

Save For Later? Understanding Consumers' Emotional Attachment To Items They Do Not Purchase

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Abstract

The growing prevalence of “save for later” Features in digital shopping platforms has introduced a new dimension to consumer behaviour that extends beyond immediate purchasing decisions. This conceptual study explores how consumers develop emotional attachment to items they save but do not purchase, and how this attachment influences future behavioural outcomes. Drawing upon theories of psychological ownership, emotional bonding, decision postponement, and online engagement, the study proposes a framework in which save for later behaviour functions as an antecedent to emotional attachment, future purchase intention, and ongoing brand engagement. Existing literature suggests that repeated exposure, mental simulation of ownership, and symbolic value contribute to the formation of emotional connections with unpurchased items. These attachments, in turn, may strengthen consumers' likelihood of revisiting platforms, interacting with brands, and eventually considering delayed purchases. The study highlights a significant gap in understanding non-purchase digital behaviours and emphasizes the strategic importance of saved items in shaping consumer-brand relationships. This conceptual exploration provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical research and offers insights into how e-commerce platforms can leverage save for later behaviour to enhance consumer engagement and retention.

Keywords: Save for later behaviour; emotional attachment; digital consumer behaviour; psychological ownership; deferred decision-making; future purchase intention; brand engagement.

Introduction

The blistering growth of e-commerce has altered consumer process in terms of product evaluation, comparison, and temporary storage during their online shopping experiences. Out of the numerous functionalities provided by online retail services, the save for later has become a popular but insufficiently researched behaviour. Consumers often store products that they are going to go through later, although they may not have an urgent need to buy them. The behaviour begs some crucial questions regarding the establishment of emotional relationships with the unpurchased products. Although in the past, the traditional consumer behaviour paradigms have focused on the purchase intention, evaluation and decision-making, modern digital settings has shown another aspect of attachment, it develops without any

transaction though in the presence of psychological involvement. Saved items are not just a deferral of action as consumers tend to associate saved items with their future plans or lifestyle choices. Saving something to use later can bring about feelings of perceived ownership, emotional comfort or symbolic relevance hence enhancing its psychological value. These emotional reactions may determine the future long-term interest in brands, subsequent consumer buying behaviour and consumer mental prioritization of products saved compared to the alternatives. Although this phenomenon is common, there is paucity in academic literature on why consumers develop an attachment to things that they do not buy and how the attachment affects their entire shopping experience. Considering the growing role of digital wish-lists, the delayed decision-making, and the customization of recommendation system, the study of this emotional attachment becomes a necessity both to researchers and marketers. The theoretical research presented in this conceptual study has added to the current body of literature because it synthesized research on emotional bonding, online consumer psychology and online decision postponement to come up with a theoretical insight into how and why such attachments take place. The investigation of the psychological processes of save for later behaviour can give more substantial details on the changing nature of online shopping and the strategic opportunities of the brands to take advantage of this attachment in increasing consumer retention and engagement.

