THE ANTECEDENTS AND OUTCOME OF SERVICE BRAND AVOIDANCE IN THE CELL PHONE NETWORK SERVICE PROVIDER INDUSTRY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The South African cell phone network service provider industry has grown into a multi-billion rand industry in just twenty years, providing thousands of jobs to the South African market and connecting millions of consumers worldwide (Deloitte Digital SA, 2013). The cell phone network service provider industry in South Africa has shown great recent development ranking fourth in the world behind the USA, India and Indonesia (Maharaj, 2012:457). According to Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuaman (1996:1), the importance of satisfying consumers by providing quality services has been extensively recognised. However, cell phone network service provider customers experience numerous service problems such as incorrect billing, dropped calls and a lack of network coverage (Deng, Lu, Wei & Zhang, 2010:290). These drawbacks have caused consumers to require solutions from cell phone network service providers and improved levels of services that meet customer needs (Deng *et al.,* 2010:290).

Central to this study is the social identity theory which suggests that consumers believe they share matching their own attributes with businesses from which they choose to purchase (Lam, Ahearne, Hu & Schillewaert, 2010:129). If the consumer feels that they do not share matching attributes with the business and its brand, this could potentially lead to brand avoidance (Lam *et al.,* 2010:129). Furthermore, if dissatisfaction with the business or in this instance the cell phone network service provider's brand occurs, this may indicate incompatibility between the consumer and the business which subsequently may lead to brand avoidance (Lee, Conroy & Motion, 2009a:422).

Brand avoidance may lead to outcome behaviour that could potentially be detrimental to a business's brand, for example, consumers spreading negative word-of-mouth communication about the brand (Chan & Chui, 2011:326; Jillian, Sweeney & Mazzarol, 2012:75; Fernandes & Dos Santos, 2008:148). According to Bone (1995:216), word-of-mouth communication has become increasingly important to researchers and managers because of the persuasive influence it has on the purchasing decisions of consumers. For the purpose of this study, negative word-of-mouth communication in the form of oral or verbal, one-to-one communication of cell phone network service provider customers will be analysed.

Current literature on service brand avoidance is limited, particularly in the cell phone network service provider industry. This study focuses on investigating brand avoidance in a services context, with specific emphasis on determining the antecedents of service brand avoidance and, subsequently, the outcome of service brand avoidance in the cell phone network service provider industry. The aim of this study is to propose a model illustrating the relationships between the antecedents of service brand avoidance as well as the outcome of service brand

avoidance, negative word-of-mouth communication, in the South African cell phone network industry. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is to expand on current literature based on brand avoidance by providing a clearer view of the brand avoidance concept within a services context as well as to contribute to the industry by presenting the antecedents of brand avoidance that service businesses should consider in order to avoid the loss of valuable customers through such actions as service brand avoidance and the spread of negative word-of-mouth communication.

The following sections of the research proposal aim to clarify the necessity of conducting the study on service brand avoidance in the cell phone network service provider industry by presenting a background to the study, literature review, hypothesis, problem statement, specific research objectives and conceptual model. Subsequent sections address the research methodology proposed for the undertaking of the study, followed by the clarification of key concepts and the timeline.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

South Africa has shown rapid growth in the number of cell phone users, leading the market to reach saturation (De Meyer & Petzer, 2012:25). This rapid growth has also led to major network congestion and subsequent service problems in the cell phone network service provider industry (Sutherland, 2008). According to Stats SA (2015), telecommunication services was the largest contributor to total household Information and Communication Technology spending of R1 974 billion in 2012. This has led to an increase in the number of cell phone network service providers competing for a share in the profitable market (Deloitte Digital SA, 2013).

The international telecommunications union indicated that South Africa has the fifteenth largest cell phone network service provider market globally with regards to revenues received from network provider services (Deloitte Digital SA, 2013). South Africa's market size places in the top twenty-five countries in terms of global cell phone connections. The cell phone network service provider industry has grown rapidly in the past twenty years (Deloitte Digital SA, 2013). The size of the cell phone population and growing maturity of subscribers is a significant driver of competition amongst cell phone network service providers in South Africa (Deloitte Digital SA, 2013).

Previously, the South African postal and telecommunications services formed a monopoly in the postal and telecommunications sector and were controlled by the Ministry of Transport and Communications. The government offered utilities at a lower cost leading to a system that was

fraught by a shortage of income and operating capital and in turn a growing deficit (Molapo, 2012:2). In 1989, approximately 45.4% of the population had access to landline phones. Telkom, owned and managed by the government, introduced cell phone network provider services, amongst other things, to the country (Sutherland, 2008:7).

After the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, two cell phone network service providers were given permission to operate in the market: Vodacom and MTN (Mobile Telephone Network). The third leading cell phone network service provider, Cell C (Cellstar Mobile Phone Networks) was a late market entrant and launched in 2001. Cell C formed a merger with Virgin Mobile in 2006 in an attempt to expand operations. However, in 2011, Cell C sold out its shares to Virgin Mobile. In 2010, Telkom mobile was launched, formally known as 8ta, which currently operates using the MTN network (Pau, 2014:131).

The South African cell phone network provider industry's main challenge is growing competitiveness among service providers. Since Vodacom and MTN became cell phone network innovators in the new democratic South Africa in 1994, the two leading network providers have, and still enjoy, a high market share of subscribers posing significant growth challenges upon late market entrants (Molapo, 2012:5).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review presents a brief discussion of consumer behaviour and the social identity theory that grounds this study. This is followed by an introduction to brand avoidance and service brand avoidance followed by a discussion of the categories of brand avoidance as presented in literature. Based upon this discussion, possible antecedents of brand avoidance are also identified. A discussion on word-of-mouth communication and negative word-of-mouth communication is finally presented. Based upon the literature, the hypotheses of the study are formulated.

