WHY CONSUMERS LOVE BRANDS?

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore the consumer-brand love relationship. By doing so, 750 entries of consumer statements about their beloved brands were analyzed via discourse analysis. As a result, it was found that brand love is different from interpersonal love. There is brand related factors (functional congruity, satisfaction, brand trust, brand passion, sensory experiences) as well as consumer related factors (self-congruity, and personalized experience) affect the development of love relationship with brands.

1. Introduction

Brands help define consumers' lives and play a central role in people's consumption behavior (Albert, 2013). As a new territory for differentiation and loyalty, creating deep emotional connection between brands and consumers became crucial. And that shift in the consumer-brand relationship raised interest and research on brand love. Among practitioners, the book *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands* by Roberts (2004) drew attention that brands become ubiquitous and commoditized because of continuous improvements across quality dimensions in manufacturing, distribution, service, price, and promotion.

Studies on the love relationship between consumers and brands are commonplace not only in marketing literature but also in managerial applications. Research has revealed that there may develop a love strong bonds between consumer and brands such as marriage-like, love-like and friendship-like (Fournier, & Yao, 1997). There are studies on the conceptualization (Ahuvia, 1993; Albert *et al.* 2008) and measurement (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Batra *et al.*, 2012; Albert & Valette-Florence, 2010; Rossiter, 2012). There are only a few studies analyzed the outcomes of brand love and found that brand love is associated with positive word of mouth (WOM), brand loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006; Fournier 1998; Thomson *et al.*, 2005), increased willingness to pay a price premium (Thomson et al., 2005), forgiveness of brand failures (Bauer *et al.*, 2009), brand identification (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen 2010; Albert & Merunka, 2013), commitment, and trust (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen 2010; Albert & Merunka, 2013).

This research aims to define the roots of brand love and answer the question of why people love brands. Based on 750 entries of consumer statements about their lovemarks, this research proposes a higher-end love relationship model. Secondly, this research put forwards

the possible antecedents brand love. And finally, this study extends the literature by responding Albert &Merunka's (2013) further research concern on the roots of brand love.

The following section provides a literature review on the concept of brand love and the reasoning of research questions. Next, the methodology is explained and the results of analysis are discussed along with the theoretical and managerial implications. The further research considerations are presented last.

2. Literature Review

Brand love is defined as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment that a person has for a particular trade name" (Caroll & Ahuvia, 2006, p. 5). Consumers develop an emotional connection with the brands that is beyond brand loyalty. Love is a predominant concept since it was the second most commonly listed emotion, superseded only by happiness, when asked to list feelings that were experienced for an emotionally attached object (Schultz *et al.*, 1989). Our sense of who we are is strongly influenced by the people, and things that we love (Ahuvia, 2005).

Theorists attempted to link the brand love with the interpersonal love based on Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love. Sternberg's (1986) defines fundamental components of love as (1) intimacy, (2) passion, and (3) decision/commitment. Shimp & Madden (1988) adapted Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love and defined eight types of consumer-object relations: nonliking, liking, infatuation, functionalism, inhibited desire, utilitarianism, succumbed desire, and loyalty. Ahuvia (1993), Whang et al. (2004) concluded that there were similarities between interpersonal love and brand love. However, Albert et al. (2008) argue that love is a complex phenomenon, and choosing any particular theory of interpersonal relationships may be theoretically constraining brand love concept. They defined seven first-order dimensions of brand love (duration, idealization, intimacy, pleasure, dream, memories, unicity) that constitute two second-order dimensions (passion and affection) (Albert et al. 2008). In addition to that, Batra *et al.* (2012) highlighted that consumers' love for a brand should have been differentiated from interpersonal love and they revealed that brand love was constituted by seven dimensions: perceived functional quality; self-related cognitions; positive affect; negative affect; satisfaction; attitude strength; and loyalty. Rossiter (2012) provided the C-OAR-SE method to measure brand love and distinguishing it from brand liking.