Review of literature

Emotional attachment in consumer behaviour is neither a new concept that leads to product preference and brand loyalty. Bowlby (1982) further states that, attachment develops when a person feels secure or comfortable with an object. This attachment in the digital market is commonly directed to products that the consumer does not necessarily buy at the point of time but go back to. According to belk (1988), possessions, real or imagined, can be treated as the extensions of the self-meaning that objects that are not actually bought online can have a symbolical relevance. This behaviour is also upheld by the idea of psychological ownership. According to pierce, kostova and dirks (2003), people tend to possess an attitude of mine even when they do not own it legally and this would be very applicable to save for later lists. Likewise, peck and shu (2009) have shown how perceived ownership can be enhanced by simple touch or sightseeing, and since interaction with digital products is adequate to generate attachment, it follows that perceived ownership can be enhanced by means of digital interaction. It is also critical that the decision postponement is made. Dhar (1997) discovered that consumers procrastinate in making decisions when they have conflicting preferences by various mechanisms such as wish-lists to cope with cognitive load. Iyengar and lepper (2000) found that excessive options reduce decision fatigue in online setting and this motivates consumers to adopt the option of save for later feature to deal with the decision fatigue. New emotional triggers are provided by the online shopping environments. Mandel and johnson (2002) demonstrated that images on websites impact on consumer thinking process and affective feelings, which may result in increased attachment to the saved goods. Also, schlosser (2003) observed that among the online shopping experiences, the interactive experiences produced better emotional reactions than the static ones. Attachment also is a result of digital curation practices. Odom et al. (2009) emphasize the fact that people curate digital objects during the process of identity formation, just as consumers curate saved objects to showcase their future expectations. Simultaneously, kim, park and park (2014) have indicated that wish-lists also serve as self-expression instruments on online shopping. Lastly, the influence of expected regret determines the motivation of consumers to hold on to unpurchased products. According to zeelenberg and pieters (2007), the anticipated regrets also

make people make the future open, which is in line with saving the products to recent references. Altogether, the literature indicates that the degree of emotional attachment to unpurchased products is influenced by the psychological ownership, identity formation, symbolic value, the impact of the digital interface, and the mechanism of decision avoidance.

Objective

To examine how and why consumers develop emotional attachment, future purchase intention, ongoing brand engagement to items they save for later but do not purchase in online shopping environments.

Statement of the problem

As a part of online shopping, the save for later feature is frequently used by consumers to list products that they intend not to purchase at the moment but intend to buy later. Although this is common on the online shopping websites, it is not clearly understood why people form emotional attachments to these products that they have not even bought. The majority of studies on consumer behavior have focused on ownership attachment or brand attachment that is created by the actual purchase. Nevertheless, not much attention has been paid to the growing popularity of emotional attachment to objects that have gone online as a reminder in wish list or carts. This negligence limits the efforts of marketers to develop strategies to effectively make use of such attachments to increase consumer engagement, retention, and chances of making future purchases. As a result, there is an urgent necessity to conceptually research the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral determinants that drive the consumers to establish meaningful links with the products that they add to the list to purchase it later and may never purchase them.

Research gap

Though emotional attachment is an issue that has been widely studied in the context of owned products, brand loyalty and post purchase behavior, little has been researched on the psychological bond that the consumer develops with things they never buy but store in their minds to be considered at some time. The current literature primarily focuses on the purchase intention, decision making processes, and online shopping behavior, but it fails to capture the newly developing behavior of save for later usage on the online platforms. The role of psychological ownership, deferred decision making, symbolic value and digital interface interactions in the formation of emotional attachment to unpurchased items is under understood. Moreover, existing research lacks a proper explanation of the influence of such attachments on the long-term consumer interest, possibility of future purchase, or brand engagement. This gap in research makes the contribution of a meaningful conceptual gap that highlights the necessity to investigate the emotional processes behind the attachment of consumers to the items saved, in waiting to be purchased, in online shopping settings.

Future scope of the study

To begin with, the idea can be further developed in future research by empirically investigating the degree of emotional attachment related to the behaviour of saving money by using quantitative or mixed methodology (i.e., by examining the factors that influence the behaviour). This kind of empirical validation would aid in the determination of the psychological drivers which impact the greatest in the unpurchased item attachment of varied consumer groups. Second, the authors can examine the impact of various platform design features, including customized reminders, item visibility, interface aesthetics, and

recommendation algorithm, on the development of emotional attachment and future purchase intention. It would provide more information on how online spaces can be streamlined to allow greater consumer interaction. Third, comparative research in the future can be done on behaviours of saving for later in a variety of products, culture and demographics in order to know whether there exist variations in attachment based on product involvement, shopping motivation or culture shopping norms. The expansions will further enrich theoretical knowledge of online consumer behaviour, as well as provide more scope to marketers and digital platforms.