3.1. Grounding the study: consumer behaviour and the social identity theory

Consumer behaviour is defined as the exploration of how organisations, groups and individuals select, acquire, utilise and dispose of a product or service, experience, or idea to satisfy needs and the influences that these processes have on the consumer and society (Cant, Brink & Brijball, 2006:2). This definition proposes that consumer decisions not only involve the buyer and seller but also involve the impact of numerous external influences (Cant *et al.*, 2006:2). Consumer behaviour is not only limited to how consumers' purchase tangible products but also investigates the acquisition of services (Noel, 2009:12). A product or service offering superior

performance is likely to influence satisfied consumers in terms of persuading others to purchase the product or service (Noel, 2009:12). Alternately, dissatisfied consumers tend to encourage negative behaviours such as, non-purchase of a product or service (Noel, 2009:14). According to Noel (2009:14), there are numerous factors that impact consumer behaviour. These factors can be categorised into three hypothetical domains: internal influences, external influences and post-decision processes (Noel, 2009:14). A theory often used to explain consumer behaviour related to pre-purchase and post-purchase behaviours such as service brand avoidance, is the social identity theory.

The social identity theory suggests that individuals define their self-concepts by their connections with socials groups and/or businesses (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to Lam *et al.* (2010:130), existing literature based on the social identity theory reveals that individuals who form part of a brand community tend to engage in rituals and traditions to admire the good qualities of their adored brands, to celebrate shared behavioural norms and values and to assist others in identifying with the brand. Brand community research focuses specifically on how consumers who identify with the same brand or with competing brands interact with one another (Lam *et al.,* 2010:130).

The social identity theory proposes that consumers may develop a consumer-business identification, or consumers may believe that they share the same self-definitional attributes with the business (Lam *et al.*, 2010:129). Applying the social identity theory to a branding relationship motivates the building of brand identification, representing the consumer's sense of belonging to a business and its brand. Brand identification is seen as a major predictor of customer loyalty (He & Lee, 2011:673-674). Consumers who are not able to identify with a business and its brand, and who feel they do not share matching attributes with the brand, are likely to engage in brand avoidance (Lam *et al.*, 2010:129).

3.2. Brand avoidance and service brand avoidance

Existing literature on consumer research is typically traditional and focuses predominantly on consumers' satisfactory experiences with a brand. However, the comprehensive field of anti-consumption and more specifically the concept of brand avoidance is generating a growing interest amongst consumers, researchers and managers (Lee *et al.,* 2009b:421). Lee *et al.* (2009:169-170) suggest that an extensive variety of definitions exist for the term 'brand'. In their study, a brand is described as 'a multi-dimensional tool that communicates a constellation of values' (Lee *et al.*, 2009:169-170).

However, literature seldom acknowledges the concept of brand avoidance and does not provide a formal definition (Lee *et al.,* 2009:169). Two significant articles in marketing literature explicitly mention brand avoidance. Olivia, Oliver and MacMillen (1992:83-95) suggest the antithesis of brand loyalty as brand avoidance, and, is used interchangeably with the term brand switching. According to Olivia *et al.* (1992:84-85), satisfaction among consumers motivates brand loyalty while dissatisfaction subsequently motivates brand avoidance. Thompson, Reindfleisch and Arsel's (2006:50-63) study does not provide a specific definition of brand avoidance. However, their study revealed that brand meanings believed to be inauthentic likely dissuades consumers from purchasing particular product or service brands. (Lee, 2008:225) describes brand avoidance as 'the conscious, deliberate, and active rejection of a brand that the consumer can afford, owing to the negative meaning associated with that brand'.

Prior to defining service brand avoidance, it is necessary to briefly put service brands in context. According to Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony (2000:141), the limited research on the nature of service brands refers to the same fundamental principles and concepts uncovered in literature concerning the branding of goods. Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony's (2000:143) study suggest that the definition of 'the brand' equally applies to goods and services. This is justified by stating that both product and service brands form part of perceptions in the mind of the consumer. Brands are a blend of emotional and rational components, they thrive by developing relationships with consumers, they are grounded on trust, and lastly both types of brands represent an ability to satisfy consumer's needs (Dall'Olmo Riley & de Chernatony, 2000:143. However, in the services sector, personnel have a greater effect on creating the brand's values (Dall'Olmo Riley & de Chernatoney, 2000:143).

Service brand avoidance refers to the intentional rejection or avoidance of a particular service providing business due to several factors relating to consumer behaviour, more specifically pre-purchase and post-purchase behaviours such as service brand avoidance, explained by the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The study will empirically measure the extent to which consumers avoid a particular service brand.

3.3. Brand avoidance categories and possible antecedents of brand avoidance

Five categories (reasons) of brand avoidance have been uncovered, namely experiential, identity, deficit-value, moral and advertising categories. Table 1 presents existing studies that uncover these categories of brand avoidance as well as a brief description of each. Consequently, possible antecedents of brand avoidance that will be empirically measured in this study are identified.

