TRUE LOVE CONQUERS ALL
A Qualitative Study Focusing on the Impact of Perceived Brand Authenticity on Brand Love

Abstract

In the last decade, consumer-brand relationships have gained much attention from both practitioners and academics. In this context, two parallel but distinct streams in the field of consumer research have gained increasing interest: studies on brand love, on the one hand, and brand authenticity, on the other. Both concepts are independently rooted in attachment theory implying that a relationship between the two constructs is justifiable. We conceptionalize the influence of brand authenticity on brand love, proposing that brands need to be perceived as authentic in order to become loved. In a more comprehensive context, this research contributes to consumer research in general and research on brands in particular, as it calls for the integration of currently separated streams of research. In order to be able to unveil further profound results from current research, this article emphasizes the need to integrate and interlink these separate streams.

Keywords: Brand Management, Brand Love, Consumer-Brand-Relationships, Brand Authenticity

1   Introduction

In the last decade, consumer-brand relationships have gained much attention from both practitioners and academics. In this context, two parallel but distinct research streams in this field of study have gained increasing interest, i.e. studies on brand love on the one hand and brand authenticity on the other. Both concepts are independently rooted in attachment theory implying that a relationship between the two constructs is justifiable.

Brand love, as being "the most emotionally intense consumer-brand relationship" (Langner, Schmidt, & Fischer, 2015) has recently gained increasing interest both on an academic and managerial level (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). In the context of attachment theory, a strong emotional attachment is needed in order for brand love to emerge (Batra et al., 2012). Parallel streams of research constitute consumers' increasing search for authenticity in brands (Arnould & Price, 2000; Beverland, 2005; Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). Authenticity is increasingly recognized as a desirable brand characteristic, leading to emotional brand attachment (Morhart et al., 2015). As such, authentic brands benefit from a competitive advantage in terms of the creation of strong consumer–brand connections (Beverland, 2005; Morhart et al., 2015).

Against this background, the underlying article seeks to shed light on the relationship between brand authenticity and brand love, proposing that perceived brand authenticity positively influences brand love. Based on the two streams of theory, a conceptual model is derived. As such, the article aims to advance both the theoretical and managerial understanding of brand love and brand authenticity and highlight the constructs' relevance for consumers' brand-related behaviours.

The purpose in this study is to examine whether brand authenticity has a positive influence on consumers to love their brands. The developed framework integrates brand love and brand authenticity along with constructs that are well-researched in the research field of consumer-brand relationships; i.e. brand trust and brand attachment. We also link them to WOM as an outcome of the relationship with a brand. The model builds upon the study of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) who have identified some antecedents and consequences of brand love, and of

Morhart et al. (2015) who have developed an integrative framework of the concept of brand authenticity. In this study, however, we identity effects of brand authenticity on brand love.

2   Theoretical Background

Brand Love

"Brand love is the most emotionally intense consumer-brand relationship" (Langner et al., 2015:1). Loved brands exert many strong, positive effects on consumer behavior, including greater brand loyalty, positive word of mouth, resistance to negative information, forgiveness of failures, and increased willingness to pay (even irrationally high prices) for loved brands (Batra et al. 2012; Bauer, Heinrich, & Albrecht, 2009; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Rossiter, 2012). In general, consumers who have fallen in love with a brand exhibit extensive involvement, such that they participate in brand communities, travel long routes to meet like-minded people at brand conventions, or even tattoo themselves with the label of their beloved brand. Accordingly, brand love is a highly pertinent topic for marketing, and both researchers and practitioners seek insights into this powerful consumer-brand relationship.

Brand love has its roots in the theories of interpersonal love and relationships (Batra et al., 2012; Langner et al., 2015). Fournier (1991) was among the first scholars to provide evidence that consumers are able to emotionally bond with brands in a similar way to that observed in personal relationships. This has been supported by more recent research, which shows that consumers can develop a relationship with a brand that evokes emotions similar to love (Albert et al., 2008; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Wallace et al., 2014). Emotions towards a brand have been found to play an especially strong role in the propensity to continue a relationship (Drennan et al., 2015; Kudeshia et al., 2016). Although brand love is acknowledged as an important construct of consumer-brand relationships (Batra et al., 2012; Huber et al., 2015), research on its drivers and consequences for such relationships remains limited (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Fetscherin, 2014; Grisaffe and Nguyen, 2011). Responding to this conclusion, the following study aims at extending the literature on brand love.

Differences Between Brand Love and Related Marketing Constructs. Brand love should be distinguished from other constructs with which it might be correlated, such as brand attitude, satisfaction, and involvement.

Love is understood as a subjectively experienced combination of the dimensions of intimacy, passion and commitment (Aron & Westbay, 1996), whereas brand love is "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Caroll & Ahuvia, 2006: 5). Although brand love positively correlates with attitude, involvement and satisfaction, it is separate and distinct from those constructs (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Thomson et al., 2005). Positive attitude alone does not require the formation of brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), does not link the brand to the self-concept, and does not cause an individual to maintain a relationship with the brand when more attractive options are introduced (Thomson et al., 2005). In addition, although brand involvement shares some characteristics with brand love, such as both being based on needs, values and interests (Brakus et al., 2009) and being driven by perceived importance and personal relevance (Zaichkowsky, 1985), the constructs are distinct from each other. While brand love requires emotional attachment towards a brand in order to emerge, brand involvement is only connected with cognitions (Batra et al., 2012; Thomson et al., 2005).