Limitations of the study

As a conceptual study, this research is inherently limited to the review of existing literature rather than any empirical data, which restricts any possibility of measuring the actual strength of relationships that may be proposed in the framework. The sources on which this study is based are also primarily general consumer behavior and psychological theories, which may not capture the nuances of “save for later” Behavior quite as well across diverse digital platforms. Another limitation is that this research has not looked in-depth at consumer motivational variations, product category differences, or aspects such as e-commerce interface design, which might influence how emotional attachment is constituted in the real world. The absence of cross-cultural comparisons further limits the generalizability of the findings, as cultural factors may shape how consumers perceive and emotionally respond to unpurchased items. These limitations highlight the need for future empirical and context-specific research to validate and refine the proposed conceptual insights.

Conceptual framework

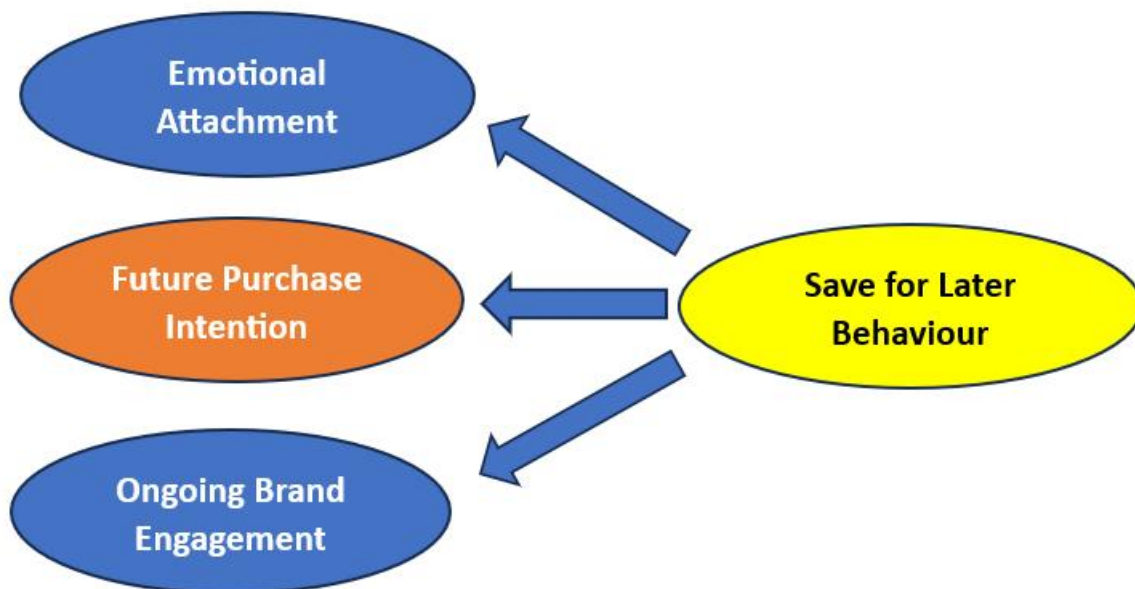


Fig 1 – conceptual framework

Conceptual framework explanation

The theoretical framework of this study is founded on the idea that save for later behavior acts as the primary independent variable, affecting three significant consumer outcomes, which are the dependent variables: Emotional attachment, future purchase intention, and ongoing brand