Table 1: The categories (reasons) of brand avoidance

Categories (reasons)	Description	Authors
Experiential avoidance	Experiential avoidance emerges from incidents which involve unsatisfactory experiences with a business and its brand.	Knittel *et al.* (2016:28); Lofgren and Ostlund (2016:8-9); Lee *et al.* (2009b:421); Lee *et al.* (2009b:422); Lee (2007:86); (Lee, 2007:77); Gronroos (2006:406); Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal and Voss (2002:122); Berry (2000).
Identity avoidance	Identity avoidance comprises incidents where the brand's image is seen to be symbolically incompatible with one's self-perception or identity.	Lofgren and Ostlund (2016:9-10) Khan and Lee (2014:331); Lee *et al.* (2009b:173); Kulviwat, Bruner and Al-Shuridah (2009:707); Duhacheck, Zhang and Krishnan (2007); (Lee, 2007:77; Banister and Hogg (2001:75).
Deficit-value avoidance	Deficit-value avoidance involves brands being interpreted as inadequate in value.	Knittel *et al.* (2016:31); Lofgren and Ostlund (2016:11-12); Lee *et al.* (2009a:424); Lee, 2007:77).
Moral avoidance	Moral avoidance involves the unwillingness of consumers to adopt a specific brand due to socio-political and ethical issues.	Knittel *et al.* (2016:30); Lofgren and Ostlund (2016:11); Lee *et al.* (2009b:175); Cromie and Ewing (2009:220); Bloemer, Brijs and Kasper (2009:63); Lee, 2007:77; Hodge and Kress (1993:6).
Advertising avoidance	Advertising avoidance involves the avoidance of brands owing to failed advertising communications.	Knittel *et al.* (2016:35); Lofgren and Ostlund (2016:12-13); Shimp and Andrews (2013:400); Lantos and Craton (2012:400); Belesioti (2011:4); Kotler (2009).

3.3.1. Experiential avoidance: unmet expectations

The key motive leading to brand avoidance under the category of experiential avoidance is negative first-hand experiences typically involving unmet expectations (Lofgren & Ostlund, 2016:8-9). *Lee et al.* (2009b:422) suggest that experiential avoidance is associated with the direct use of a brand and the perceptions that are associated with it. Experiential avoidance motivating brand avoidance includes the poor performance of the product or service, the inconvenience or hassle associated with acquiring the product or service and a negative store environment, which subsequently lead to unmet expectations (Lee *et al.,* 2009b:422). Branding involves making a brand promise to consumers and adding value to their lives by fulfilling that promise (Knittel, Beurer & Berndt, 2016:28). Brand promises lead to expectations amongst consumers and when these brand promises are consistent with the expectations of consumers, repurchase is encouraged (Berry, 2000:129; Gronroos, 2006:406). According to Lee (2007:79), a consumer's negative experience with a brand may be a particularly powerful reason to avoid the brand entirely. Three sub-themes of experiential avoidance are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: The sub-themes of experiential avoidance

Sub-themes	Description
Poor performance	This sub-theme refers to the inability of a brand to perform basic functions which forms the basis of consumer avoidance behaviour under the category of experiential avoidance (Lee *et al.,* 2009b:173). Most brand promises aim to reinsure consumers that products and services will perform at the basic level that is required by the consumer (Lee, 2007:86). However, some brand promises of basic functionality are not delivered, leading to poor brand performance, and subsequently brand avoidance. If the consumer's actual experience does not match what they were led to expect, it is likely that dissatisfaction will be the end result and brand avoidance may occur (Oliver, 1989:461; Olivia *et al.,* 1992:88 and Thompson *et al.,* 2006:50-63).

Hassle factor	This sub-theme refers to the inconvenience involved when acquiring a product or service (Lee, 2007:91). In a study conducted by Lee (2007:91), it was found that undelivered promises not only led to unmet expectations but subsequently resulted in negative experiences which was further complicated by an additional inconvenience or hassle factor. In an effort to manage unsatisfactory service experiences, most businesses offer exchange policies or money back guarantees (Lee, 2007:91). However, despite service recovery tactic, the hassle factor involved in a failed service experience often leads to brand avoidance (Lee *et al.,* 2009b:173).
Store environment	This sub-theme emerges from unsatisfactory brand encounters from the consumers' perspective in store (Lee *et al.,* 2009a:173). Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal and Voss (2002:122) identified three key aspects of store environment: ambience, design and social avoidance. Lee (2007:95) suggests that several consumers chose to avoid brands due to a messy store layout, unclear labels and discomfort within the store.

The study will empirically measure the extent to which cell phone network service provider customers have experienced unmet expectations with a particular service brand they avoid. Based upon the discussion above the following alternative hypothesis is formulated for the study:

H$_1$: *Unmet expectations* has a direct positive influence on service brand avoidance in the cell phone network service provider industry.

3.3.2. Identity avoidance: symbolic incongruence

According to Lee *et al.* (2009b:173) identity avoidance refers to the inability of a brand to represent a unique set of characteristics. Consumers develop self-perceptions as well as identify their social reference groups through the brands they actively consume and those that they actively avoid (Khan & Lee, 2014:331; Banister & Hogg, 2001:75). Undesired self is a concept most pertinent to brand avoidance (Knittel *et al.,* 2016:30). Similarly, a consumer preserves his or her self-concept by making use of brands that are congruent with one's self, which enhance and maintain their self-concept and thus avoiding brands which are perceived as incongruent with the desired or actual self-concept (Knittel *et al.*, 2016:30). Four sub-themes of identity avoidance is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: The sub-themes of identity avoidance

