Previous studies (Chatzidakis et al., 2018; Debenedetti et al., 2013; Rosenbaum et al., 2020) recognize the importance of place as a multi-dimensional entity and acknowledge that places play an important role in consumers' lives. Research on commercial places recognizes the potential of retail stores and service establishments to elicit in consumers strong and lasting emotional relationships with the place—an attachment—and positively influence their well-being (Rosenbaum et al., 2020) and affect consumers' behavior (Brocato et al., 2015) and loyalty toward the place (Johnson et al., 2015). What research has failed to assess so far is how distinct dimensions of the place—that is, place identity, place dependence, and social bonds established in the

place—affect the attachment bond and lead to important consequences in consumer behavior.

The results of this study highlight the importance of place attachment as an antecedent of consumer behavioral loyalty toward both offline and online stores. While prior research (Brocato et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2015) has focused on the relationship between the attachment bond and behavioral loyalty, we enhance the current knowledge by showing how distinct dimensions of the place contribute to the formation of consumers' loyalty. Confirming the assumptions of previous studies, our analysis reveals that place identity and place dependence positively affect the spreading of positive WoM and lower consumers' intentions to switch to other provider. However, while some of the previous studies (Argo and Dahl, 2020; Debenedetti et al., 2013; Rosenbaum et al., 2020) stress the role of social bonds established in the place, our study did not find a connection between the social dimension of place and consumers' behavioral loyalty in either traditional or online retail stores. These findings suggest that, although social aspects of the place can have a positive effect on the formation of attachment bonds, they do not necessarily translate into consumers' loyalty in retail settings. One of the reasons for this may be the character of the stores chosen for this study. In these furniture and home decor retail stores, consumers shop rather independently and engaging with the store staff or other consumers is not necessarily a crucial part of their shopping experience. In other types of retail stores, e.g. those providing personal services, social aspects of the place may play a more essential role (Debenedetti et al., 2013).

5.2. Managerial implications

This study shows that place attachment is not limited to physical shops but can also be triggered by online stores. This finding has important managerial implications. The established attachment seems

to have a much stronger influence on spreading positive WoM than on consumers' switching intentions. The effect on switching intentions is even weaker in the online environment than in traditional brick-and-mortar stores. This is likely due to the low cost of switching and multiple alternatives available in the online environment (Laroche et al., 2005). In the offline environment, switching is costly and inconvenient since consumers are bound to their physical location and store opening times. These findings imply that while other reasons for switching to another provider may outweigh even a strong attachment to the store, consumers may still engage in spreading positive WoM and advocate for the store regardless of the environment. Online retailers should therefore recognize the importance of the servicescape design also in the online environment, as consumers attach meanings with the features of the shop and perceive it as a part of their self-identity.

5.3. Limitations and future research

The current research has certain limitations against which we offer several promising propositions for future research. First, when choosing retail stores, we have intentionally selected stores that appeal strongly to consumers and therefore have high potential of arousing consumers' emotions and attachment towards the place. While we confirmed that both offline and online retail places have the capability of arousing strong emotional attachment in consumers, further research should investigate how the character and size of the store influence the relationship that consumers form with different types of commercial places. Future studies could also examine the place attachment bond in the context of other online services. Likewise, taking a broader view by including large market areas, for instance the US or Asian markets can illuminate cultural and geographic differences in how place bonds are formed.

Second, this study pioneers the examination of relational bonds

formed by consumers in online environment. Our findings suggest that place attachment does not substantially differ in the online and offline environment; nevertheless, a thorough investigation of how online stores appeal to consumers and facilitate the formation of attachment and loyalty is needed. Studies on traditional retail stores (Johnson et al., 2015) have examined the role of various store attributes and their effect on the attachment bond. We therefore encourage researchers to examine how distinct store attributes, such as design, atmosphere, or product, affect the formation of attachment bonds in the online environment.

Third, our study did not find a connection between the social bonds established in the place and the outcome in the form of behavioral loyalty. The negative finding could have been caused by the research design, since the respondents may have been unable to fully recall their experience of visiting the particular store, especially the social aspects of their visit. It would be of great interest for future research to further examine the role of social bonds for other consumer outcomes such as emotions. We also find the online commerce a particularly fruitful context for further studies because the social bond there can be cherished through various new technologies and applications.

Finally, we draw on previous studies on place attachment regarding the causality of the relationship between place attachment and consumers' behavioral loyalty. Our results confirm the notion that loyalty is a result of a strong relationship with the place. However, it is possible that revisiting a store regularly or engaging in spreading positive WoM can contribute to the strength of the attachment bond. Moreover, the effect of place attachment on other outcome variables, such as willingness to spend, should be examined in the future.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix. List of Questionnaire Items and Factor Loadings

| Questionnaire Item | Factor loading |
|--|----------------|
| Place identity (Johnson et al., 2015) | |
| I have a strong bond to this store as a place. | 0.908 |
| This store means a great deal to me. | 0.941 |
| I feel like the store and I have the same features. | 0.831 |
| Place dependence (Johnson et al. 2015) | |
| This store cannot be compared with any other store. | 0.641 |
| I would not change my shopping in this store to any other store. | 0.946 |
| It is important to me to do my shopping precisely in this store and not in any other store. | 0.910 |
| Social bonds (Hsieh et al. 2005) | |
| This (online) store keeps in contact with me. | 0.746 |
| This (online) store knows me. | 0.903 |
| This store is interested in my needs. | 0.886 |
| It is important to me that I know this (online) store well. | 0.802 |
| I feel like a part of a community in this store. | 0.862 |
| Switching intentions (Brocato et al. 2015) | |
| I am likely to switch and regularly visit another store. | 0.950 |
| I might be convinced to regularly visit another service provider under the right conditions. | 0.705 |
| There is no chance that I will switch and regularly visit a different store in the near future.* | 0.379 |
| Positive WoM (Brocato et al. 2015) | |
| I recommend this store to friends. | 0.918 |
| I tell good things about this store to friends. | 0.951 |
| I encourage my friends to visit this shop. | 0.909 |

*Item removed.

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