On the other hand, there are several studies that explored consumer-brand relationship constructs as antecedents and consequences of brand love. The results demonstrate relationships between brand love and sense of community (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen 2010) brand trust, and brand identification (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2010) as antecedents, and brand commitment, (Albert & Merunka, 2013) positive WOM (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Batra *et al.*, 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia 2006; Fournier 1998; Thomson *et al.*, 2005), propensity to pay a higher price (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Thomson *et al.*, 2005); resistance to negative information (Batra *et al.*, 2012), brand loyalty (Batra et al., 2012; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2010), and active engagement (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2010) as consequences.

Previous studies used convenience sampling, and collected data via in-dept interviews or self-administered questionnaires. Love is a complex emotion and measuring love via self-administered questionnaires may not cover all the aspect of brand love. In that point, qualitative research and in-depth interviews may generate much richer data. Already, the studies used in-depth interviews concluded that brand love is different from interpersonal love. The aim of this research is to explore the roots of brand love by answering the questions of; (1) why do the consumers love brands? (2) Are there brand-specific features? (3) Are there

consumer-specific features? (4) How does brand love develop? By doing so, unlike the other studies, this research relies upon the self-expressions of consumers, their stories with the brand and their love declarations.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sampling

In the study, as a research methodology, in order to collect data netnography is used via non-participant observation.). Netnography is defined as "a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications" (Kozinets, 1998: 366). It is a stand-alone method of tracking marketing-related behavior of virtual communities (Kozinets, 2002). It provides valuable contributions for the marketing and consumer behavior. As part of the ethnographic approach, first of all, cyber ethnography is a method well suited to gaining insights about the virtual communities. Because the virtual communities have a cultural composition, netnographic research provides a deeper understanding of behavior, habits, needs and wants (Ward, 1999; Catterall & Maclaran, 2001). Also it is adaptable to a variety of circumstances due to its rich qualitative content and the open-endedness of its findings (Kozinets, 2002). The most important decision of netnography is the identification of the suitable online communities in cultural entrée stage. There are five basic criteria in deciding which virtual community to choose. These are as follows (Kozinets, 2002):

- The chosen virtual community should have a focused segment related with the research question.
- The traffic in the community should be substantial and the number of postings should be high.
- The virtual community should have larger numbers of discrete message posters.
- It should contain detailed and rich data.
- The member contact related with the research subject should be interactive.

On the basis of these criterias *lovemarks.com* website is chosen as subject to research. *Lovemarks.com* is established by Saatchi&Saatchi and includes the conversations and shares of consumers' lovemark stories. In the study, the consumers' statements and stories about six brands (Apple, Google, Starbucks, Coca Cola, Toyota and Nike) were downloaded on 5-8 February 2015, and totally 750 entries were analyzed. These brands are chosen because not only they are from different product categories, but also they are on the list of the most valuable brands, have global operations, and have higher postings on the *lovemarks.com* website.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed via thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analytic method to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis searches for themes, which are emerged as being important to the description of the phenomenon (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008). The process involves the identification of themes through "careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). It is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis. It helps to describe the data set in rich and thick details. It also interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). An

inductive approach is implemented in coding. Inductive approach is data-driven and includes "a process of coding the data *without* trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12). Hierarchical coding was used in order to reach high-order themes. In hierarchical organization of codes, with groups of similar codes clustered together to produce more general higher-order codes. Hierarchical coding allows the researcher to analyze texts at varying levels of specificity (King, 2004). Themes are defined as units derived from patterns such as "conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1989, p.131). Themes that emerge from the informants' stories are pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience. The "coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked together" (Leininger, 1985, p. 60).

4. Research Findings

4.1. Brand-specific features
A brand is formed by different functions, concepts, and characteristics that are named as brand assets from the consumers' perspective (Park et al., 2013). An emotional bond develops if a brand helps to achieve one's goals, in other words, the instrumental role of brands are important in the emerging process of personal connection and emotional bond between brands and consumers (Park et al., 2006). This findings of this research also supports the previous literature on that brand love is not an unconditional love, and in that sense, it differs from interpersonal love. In this study, five brand-specific features are defined as affecting brand love: (1) functional congruity, (2) satisfaction, (3) brand trust, (4) brand passion and (5) sensory experiences.