Sub-themes	Description
Negative social influences	This sub-theme refers to the manner in which members who form part of a reference group influence one another's behaviour and experience social pressure to carry out specific behaviours (Kulviwat, Bruner & Al-Shuridah, 2009:707). According to Khan and Lee (2014:332) and Duhacheck, Zhang and Krishnan (2007:395), consumers believe that they have the ability to make choices independently. However, individual's beliefs can potentially influence consumers, particularly individuals with negative attitudes who have the ability to influence other's purchase decisions. Duhacheck *et al.* (2007:395) found that individual's negative attitudes towards a brand had a significantly powerful influence on the attitude of other individuals.
Perceived risk	This sub-theme refers to perceptions of uncertainty among consumers and the subsequent consequences of engaging in a specific activity (Featherman & Pavlou, 2003:453-454). Perceived risk occurs when consumers are uncertain about what they will receive from a particular brand, therefore, consumers aim to reduce the risk involved as much as possible by avoiding the brand entirely (Khan & Lee *et al.*, 2014:333).
Inauthenticity	This sub-theme refers to a situation where a brand becomes too popular amongst consumers and loses its ability to deliver a desired meaning to consumers (Knittel *et al.*, 2016:30; Lee, 2007:106). Similarly, Lee *et al.* (2009b:174) suggest that for certain brands, popularity may be a particularly powerful drawback since the over-commercialisation of the brand may lead to a lack of authenticity.
Deindividuation	This sub-theme refers to the avoidance of mainstream brands to prevent the loss of consumer self-identity and individuality. Deindividuation avoidance emerges when the consumption of a brand leads to a loss of identity. A study conducted by Lee *et al.* (2009b:173) found that the thought of being similar to other individuals was problematic and not the actual quality and functionality of the brand.

The study will empirically measure the extent to which cell phone network service provider customers have experienced symbolic incongruence with a particular service brand they avoid. Based upon the discussion above the following alternative hypothesis is formulated for the study:

H[2]: *Symbolic incongruence* has a direct positive influence on *service brand avoidance* in the cell phone network service provider industry.

3.3.3. Deficit-value avoidance: unacceptable trade-offs

Lee *et al*. (2009a:424) suggest that deficit-value avoidance refers to a situation when certain brands are perceived as representing an unacceptable cost to benefit trade-off. Consumers may choose to avoid brands that are perceived as having a low-quality and therefore are perceived as having a deficit-value (Lee *et al.*, 2009a:424). The consumer's perception of value, their choices and purchase intentions are also influenced by a price-quality perceived relationship (Knittel *et al.*, 2016:31). Table 4 highlights a sub-theme of deficit-value avoidance.

Table 4: The sub-theme of deficit-value avoidance

Sub-theme	Description
Unfamiliarity	This sub-theme suggests that consumers are likely to engage in the avoidance of brands that they are not familiar with as these brands may be associated with lower quality. This increases the consumer's perception of the risk involved when purchasing the brand (Knittel *et al.,* 2016:31). Similarly, when consumers compare unfamiliar brands with brands that they are familiar with, avoidance of the unfamiliar brand is likely to occur as those brands are seen to be low in quality and high in risk (Lofgren & Ostlund, 2016:17). According to Lee (2007:121) a lack of brand familiarity may increase the perceptions of an unacceptable trade-off.

The study will empirically measure the extent to which cell phone network service provider customers have experienced unacceptable trade-offs with a particular service brand they avoid. Based upon the discussion above the following alternative hypothesis is formulated for the study:

H$_3$: *Unacceptable trade-offs* has a direct positive influence on *service brand avoidance* in the cell phone network service provider industry.

3.3.4. Moral avoidance: ideological incompatibility

Moral avoidance contributes as another significant motivating factor behind brand avoidance. Moral avoidance can be referred to as the ideological incompatibility between the consumer and the brand (Lee *et al.*, 2009b:175). Ideological incompatibility is an important motivating factor of moral avoidance and can specifically be referred to as a socio-economic and political set of beliefs as well as a systematic body of ideas which are organised into a specific point of view (Hodge & Kress, 1993:6; Lee *et al.,* 2009b:175). Table 5 presents a sub-theme of moral avoidance. The study will empirically measure the extent to which consumers have experienced ideological incompatibility with a particular service brand they avoid.

Table 5: The sub-theme of moral avoidance

Sub-theme	Description
Anti-hegemony	This sub-theme refers to the opposition to dominating forces, a communal public belief that reaches further than the individual, and the belief that it is an ethical duty to avoid specific brands (Lee *et al.*, 2009b:175). There are two significant components of anti-hegemony: • **Monopoly resistance** Consumers may possibly avoid dominant brands to prevent the formation of monopolies as they are associated with corporate irresponsibility (Knittel *et al.,* 2016:30). Consumers may feel discouraged by a lack of freedom of choice amongst brands, resulting in brand avoidance (Cromie *et al.,* 2009:220). • **Country-of origin effects** This component refers to the connection that consumers have with a brand's country-of-origin (Knittel *et al.,* 2016:30). Consumers may use country-of-origin of a brand as a means of evaluating service quality of the brand (Bloemer, Brijs & Kasper, 2009:63).

The study will empirically measure the extent to which cell phone network service provider customers have experienced ideological incompatibility with a particular service brand they avoid. Based upon the discussion above the following alternative hypothesis is formulated for the study:

H_4: *Ideological incompatibility* has a direct positive influence on *service brand avoidance* in the cell phone network service provider industry.

3.3.5. Advertising avoidance: failed communications

In addition to the different antecedents mentioned above, failed advertising communications can be regarded as another significant factor leading to brand avoidance (Knittel *et al.,* 2016:35). In Knittel's *et al.* (2016:35) study conducted on brand avoidance amongst generation Y, participant's comments related to either television or radio commercials. Even though these commercials were not current, participants remembered the negative feelings that were associated with them which lead to brand avoidance (Knittel *et al.*, 2016:35). According to Knittel *et al.* (2016:35), there are four avoidance factors of advertising that could lead to brand avoidance: content, music, celebrity endorsement and response. These are consequently discussed. Table 6 presents the four sub-themes of advertising avoidance. The study will empirically measure the extent to which consumers have experienced failed communications with a particular service brand they avoid.