Brand love also differs from satisfaction. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) list several ways in which brand love differs from satisfaction, including: (1) satisfaction is conceptualized as a

cognitive judgment, whereas brand love is more affective; (2) satisfaction is typically related to transactions, whereas brand love develops over time and is more related to long-term brand relationships; (3) satisfaction is related to expectancy disconfirmation, whereas brand love does not require these conditions and (4) satisfaction does not require integration of the brand into the consumer's identity, or their willingness to declare love, whereas brand love does. Attachment to a brand, which is a precondition for brand love, develops over time and requires affective memories that connect the object to the self (Holmes, 2000; Mikulincer et al., 2001). Therefore, brand love is found to be constructed on a variety of affective-laden perceptions, such as self–brand integration, passion-driven behaviors, positive emotional connections, a long-term relationship, positive overall attitude (attitude certainty and confidence) and separation distress (Batra et al., 2012; Thomson et al., 2005). Therefore, brand love is a sign of a far stronger consumer–brand relationship than mere positive brand attitude or satisfaction.

Brand Authenticity

Brand authenticity refers to a brand being perceived as honest, real and genuine (Alexander, 2009; Gilmore & Pine, 2007). An authentic brand differentiates itself through its sincerity, quality commitment and connection to heritage (Beverland, 2006; Napoli et al., 2014). Authentic brands have the ability to connect with consumers on an emotional level through their symbolic quality (Morhart et al., 2015). A recent conceptualization of consumers' brand authenticity perceptions indicates that an authentic brand is dependable, cares for its consumers, helps them define and construct their identity, and reflects continuity from the past into the future (Morhart et al., 2015).

A consideration of brand authenticity is relevant to marketers because authenticity creates a distinctive brand identity and contributes to brand status and equity (Beverland, 2006; Brown et al., 2003; Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Recent studies show that brand authenticity positively relates to brand attitude (Ilicic & Webster, 2014), purchase intentions (Ilicic & Webster, 2014; Napoli et al., 2014), as well as word-of-mouth communication, emotional brand attachment and brand choice likelihood (Morhart et al., 2015). The literature further suggests that authentic brands play a role in self-authentication behaviors, which occur when consumers reveal or create their true self (Arnould & Price, 2000; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Because authentic brands represent a meaningful resource in identity construction, they become instrumental in consumers' self-authentication behaviors (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

Consistent with the view that a target that responds to an individual's need creates strong attachments (La Guardia et al., 2000), this research proposes that by helping consumers satisfy important needs (i.e. the need to belong, the need to express one's authentic self), brand authenticity results in higher levels of emotional brand attachment when such needs are activated.

Synthesizing Brand Love and Brand Authenticity

The need to belong is a fundamental human motive (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As a basic drive to connect with others, it motivates human beings to form meaningful and enduring relationships and to maintain acceptable levels of belongingness (Gardner et al., 2000). The literature supports the role of authentic brands in helping consumers satisfy the need to belong: the need for connection is an important self-authentication goal that authentic brands and experiences contribute to (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Authentic brands remain relevant through time (Gilmore and Pine, 2007), induce connections across generations

(Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Gilmore & Pine, 2007) and provide consumers with a sense of continuity and common identification (Napoli et al., 2014).

In addition, the attachment literature suggests that attachment to a target increases when it fulfills a salient need (La Guardia et al., 2000). Strong attachments are associated with feelings of connection, affection, and love (Bowlby, 1969). Emotional brand attachment is thus defined as the bond that connects a consumer with a specific brand (Thomson et al., 2005). Although consumers interact with many brands, they develop strong attachment with only a few. Because of an authentic brand's ability to satisfy consumers' connection goals (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), we expect emotional brand attachment to be positively influenced by authentic brands. Moreover, as brand love requires emotional attachment towards a brand in order to emerge (Batra et al., 2012), emotional attachment is argued to be a precondition for brand love. Hence, the following two propositions are made for the constructs under study:

*H1: Brand authenticity has a positive effect on emotional attachment.*
H2: Emotional attachment positively influences brand love.

Combining those premises, the following conclusion can be drawn: Arguing that brand love is the highest level of emotional brand attachment to be reached and brand authenticity positively influencing emotional attachment, it can thus be proposed that brand authenticity positively influences brand love, resulting in hypothesis three:

H3: Brand authenticity positively influences brand love.

