



iJRASET

International Journal For Research in
Applied Science and Engineering Technology



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 10 Issue: IV Month of publication: April 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2022.41618>

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Three Stages to Elicit Brand Love: Literature Tracing on Person-To-Brand Relationship Development

Deeptangshu Thapa

AIT, Nepal

Abstract: *The tendency of consumers to perceive strong emotions towards brands has significant implications in branding. However, there is a gap in the marketing literature regarding the development and the process that may influence the degree to which consumers perceive the strongest emotions towards the brand, cited as brand love. The present research based on literature review discusses the mechanisms that underlie the development of consumer brand relationships, as the process towards brand love. This study builds on the triangular theory of interpersonal love to explain how a consumer moves from one stage to another. Furthermore, the study suggests that anthropomorphisation facilitates the process of brand love, which results in stronger commitment towards the brand as a brand is recognized as human. Theoretical and managerial implications are also discussed.*

I. INTRODUCTION

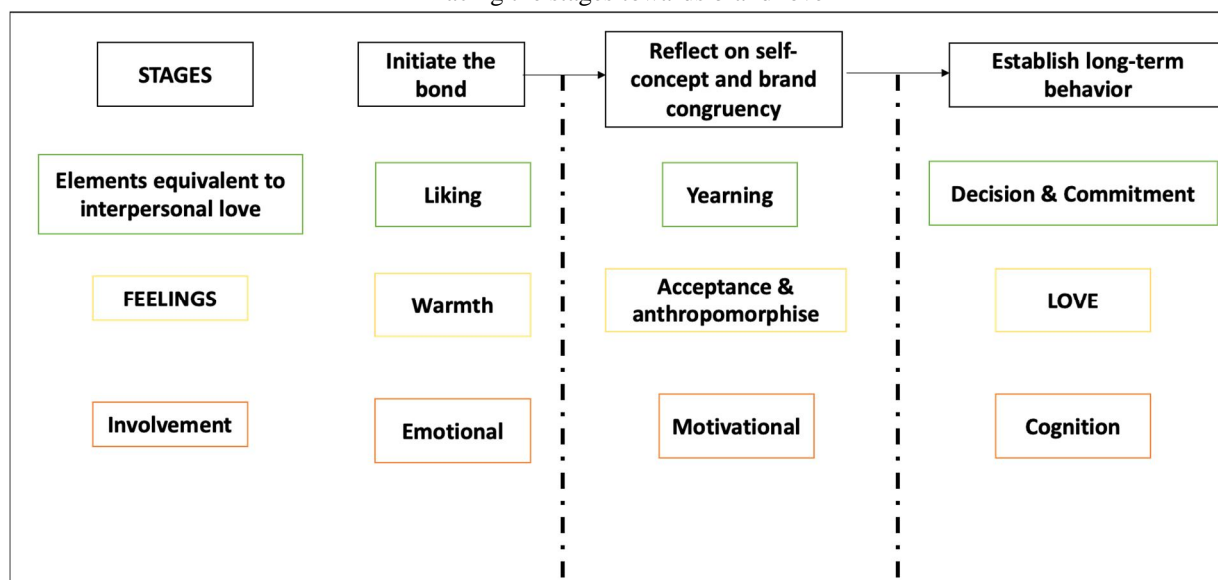
The concept of love has been explored in various academic disciplines: religion context, interpersonal context, and object context (Shimp & Madden, 1988; Ahuvia A. , I love it! Towards a unifying theory of love across diverse love objects, 1993; Fournier S. , 1998). Among philosophers, the context love has been discoursed for more than thousand years. Triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986) has significant implications in branding research. In consumer-brand context since the analogous contribution of interpersonal love to consumer-object relationship by Shimp & Madden (1988), many significant literature contributions have been made. For example, Ahuvia A. (1993) provides evidence that consumers judge a relationship as love based on a prototype, Fournier (1998) claims that consumers form different relationships with brands, while considering brand as an active relationship partner in the life of a consumer. A careful literature review points that the concept of reaching towards such a relationship of brand love is still a fertile, and its nuances has been lost in recent brand relationship research. The literature contributions suggest that the brand can earn the love status, by phasing through three key stages of the consumer-brand relationship as identified through implications in the foundational studies guiding the love between person and object.

The evolving concept of Brand Love has been receiving attention of managers and academicians (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). Organizations are specifically interested to understand the concept (Palusuk, Koles, & Hasan, All you need is brand love: A critical review and comprehensive conceptual framework for brand love, 2018), as consumer's liking and satisfaction towards a brand are not sufficient to build a long-term relationship (Jones & Saaser, 1995). As marketing practitioners direct their promotion budgets in an attempt to persuade the consumers to form a relation with their brands, no reasonable path has been provided in regards to the potential phase a consumer takes towards development of the relationship. Furthermore, a considerable number of psychological theories have been employed in order to better understand consumer-brand relationships without laying down the stages of the relationship and its desired outcome, love.

With evolution in academic research on customer-brand relationships, extensive studies in varying streams of literature are being carried out, on the principal element of customer-brand relationship, i.e. love (Fournier S. , 1998). Moreover, researchers in marketing have been considering love as an invariant phenomenon, but not laid out a clear process to achieve it. Following this tradition, marketing researchers who have utilized the notion of love towards an object in their contributions have considered the process towards such a love as a result from repeat usage and experience. However, it is important to note the similarities in literature contributions on consumer-brand relationships to establish a pattern for the stages towards brand love. Understanding the stages is of crucial importance in marketing and branding, to aid brand marketer's from avoiding one sided communication stunts towards the sought result (Welbourne & Grant, 2015) i.e. brand love, which makes tracing of the stages that elicit brand love imperative.