Table 6: The sub-themes of advertising avoidance

Sub-themes	Description
Content	This sub-theme refers to the content of an advertisement which includes the specific elements within an advertisement such as the storyline and the message (Knittel *et al.,* 2016:35). Knittel's *et al.* (2016:35) study reveals that the content of an advertisement can result in avoidance of the advertised brand. According to respondents, not only did the idea of the advertisement impact brand avoidance but the creative idea and execution also proved to impact brand avoidance (Knittel *et al.,* (2016:35).

Music	This sub-theme refers to the use of music in advertisements that could contribute to brand avoidance. Extensive literature on the use of music in advertising reveals that music is a frequently used tool to creatively influence the target audience and their perception of the advertisement (Lantos & Craton, 2012:22; Shimp & Andrews, 2013:400). Music has the ability to influence consumer attitudes, purchase behaviour and preferences, which could potentially lead to brand avoidance (Knittel *et al.,* 2016:36).
Celebrity endorsement	This sub-theme refers to consumers focusing solely on the endorser of the brand rather than the advertisement itself (Lofgren & Ostlund, 2016:13). Celebrity endorsers add symbolic meaning to products and services (Knittel *et al.,* 2016:36). Consumers may have a positive or negative reaction to an advertisement related to the celebrity used (Knittel *et al.,* 2016:36). Disliking a celebrity used to represent the brand could lead to the consumer disliking the brand itself which subsequently may lead to brand avoidance (Knittel *et al.*, 2016:36).
Response	This sub-theme refers to the individual interpretation of the message, which forms part of the communication process, and is largely dependent on the receiver (Lofgren & Ostlund, 2016:13). One advertisement could have the ability to generate a number of different responses from different viewers (Knittel *et al.*, 2016:37). In general, this sub-motive for response may be described as a disliking towards the advertisement which may not necessarily be on a rational level, however, it can be seen as a subjective emotional response and evaluation (Knittel *et al.*, 2016:37).

The study will empirically measure the extent to which cell phone network service provider customers have experienced failed communications with a particular service brand they avoid. Based upon the discussion above the following alternative hypothesis is formulated for the study:

H_5: *Failed communications* has a direct positive influence on *service brand avoidance* in the cell phone network service provider industry.

3.4. Word-of-mouth communication and negative word-of-mouth communication

Word-of-mouth communication refers to a form of social communication among consumers regarding their direct experiences with a business or a product and has undoubtedly always had a powerful influence on marketing (Jillian, Sweeney & Mazzarol, 2012:239; Richins, 1984:697). Word-of-mouth communication has become increasingly important to researchers and managers because of the persuasive influence it has on the purchasing decisions of consumers (Bone, 1995:216). A large amount of word-of-mouth communication occurs in the context of group discussions with family, friends, colleagues and strangers (Chan & Cui, 2011:325-326). According to Jillian *et al.* (2012:239), negative word-of-mouth communication has a greater influence on the receiver than positive word-of-mouth communication. Word-of-mouth communication is known to have a significant influence on consumer purchase behaviour (Jillian *et al.*, 2012:73). Research suggests that word-of-mouth communication is often related to consumers' previous satisfactory or unsatisfactory purchasing experiences (Blodgett, Granbois & Walters, 1993:399).

For the purpose of this study, word-of-mouth communication in the form of oral or verbal, one-to-one communication amongst cell phone network service provider customers is considered. According to Balaji, Khong and Chong (2016:529), negative word-of-mouth communication can be described as 'a consumer's efforts to share negative or unfavourable feedback or opinions with family, friends and others'. Negative word-of-mouth communication is likely to dissuade potential consumers from considering a particular brand, consequently harming the business's reputation and financial position (Sundaram, Mitra, Webster, 1998:527). According to Noel (2009:14), once a purchasing decision has been made, the last step is to determine the outcome. A dissatisfied customer could react negatively by sharing their negative feelings with other individuals (Noel, 2009:14). Therefore, it is evident that service brand avoidance could subsequently lead to outcome behaviours such as the spread of negative word-of-mouth communication amongst consumers (Noel, 2009:14). In addition, negative experiences with a brand such as unmet expectations, symbolic incongruence, unacceptable trade-offs, ideological incompatibility and failed communications may lead to negative word-of-mouth communication (Noel, 2009:14; Verma, 2012).

The study will empirically measure the extent to which cell phone network service provider customers spread negative word-of-mouth with respect to a service brand they avoid. Based upon the discussion above the following alternative hypothesis is formulated for the study:

H[6]: *Service brand avoidance* has a direct positive influence on *negative word-of-mouth communication* in the cell phone network service provider industry.

4. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Based upon preliminary research and the previously discussed background and literature review, the following elements support the definition of the problem statement for this study:

- The cell phone network service provider industry is a highly saturated industry that is fraught with service failures (De Meyer & Petzer, 2012:25).
- There is a growing competitiveness in the cell phone network service provider industry in South Africa (Deloitte Digital SA, 2013).
- It is necessary for service businesses to provide high-quality services to distinguish themselves from rivals (Boshoff & Du Plessis, 2009:512).
- Consumer often engage in brand avoidance when they feel that they do not share the same self-definitional needs with the business from which they choose to purchase (Lam *et al.,* 2010:129).
- It is essential for service businesses to understand brand avoidance in a services context as well as its origins, as the consequences can be significant for a business, its profitability and reputation (Knittel *et al.,* 2016:28).
- Several factors, such as poor performance, hassle factor, store environment, negative social influences, perceived risk, inauthenticity, deindividuation, unfamiliarity and ideological incompatibility have a significant impact on brand avoidance (Lee *et al.,* 2009a; Lee *et al.,* 2009b).
- Brand avoidance has certain outcomes and behaviours such as the spread of negative word-of-mouth communication (Chan & Chui, 2011:326; Jillian *et al.,* 2012:75; Fernandes & Dos Santos, 2008:148, Noel, 2009).
- Brand avoidance and consequently negative word-of-mouth communication can have harmful effects on the cell phone network service provider industry (Blake, 2016, Noel, 2009:14).
- Research thus far has not focused on a specific industry nor are there any comprehensive multidimensional studies on service brand avoidance (Lofgren & Ostlund, 2016:50).
- There are no existing studies, either internationally or in South Africa, that contribute to service brand avoidance in the cell phone network service provider industry (Lofgren & Ostlund, 2016:50).