F*unctional congruity:* Functional congruity is defined as "the match between the consumer's beliefs about brand utilitarian attributes (performance) and the consumer's referent attributes" (Sirgy & Johar, 1999 p.252). The referent attributes are used as criteria to evaluate the actual performance of the brand. In this study, love statements in relation with six different brands highlighted that, consumers impressed by the functional features of the brands. These brands are described as *high quality, make life easier, comfortable, taste great, user-friendly, functions well, run smoothly, long-lasting,* in sum*, best and great*. Park *et al.* (2013) state that attachment occurs if and when a brand can serve the consumers' needs effectively through reliable functional performance. Since the consumers see these brands as being beyond their expectations, it was proposed that (P1) functional congruity positively affects brand love.

Satisfaction: Satisfaction is a major outcome of marketing activities and serves to link purchase and consumption with post-purchase phenomena such as attitude change, repurchases, and brand loyalty (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982). It is conceptualized within the context of relationship marketing rather than transactional marketing (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1994; Hennig-Thurau & Klee, 1997). Consumers declared that they are satisfied with their beloved brands:

> *My Macbook Pro featuring my iMac, just unbeatable!*
> *Google is simply the best Search Engine I ever used.*
> *The feeling when you drink an ice, cold Coke from that traditional curvy glass bottle on a steaming hot day is one of those things you never forget or fail to appreciate. My whole body*

relaxes as that caramel-like sweetness hits my tongue and is followed by that wonderfully pleasant burn as it hits the back of my throat and is finally welcomed by my stomach as it quenches my thirst. That my friends, is satisfaction.

Therefore second proposition is stated that (P2) satisfaction positively affects brand love.

Brand trust: Brand trust is composed of affective perceptions about the brand (Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007) as well as cognitive beliefs (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003). Cognitive brand trust beliefs include expectations of brand reliability, consistency, competence, and/or predictability of performance. The emotional elements leading to brand trust include expectations of brand integrity, honesty, and/or benevolence (Becerra & Korgaonkar, 2011; Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003). In general, the consumers think those brands are reliable, and trustworthy, and they are never disappointed by them.

My first car was a Pontiac Firebird - used. That thing broke down whenever it had a chance and it even had the nerve to do so at a drive through ATM on payday Friday. I ditched it and my father gave me the old beatup Toyota minivan that was older than the Pontiac with no air conditioning. In Florida a car with no air is like a sauna multiplied by an oven. That Toyota ran, rarely broke down and was an absolute godsend. It was efficient on gas and it was just such a great car. When I saved up enough I got a new car... a Toyota Tundra. Built to be great cars and they seldom disappoint.

Nike is a very high quality sports brand which is also quite prestigious. I have fallen in love with Nike and never want to use another brand. If you truy Nike, you will not be disappointed.

3 words that can describe this product are classy, elegant and highly-qualified. Love can disappoint you, but Apple will never let you down. I recommend Apple over any other product

So that, it was stated that (P3) brand trust positively affects brand love.

Brand passion: Brand passion is an intense feeling of consumers toward the brand (Bauer *et al.*, 2007; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Brand passion encompasses two components: the presence of the brand in the consumer's mind and the idealization of the brand (Albert *et al.*, 2008). Within that context, it is a psychological construct that comprised of excitation, infatuation, and obsession for a brand (Albert *et al.*, 2013). In this study, consumers' statements displayed that those brands became a part of their life; they could not think how they can live without them, because without them, they feel incomplete, and anxious.

Oh my God, this computer [Macbook Air] is a piece of art. I can't think of using something else. I feel that it's soooo sexy and soooo attractive. The way you hold everything in - it is soo attractive.

