

BRAND AVOIDANCE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN A SERVICES CONTEXT

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Researchers have predominantly focused on investigating the positive aspects of how customers relate to brands, thereby typically researching topics such as brand attachment, brand strength and brand love. In contrast, inquiry into the negative aspects of how customers relate to brands, such as brand avoidance, have received limited attention. Brand avoidance can best be described as a situation where a customer deliberately chooses not to purchase a particular product, despite it being available, accessible and affordable (Knittel, Beurer, and Berndt, 2016; Lee, Conroy, and Motion, 2009a; Lee, Motion, and Conroy, 2009b).

Although services marketing literature clearly differentiates between products and services with respect to several fundamental principles, brand avoidance is considered universal to both product and service brands. Thus, the *purpose of this study* is to explore the drivers of service brand avoidance specifically within a services context.

From a product perspective, extant literature has identified five possible drivers of brand avoidance, namely experiential avoidance, identity avoidance, moral avoidance, deficit-value avoidance and advertising avoidance (Knittel et al., 2016; Lee, 2008; Lee et al., 2009a; Lee et al., 2009b; Sandikci and Ekici, 2009). *Experiential avoidance* results from a negative evaluation of the experience, where the customer has for example, encountered a service failure (Bitner, 1990; Lee et al., 2009b). *Identity avoidance* is the result of conflict perceived between the brand and the customer's identity (either with the self or in relation to others) as shared among a group of customers (Dall'olmo Riley and De Chernatony, 2000). An incompatibility between the consumer's personal values and those reflected by the brand may result in *moral avoidance* (Lee et al., 2009a) where a customer decides to avoid a brand due to perceived unethical actions or political associations associated with the brand (Sandikci and Ekici, 2009). *Deficit-value avoidance* occurs when the customer perceives a disjunct between the value that was anticipated and the value that was actually delivered by a brand (Lee et al., 2009b). This is closely associated with the price-quality relationship as perceived by the customer (Bolton and Drew, 1991) and a possible lack of familiarity with the offering (Lee et al., 2009b). *Advertising avoidance* involves a negative reaction to a brand's advertisements (Knittel et al., 2016) and aspects such as word-of-mouth, especially relevant in a services context.

Exploratory methodologies were followed in this study. The Critical Incident Method (CIM) was used to collect 120 service journal submissions from customers of service brands and nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with service brand customers.

The *preliminary findings* suggest that the previously identified product brand avoidance drivers can also be used to explain the avoidance of service brands, and this is especially true of experiential avoidance due to the unique nature of services. Further research is required to investigate each of these drivers to provide a more comprehensive perspective of this phenomenon.

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