Taking into consideration the introduction, the background to the study, the preliminary literature review and the above discussion, the following problem statement is formulated for this study:

In a highly competitive and saturated cell phone network service provider industry, consumers often engage in service brand avoidance. Consumers engage in brand avoidance when they believe that brands do not fulfil their self-definitional needs. Brand avoidance may lead to outcomes and behaviours such as the spread of negative word-of-mouth communication. It is imperative for cell phone network service providers to uncover the antecedents and outcomes of service brand avoidance to avoid the loss of valuable customers. There is no evidence of existing studies, either internationally or in South Africa, that investigate service brand avoidance in the cell phone network service provider industry. This study therefore focuses on uncovering the antecedents and outcome of brand avoidance from the perspective of customers who have avoided a service brand in the cell phone network service provider industry.

5. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In order to address the problem identified, the following research objectives have been formulated:

5.1. Primary objective:

The primary objective of the study is to determine the interrelationships between service brand avoidance, its antecedents and outcome in the cell phone network service provider industry in South Africa.

5.2. Secondary objectives:

- To determine a demographic profile of cell phone network service provider customers who avoid particular cell phone network service providers.
- To determine the cell phone network service provider patronage habits of these cell phone network service provider customers.
- To uncover the antecedents of service brand avoidance in a cell phone network service provider context.

- To measure the extent of service brand avoidance of these cell phone network service provider customers.
- To measure the extent with which these cell phone network service provider customers spread negative word-of-mouth communication in the form of oral or verbal, one-to-one communication.
- To empirically test the conceptual model proposed for the study.

6. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The conceptual model for this study is depicted in Figure 1 below. The model depicts the relationship between service brand avoidance, its proposed antecedents and outcome in cell phone network service provider industry context.

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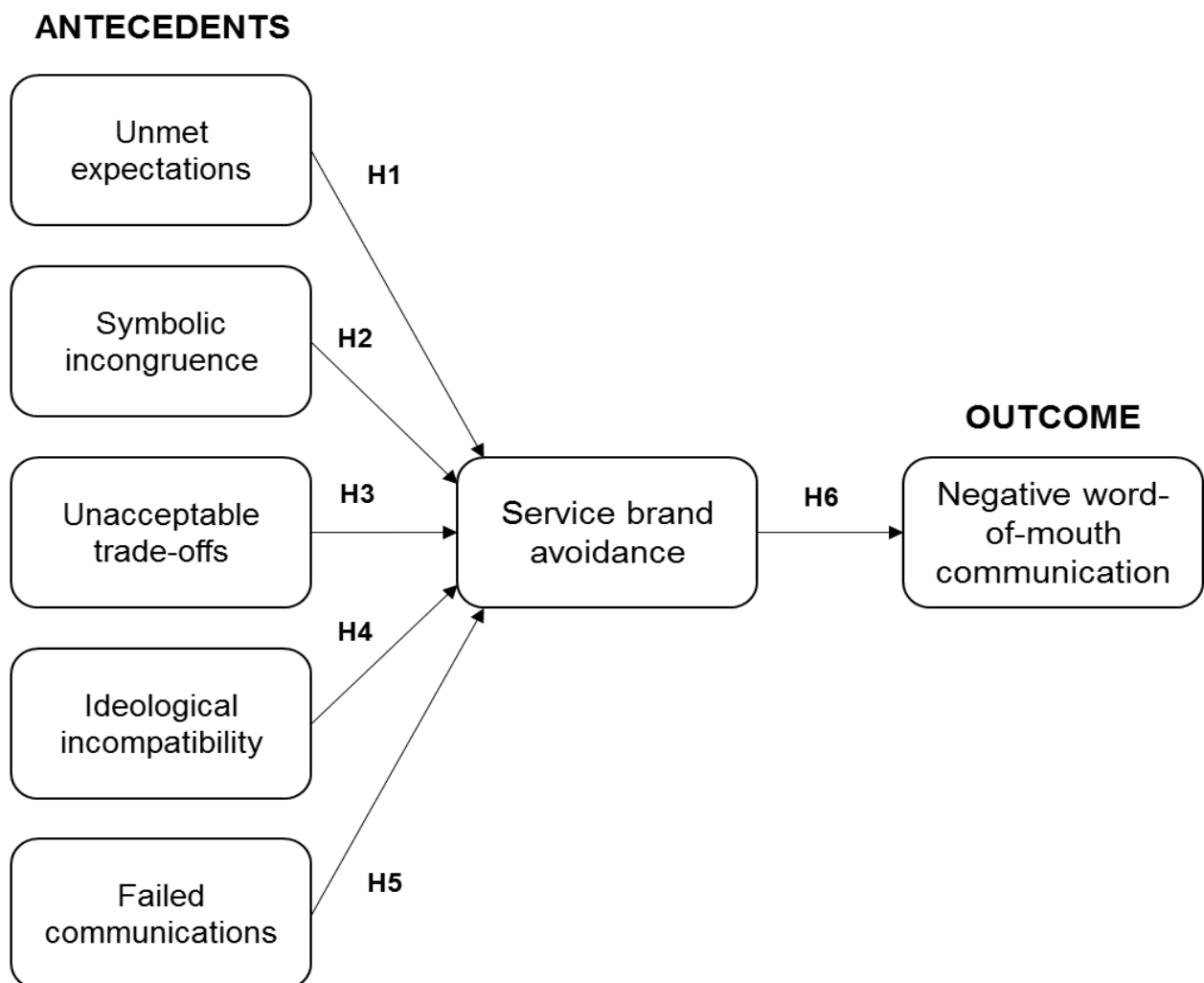
7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