I can't live without Starbucks green tea latte. It is my all time favourite beverage! I can't find anything better than Starbucks. I'm in love!.

When you buy coffee from Starbucks, you are not only buying an ordinary beverage but also experiencing the passion, loyalty, and personality of the brand.

Google is the most important thing in my life. I can't live without it. Google means everything to me.

I can`t live without Coke... I don`t have the words to describe the emotion of drinking a Coke... cold! I have beautiful memories when I was part of Coke`s creative team at McCann-

Erickson Chile. I think constantly about having a Coke... all the people in the world just think about having a Coke.

Therefore, it was proposed that (P4) brand passion positively affects brand love.

Sensory experiences: Any combination of sensory experiences (i.e. visual, auditory, gustatory, tactile, olfactory, thermal, equilabratory, and/or kinesthetic) can deliver pleasure and alter mood (Park *et al*., 2013). Consumer-brand engagement is derived from hedonic elements as multi-sensory contact, astonishment, amusement and aesthetic pleasure (Hirschman & Holbrook 1982). Consumers explain their love relationship is developed on the multi-sensory experiences and pleasure.

The 2005 Camry LE especially spells driving pleasure behind wheels, leather upholstery, sleek dashboard and comfy interior et al gives you a breathless experience as you waltz through a blaze of air. What a piece of machine!

Cozy, classy and calming are the things I am looking for in a coffee place. Starbucks has it all! It is the place I want to be; it is my comfort zone. The smell of coffee relaxes and inspires me every time.

Starbucks is the place I go to for a 5-minute vacation from a hectic day.

.....Managing and working with Windows was what I did back then, and to come home and sit in front of my Mac was a pure pleasure, and it still is....

Hence, it was suggested that (P5) sensory experiences positively affect brand love.

4.2. Consumer-related factors
In this study, two main consumer-related characteristics are defined as affecting brand love relationship: *self-congruity and personalized experiences*.

Self-congruity: Self-concept is the sum of characteristics, traits, and memberships that cognitively represent an individual in memory (Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984). An attachment object becomes connected to the self when it is included as part of the consumer's self-concept (Park *et al*., 2013). Previous researches demonstrate that individuals use products to create and communicate their self concepts (Belk, 1988; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Self-congruity is a psychological process in which the consumer focuses on the brand user image and compares this image to his/her self-concept.

Nike is not just a sports brand, Nike is a life-style. To me, Nike means personal achievement and self-improvement.

.....I have tried many shoes but I think Nike is the best. I feel very cool everytime I wear Nike shoes.

....I'm a proud owner of a Macbook Pro and I can only say that I had never fallen in love with a computer.

Therefore, it was suggested that (P6) self-congruity positively affects brand love.

Personalized experience is derived from three resources: parental influence, usage duration, and trying once. Consumers, especially for Toyota, Coca Cola and Apple, grown up by seeing their parents use them. That evokes past experiences, and memories. Moreover, some of the consumers stated they use those brand for a long time, like a marriage, those

brands became a part of their everyday life. And they claim that once you try, you get addicted.

> *Apple has been in my home for over 20 years. When Macs first came out, my mom had one. And I still remember the lady's voice that would shout random comments. ....The day I owned a Mac of my own, I felt like I could take over the world.*
>
> *Coca Cola has been a permanent companion in my life. I remember when I was a small child and lived in Ukraine I used to go to the coast of Black Sea every summer. That's where my dad bought me the first bottle of Coke. I think about and still remember the sensation of a new, delicious taste when I had my first sip of Coke. After that, no matter where I go in the world Coke is always there, like a good friend from who you know what to expect.*
>
> *My first Nike shoe was the White and Lazer Blue Air Max 90, the following year I was walking on air with my Black and Infrared Jordan 6. Fast forward to 2014, a quarter-century later, here I am still kicking the same old, yet new release Retro Jordan and Air Max. What can I say, those exciting childhood memories of opening-up a fresh new Nike box still sticks with me to this day*

So that, it was proposed that (P7) personalized experiences positively affect brand love.