engagement. In online shopping settings, when consumers opt to save items for later instead of buying them right away, they engage in a psychological process that extends beyond merely delaying a decision. This action activates cognitive and emotional processes that influence their reactions to the saved items and the brand associated with them. Firstly, save for later behavior affects emotional attachment by enabling consumers to repeatedly revisit the item, mentally picture owning it, and attribute symbolic significance to the product. This repeated exposure and envisioning of future use foster a sense of psychological ownership, thereby enhancing emotional connection with items that remain unpurchased. Secondly, save for later behavior affects future purchase intention, as saving an item signifies an initial interest or aspiration. Over time, emotional attachment, perceived relevance, and reminder notifications from platforms increase the chances of these saved items being eventually purchased. The act of saving serves as a reminder that keeps the product in the consumer's consideration set, making the shift from intention to purchase more likely. Thirdly, save for later behavior boosts ongoing brand engagement because consumers who save products often return to the platform to review their lists, monitor price changes, check availability, or explore related products. This repeated interaction strengthens their relationship with the platform or brand, promoting long-term engagement even without immediate purchases. Consequently, the conceptual framework proposes that "save for later" is not just a functional tool but a behavior that influences emotional, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes. By understanding these relationships, marketers and researchers can better recognize the strategic significance of saved items in shaping overall consumer behavior.

Research discussion

The results of this conceptual analysis indicate that the behavior of "Save for later" significantly influences consumers' emotional and behavioral reactions in digital shopping settings. Previous studies suggest that emotional attachment can form even without actual ownership, as people attribute symbolic meaning and personal relevance to the items they engage with (Belk, 1988). In the case of items saved for later, this attachment is strengthened through repeated exposure and mental visualization, aligning with the idea of psychological ownership introduced by Pierce et al. (2003). When consumers save items for future consideration, they experience a sense of perceived ownership, supporting the notion that emotional connections can develop with products that have not been purchased. The framework further emphasizes that saving items boosts future purchase intentions. This relationship aligns with Dhar's (1997) observation that consumers often postpone decisions when faced with complex choices but keep items in their consideration set. "Save for later" lists act as cognitive placeholders, allowing consumers to revisit and reassess products without the pressure of making immediate decisions. As the saved item becomes more familiar and emotionally meaningful, the likelihood of eventual purchase rises, echoing Peck and Shu's (2009) findings that increased psychological ownership tends to enhance purchase motivation. Additionally, the study shows that "Save for later" behavior contributes to ongoing brand engagement. As consumers continue to check saved items for price changes, availability, or updated recommendations, their interaction with the platform deepens over time. This aligns with Schlosser's (2003) argument that interactive digital environments boost consumer involvement and experiential engagement. Furthermore, identity-driven motivations, as noted by Odom et al. (2009), explain why consumers curate saved items as representations of personal goals and future aspirations, thereby maintaining long-term connections with brands. Overall, the discussion underscores that "Save for later" behavior is not just a convenience feature but a psychological process that triggers emotional attachment,

influences deferred purchasing decisions, and strengthens brand engagement. These insights highlight the strategic importance for marketers and platform designers to understand and leverage this behavior to enhance consumer retention and conversion.

Conclusion

This conceptual study underscores the increasing importance of "Save for later" Behavior in digital shopping settings and offers a deeper insight into how consumers develop emotional bonds with items they don't purchase immediately. The analysis indicates that setting items aside for future consideration goes beyond merely delaying a decision; it is a psychologically significant process that cultivates emotional attachment, bolsters future purchase intentions, and enhances ongoing interaction with brands and platforms. By incorporating insights from theories of psychological ownership, symbolic value, and online consumer behavior, the study presents a framework explaining how items left unpurchased can profoundly affect consumer emotions and actions. The findings highlight that items saved for later act as digital symbols of consumer aspirations, identity expression, and future plans, thus holding considerable strategic value for marketers. Understanding these underlying mechanisms can aid e-commerce platforms in crafting more effective engagement strategies, such as personalized reminders, curated wish lists, and emotionally appealing product presentations. Although conceptual, this study lays the groundwork for future empirical research that can validate and expand upon the proposed relationships. Overall, the research emphasizes the importance of exploring non-purchase behaviors in the digital marketplace and contributes to a broader understanding of modern consumer decision-making dynamics.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study. The research was conducted independently, and no external parties influenced the development, interpretation, or presentation of the findings.

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