7.1. Research design

The purpose of the research design is to provide a complete plan detailing the methods that the researcher will use to collect and analyse data (Hair, Celsi, Ortinau & Bush, 2013:36). Determining the most suitable research design is a function of information requirements and objectives (Hair *et al.*, 2013:36). It is crucial for the researcher to take into consideration the various types of data, the method in which data will be collected and sampled. There are three comprehensive forms of research designs which are important for the researcher to consider: exploratory, descriptive and causal (Hair *et al.,* 2013:36). To reach the objectives of this study, a descriptive research design that is quantitative in nature will be used. Hair *et al.* (2013:36) states that descriptive research collects quantitative data to answer specific research questions such as what, who, where, when and how. A descriptive research design is considered to be unambiguous and its purpose is to confirm insights along with aiding the researcher in selecting an appropriate solution to the problem. The sample of a descriptive study is reasonably large and the analysis of the data is usually quantitative (Pride & Farrel, 2007).

According to Hair *et al.* (2013:77), quantitative research is defined as a form of research that emphasises the use of formal questions and predetermined response options which are provided in questionnaires and are administered to a large number of respondents. Hair *et al.* (2013:77) suggest that quantitative data is generally used when there is a clear and precise research problem at hand. A quantitative data collection method comprises the use of analytical approaches and numerical measurements. This allows the researcher to examine significant relationships as well as gain insights into these relationships (Hair *et al.,* 2013:117).

This study is considered to be descriptive since it is conclusive rather than exploratory which indicates that the research is grounded upon quantifiable information that the researcher can use to make estimations pertaining to information collected from samples. A descriptive approach is used in the study to describe cell phone network service provider customers, determine their cell phone network service provider patronage habits and measure service brand avoidance and word-of-mouth communication. Quantitative research allows the researcher to gather information based on a larger number of respondents, is relatively easy to administer and permits reliable statistical analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2013:109).

7.2. Information type and sources

Secondary data can be defined as information collected for a specific purpose other than the study at hand. In order to carry out research for the study, secondary sources such as reputable research documents, articles, websites and books will be used to attain a theoretical background and comprehensive understanding of the study. Secondary data has been gathered to uncover the antecedents and outcome of brand avoidance in a services context. Secondary data should preferably be gathered prior to the gathering of primary research as this sort of information provides a theoretical background necessary for the researcher to carry out the study (Burns & Bush, 2014:74).

According to Hair *et al.* (2013:26), primary data is information that is gathered specifically for a current research problem. Primary information typically presents significant insight into the study whereas secondary information does not generally provide such insight (Hair *et al.,* 2013:38). With regards to this study, primary data will be collected and analysed in order to provide insights into the demographic profile of cell phone network service provider customers that avoid particular cell phone network providers, the cell phone network service provider patronage habits of these customers, the antecedents of brand avoidance in a cell phone network service provider context, the extent to which these customers avoid these service brands and the extent to which they spread negative word-of-mouth communication.

7.3. Data collection method

There are various aspects that need to be considered when selecting a method for collecting data. McDaniel and Gates (2013:166) suggest that researchers should consider whether the desired method chosen will deliver data that is of quality and whether the method will present the portion of respondents necessary to permit a conclusive analysis of data. Existing literature presents three significant data collection methods pertinent to researchers: self-administered, person-administered and telephone-administered (Hair *et al.*, 2013:111).

For the purpose of this study, a self-administered method will be used. A self-administered survey is a technique used to collect data where the respondent examines the survey questions and answers them in the presence of a fieldworker (Hair *et al.*, 2013:115). Self-administered questionnaires will be handed out to the respondents to complete. Self-administered surveys are low cost, allow for respondent control, does not allow for interviewer bias error and provides anonymity (Hair *et al.,* 2013:115). Based on the method chosen, a data collection form needs to be developed which is discussed in the next section.

7.4 Questionnaire

According to McDaniel and Gates (2013:336) and Hair *et al.* (2013:188), a questionnaire can be defined as an array of questions and scales designed to elicit defined and relevant answers and is utilised to collect raw primary data for the purpose of solving a research problem. Hair *et al.* (2013:188) suggest that a questionnaire should follow a methodical approach which involves the selection of the most appropriate instructions and wording. The questionnaire will commence with a screening question which is significant because it allows the researcher to adhere to the specific quota. The questionnaire will consist of six sections.