5. Conclusions

The objective of this study was to explore the antecedents and consequences of brand love. 750 entries of consumer statements about their lovemarks (Apple, Starbucks, Coca Cola, Nike, Toyota and Google) were analyzed via inductive thematic analysis and a brand love relationship model was proposed.

The antecedents of brand love are clustered under two main groups: brand-related factors and consumer-related factors. Brand –related factors are *functional congruity, satisfaction, brand trust, brand passion and sensory experiences,* and positively affect brand love.

Brand love is affected by the *functional congruity.* Brand love is not an unconditional love like some forms of interpersonal love. Instead, loved brands were praised for having best features (Batra *et al*., 2012). Consistent with the findings of Batra *et al*., (2012), in the statements not a single consumer made an unconditional love claim. Those loved brands are described as being the "best" and "great". Consumers perceive congruence between their performance specifications and brands' performances. Therefore functional congruity is proposed as affecting brand love.

Satisfaction is another feature that the brands should provide. Satisfaction is defined in the context of disconfirmation experience, where disconfirmation is related to the person's initial expectations. Consumers declare obviously their satisfaction. Carroll & Ahuvia (2006) defined brand love "as the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name". Moreover, the duration of the relationship suggests the existence of a feeling of satisfaction (Albert *et al*., 2008). Consumers mention their long-lasting relationship with these brands, and they claim they will never change that brand- that also indicates brand loyalty.

Brands also should be *trustworthy.* Trust is an important antecedent of commitment in relational marketing because trust is involved in highly valued relationships (Albert *et al*., 2013). Consumer express that those brands "never let them down" or "never disappoint them".

Brand love is in the air if there is *passion*. Brown (1998, p. 794) suggests consumers do fall "[...] truly, madly, deeply in love with products and services. They have to have them; they are passionate about them; they get a quasi-erotic charge from examining, exhibiting and

expending money on them". In consumer behavior literature, brand passion is conceptualized as a part of brand love (Batra *et al*., 2012; Albert *et al*., 2008; Thomson *et al*., 2005). The analysis in the study put forward that consumers not only feel love towards brands but passion also. They stated that they cannot live without that brand. Consumers mention those brands as "him/her", and use "my" to declare possession, and express their lifetime attachment. Those brands are not just brands, but their soul mates.

And lastly, brands should build *sensory experiences*. People do not desire products but satisfying experiences (Holbrook, 1994). Albert *et al*., (2008) put forward that love is linked to positive emotions, including pleasure. This study also confirms that brand love is derived from multi-sensory experiences and pleasure.

The love relationship between consumers and brands is also affected by the consumer-specific factors, such as *self-congruity* and *personalized experiences.*

Brands help consumers to attain self- and social-oriented goals (Fournier, 1998), and that derives strong attachment between the brand and the consumer (Grisaffe & Nguyen, 2011). In other words, consumers purchase products not only for the utilitarian benefits but also for self-expressive benefits (Park *et al*., 1986). In this study the analysis displayed that consumers perceive beloved brands are cool and prestigious, and they express that they feel confident, stylish, high class, prestigious, and sophisticated. They also stated that they are proud owners.

In the love statements it is also seen that consumers have personalized experiences. Those brands are also used by their parents and make them remember their childhood (especially for Apple, Toyota and Coca Cola). In addition to that, consumers themselves have some memories in relation with those brands. They are using them for a long time and they describe them as a life partner with whom they shared good times and get through bad times.

As a consequence, this study generates a higher-order brand love relationship model based on the consumers' statements about their beloved brands and contributes to the literature by defining brand and consumer-related roots of brand love. This study has several limitations. The main limitation of the study is that the findings rely upon the love statements written by consumers online in relation with six brands. For further research, including other brands and product categories could enable to make comparisons and it is believed that would provide thick and deeper insights on brand love. Moreover, in the study the propositions stated in relation with the inductive thematic analysis and should be tested quantitatively for further generalizability.

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