3   Conceptual Development

The conceptual model and hypotheses of the present study are shown in Figure 1. We propose that brand trust, emotional attachment and brand authenticity are the antecedents of brand love. WOM serves as the behavioral outcomes of both brand love and brand authenticity.
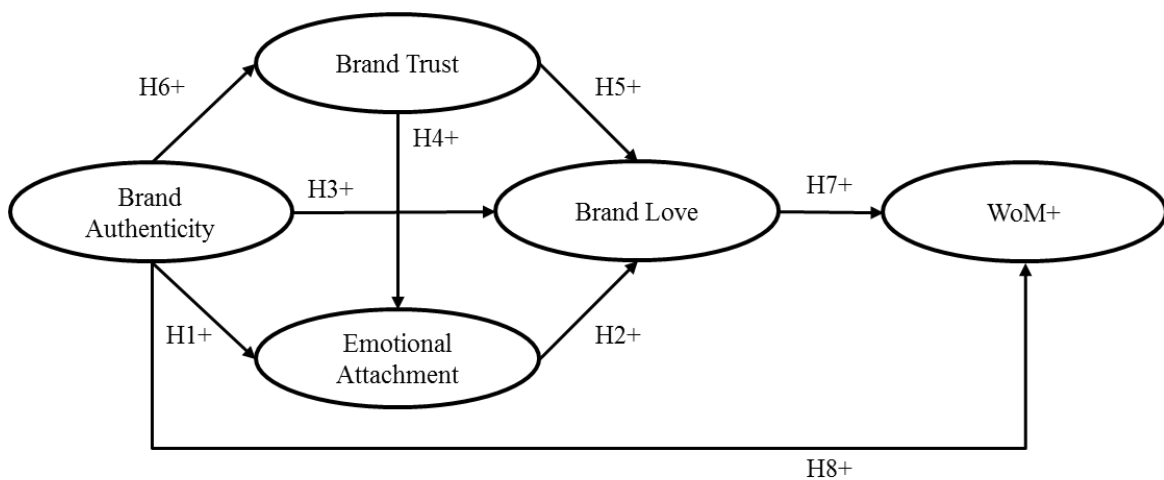
Figure 1 - Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

Brand Trust

Trust is a focal factor of the formation of any long-term relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and is used as a mental shortcut to reduce uncertainty and the need for mental processing (Moorman et al., 1992). As the brand-consumer relationship is considered a substitute for human contact between the company and its customers (Matzler et al., 2008), brand trust is a necessary precondition for all long-term brand-consumer relationships

(Matzler et al., 2008). According to Esch et al. (2006), brand trust refers to the consumers' affect-based experience of a particular brand, which leads them to rely on the performance of the brand and having faith in the brand promises communicated (Albert & Merunka, 2013). The characteristic of brand trust as an affective experience (Esch et al., 2006) related to the expectations of the brand's honesty, altruism and reliability (Albert and Merunka, 2013) means it is gradually built by the consumers' experiences and encounters with the brand. It is considered a driver of consumers' emotional attachment to a brand (Langner et al., 2015). Hence, strong trust in a brand leads to positive outcomes such as positive attitudes, stronger commitment and loyalty, and is a focal factor contributing to brand love (Albert et al., 2008). Hence, the following can be concluded:

H4: Brand trust positively influences consumers' emotional attachment to a brand.

H5: Brand trust has a positive effect on brand love.

Moreover, brand trust is closely linked to brand authenticity. Consumers tend to trust a brand if they feel a brand will perform as expected or promised (Napoli et al., 2014). Authentic brands respond to the consumers' demand for an honest brand as they will act in the best interests of its customers and society (Beverland, 2005). Delivering an authentic brand experience, then, is imperative to building brand trust. Hence, the following proposition is made:

H6: Brand authenticity positively influences brand trust.

WOM

Word-of-mouth (WOM) can be understood as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or a company (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). In connection with WOM, speaking about a brand to others is considered an important part of an individual's identity construction (Holt, 1997). It is motivated by the intention to do the receiver a favor, and also meets people's social needs by putting them in contact with others. In addition, various literature contributions show that a strong positive relationship exists between brand love and WOM. Therefore, brand love is considered to directly predict positive WOM (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Batra et al., 2012; Fetscherin, 2014). Thus, we posit that:

H7: Brand love has a positive effect on positive WOM.

In addition, since consumers seek authenticity in consumption acts (Arnould & Price, 2000; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Boyle, 2004; Holt, 2002), they likely respond positively to brands that they perceive as authentic (Rose & Wood, 2005). Authentic brands offer meaning and identity-relevant benefits that entail positive consumer responses. In addition to such a privately held response to the brand, consumers are also more likely to make a public commitment to an authentic brand by engaging in positive word-of-mouth (Morhart et al., 2015). Hence, the following can be concluded:

H8: Brand authenticity has a positive effect on positive WOM.

4   Further Procedure

In order to gain profound results, the study will build on a qualitative method, consisting of thirty in-depth interviews with Millennials, aged between 18 and 35. The participants are university alumni, being young professionals, and current students. The different life stages and age groups are explicitly included in the research design to enrich the results in general and to determine whether age is an influencing factor in specific. The goal of these interviews

is to determine whether brand authenticity is an inevitable construct for a brand to be loved. In addition, the interview results provide the opportunity to redefine the conceptual model.

5   References

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