- Preamble: This section will provide an introduction to the study, the rights of the respondent and a screening question. Screening questions are used to ensure that prospective respondents qualify to be included in the study (Hair *et al.*, 2013:194). The screening question will determine whether the individual actively avoids a cell phone network service provider brand operating in South Africa in order to qualify to take part in the study.
- Section A: This section will gather responses related to demographic variables such as age, education, gender, home language, marital status and employment of respondents, using questions requiring closed-ended responses.
- Section B: This section will gather responses related to the patronage habits of respondents in the cell phone network service provider industry, using questions requiring closed-ended responses.
- Section C: This section will measure the antecedents of brand avoidance in a cell phone network service provider industry context on a seven-point newly developed unlabelled Likert-scale where 1 is 'Strongly disagree and 7 is 'Strongly agree'.
- Section D: This section will measure the extent of service brand avoidance in a cell phone network service provider industry context on a seven-point newly developed Likert-scale where 1 is 'Strongly disagree' and 7 is 'Strongly agree'.
- Section E: This section will measure the extent to which negative word-of-mouth communication is spread relating to the cell phone network service provider brand being avoided on a seven-point existing unlabelled Likert-scale where 1 is 'Strongly disagree' and 7 is 'Strongly agree'. An existing scale developed by Jillian *et al.* (2012) will be used. The scale has strong psychometric properties and was found to be generalizable in four contexts, namely sending positive and negative messages and receiving positive and negative messages (Jillian *et al.,* 2012:237).

7.5. Sampling design

When conducting primary research, it is necessary to give consideration to the sampling design (Hair *et al.*, 2013:38). According to McDaniel and Gates (2010:328), a sampling design can be referred to as the necessary steps that are taken to ensure that the data that is collected represents the target population. In addition, the term population can be referred to as 'the identifiable set of elements of interest to the researcher and relevant to the information problem' (Hair *et al.*, 2013:137).

7.5.1. Sample plan and size

A sampling plan serves as an outline which defines the appropriate target population, identifies the possible respondents, determines procedures to be followed for selecting the sample and determines the appropriate sample size (Hair *et al.,* 2013:38). Table 7 provides the proposed sampling plan for this study.

Table 7: Sampling plan

Sampling	
Target population	Those who are avoiding a cell phone network service provider brand and who reside in Johannesburg
Sample frame	No sampling frame exists
Sampling units	Individual consumers who are avoiding a cell phone network service provider brand
Sampling techniques	Non-probability, two-stage quota sampling
Time period	2016
Extent	Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa
Sampling size	400

The target population of this study are those cell phone network service provider customers who are avoiding a cell phone network service provider brand and who reside in Johannesburg. In order to select the respondents for this study, a two-stage sampling procedure will be followed. Respondents will be selected in Johannesburg filling age, gender and race quotas based upon convenience sampling. An equal number of males and females whom are black, coloured, Indian and white, across different age categories will be selected. A quota sampling technique is used in this study to ensure representativity of the target population (Malhorta,

2007:341). The proposed sampling size of the study aims to include 400 respondents. A total number of 20 fieldworkers will be used to field the questionnaires. Each fieldworker will distribute 20 questionnaires in the communities in which they reside and will ensure that each of the quotas are filled.

7.6. Data preparation and analysis

A quantitative data analysis commences with the data preparation process: data validation, editing and coding, data entry and data tabulation (Hair *et al.*, 2013:242). Data preparation is crucial in taking raw data and converting it into useable and coded data that can be analysed (Hair *et al.,* 2013:242). In order to analyse the data gathered for the purpose of this study, the data will be entered into SPSS version 23. Analysing the data allows the researcher to evaluate the different answers received by respondents and uncover relationships between variables and ultimately draw conclusions (Burns & Bush, 2014:317). More specifically, SPSS 23 will be used to calculate frequencies and descriptive statistics and to conduct an exploratory factor analysis on the items developed to measure service brand avoidance, its antecedents and outcome. AMOS 23 will furthermore be used to assess the measurement model and structural model of this study.

8. CLARIFICATION OF KEY CONCEPTS

- **Cell phone network service provider**
  Refers to 'a company that offers transmission services to users of wireless devices through radio frequency (RF) signals rather than through end-to-end wire communication' (Rouse, 2011).

- **Brand avoidance**
  Refers to 'the conscious, deliberate, and active rejection of a brand that the consumer can afford, owing to the negative meaning associated with that brand' (Lee, 2008:225).

- **Service brand avoidance**
  Refers to the intentional rejection or avoidance of a particular service providing business due to several factors, such as, poor performance, hassle factor, store environment, negative social influences, perceived risk, inauthenticity, deindividuation, unfamiliarity and ideological incompatibility (Lee, 2009a:422).

- **Negative word-of-mouth communication**

  According to Balaji, Khong & Chong (2016:529), negative word-of-mouth communication can be defined as 'a consumer's efforts to share negative or unfavourable feedback or opinions with family, friends and others'.

9. CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter One will commence with a description of each of the concepts upon which the study is based, a background to the study and a problem statement. The chapter will conclude with the objectives of the study and the proposed research methodology for the study.

Chapter Two will analyse the South African cell phone network service provider industry. An outline of the cell phone network service provider industry in a South African context will be provided.

Chapter Three will analyse consumer behaviour and the social identity theory. A theoretical background will be provided of consumer behaviour and a theory that is often used to describe pre-purchase and post-purchase behaviours such as, service brand avoidance, the social identity theory.

Chapter Four will explore the concept of brand avoidance, its antecedents and outcome, negative word-of-mouth communication. This chapter will provide a theoretical background of the brand avoidance concept, its possible antecedents and outcome, specifically in the cell phone network service provider industry.

Chapter Five will focus on the conceptual model to be used for the study. This chapter will provide the literature that supports the relationships between the three important constructs, the formulation of the hypothesis and a depiction of the conceptual model.

Chapter Six will provide a theoretical background to the research methodology used in the study. The chapter will discuss the various phases of the research process to be followed in the study.

Chapter Seven will present the results and findings of the study. The key findings of the study will be discussed. The proposed research objectives will be assessed against the literature review as well as the key findings of the study.

Chapter Eight will provide recommendations and conclusions of the study. The chapter will include a summary, the significance, limitations and future recommendations of the study.