In summary, as posited in the triangular theory of interpersonal love, different people are more or less likely to fall in love by moving from intimacy to passion to decision and commitment levels. The emphasis of same with respect to person-to-object love has been observed in literature contributions. Thus, the purpose of the present review is three fold: 1) to advance the theory of brand love by introducing the stages of consumer-brand relationship; 2) to explain the importance of the stages of relationship development towards brand love; 3) to draw a timeline of literature contributions that support the stages to elicit love towards a brand. The stages are traced and presented overall in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Tracing the stages towards brand love



II. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

A. Consumer – Brand Relationships

Consumers form different kinds of relations with an object they consume. The relations could range from feelings of dislike to slight fondness and all the way up to extreme fondness (Shimp & Madden, 1988). The extreme fondness or enthusiasm garnered towards an object is like the state of ‘love’ (Bloch, 1981) within the relationship which represents a special type of attitude (Rubin, 1970). Consumer object relations are segregated into eight types (non-liking, liking, infatuation, functionalism, inhibited desire, utilitarianism, succumbed desire, and loyalty) of consumer object relations, which are categorized into three stages (liking, yearning and decision/ commitment as suggested by Shimp and Madden (1988).

Further, consumer object relations can be elaborated by considering a prototype to drive the relationship, as a prototype allows better approach (Fehr, Prototype analysis of the concepts of love and commitment, 1988; Fehr & Russel, The concept of love viewed from a prototype perspective, 1991). Such love prototype was suggested by Ahuvia (1993) while exploring consumer behavior with psychological literature on love while directly exploring people’s love towards products and activities.

The relationship was to be heightened when yearning consents self-integration with the object as presented in interpersonal love (Aron & Aron, Love and the expansion of self: understanding attraction and satisfaction, 1986). The validation of such relationship is strengthened with Fournier’s (1998) work, which centers around brand as a relationship partner where interdependency is a must. Anthropomorphism, practiced across societies since long (Brown D. E., 1991) underpins such mutuality facilitating the interactions with the non-material world (Glimore, 1919; McDougall, 1911; Nida & William, 1959).

In consumer-brand relationship, the collaborating parties collectively affect, define, and redefine the relationship (Hinde R. A., 1979). Consumer’s abilities to assign selective human properties to a range of consumer goods (Belk, 1988; Rook, The ritual of dimension of consumer behavior, 1985; Rook, The buying impulse, 1987), while brands are the contributing partner in the relationship dyad creates room for meaningful relationships (Kelley, 1986), which has ability to change a consumer’s self-concept through mechanisms of self-worth and self-esteem (Aron, Paris, & Aron, Falling in love: Prospective studies of self-concept change, 1995).

B. Brand Love

Marketing communication efforts are directed to encourage consumers to engage with a product. There is evidence in the marketing literature that consumers may develop emotions towards the products and brands they engage with, which grows into feelings filled relationship with time. The psychological process of imbuing strong feelings towards a brand is referred to as brand love by Ahuvia (1993). The concept's foundation is the triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986), which proposes parts of love to be embedded into three vertices of a triangle as intimacy, passion and decision/ commitment. Three of the elements are important for functioning of close relationships as their interaction prioritizes loving experiences focusing on thriving with emotional, motivational and cognitive investment.

Incubation of the theory of person-to-person love into the marketing research was initiated in the introductory works on brand love, wherein loved object is frequently used interchangeably to demonstrate the strong feelings of liking towards a brand. With contribution of practitioners to the literature, lovemark is also a new term. More importantly, the Carroll & Ahuvia (2006) define brand love as, "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name". Additionally, (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012) argue that brand love is not short term like an emotion, rather it lasts longer and involves affective, cognitive and behavioral experiences as supported by (Fournier S. , 1998). Consequently, liking and yearning or merely deciding (Shimp & Madden, 1988) that one is willing to repeatedly purchase a brand in a vast brandscape while in the relationship continuum is not synonymous with brand love.

Furthermore, results of a qualitative study regarding love towards an object conducted by Ahuvia A. (2005) shows some evidence that a person may form love towards anything other than a person. Extensive research on consumer-brand relationships supports the notion of brand love without laying out a distinct process. However, Shimp & Madden's (1988) study, considered as the foundation for love towards object argues that in order for a person to fall in love with a brand, the distinct stages of triangular theory of love are pertinent. The intense response of love with strong presence of emotional ties between the brand and consumer is also owed to product characteristic, i.e. its hedonic nature (Chandon, Wansink, & Laurent, 2000).

The fact that consumers are willing to be in a loving relationship with a brand suggests that they develop feelings and emotion through their trial and use of the brand. A relationship is a phenomena that evolves over time and changes its form during the series of interactions and the response during those (Fournier S. , 1998). Careful review of literature spread over 33 years, highlights three stages, which are conceptual counterparts of the triangular theory of interpersonal love (Sternberg, 1986). There is evidence of brand love, which if traced into a path of love towards a brand suggests that three distinct stages can be proposed. A summary of the literature with similar contributions that support the idea that brand love can be traced through three stages is below:

YEAR	Literature Contribution in brief	Support to proposed phases	References
1988	Three counterparts from interpersonal love were suggested to be equivalent to consumer – object relationships: liking, yearning and decision/ commitment	Stage 1, 2 & 3	(Shimp & Madden, 1988)
??	Brand love continuum suggests that positive experiences are triggered due to positive encounters during initial interaction with the brand which are less intense and slow development of relationship takes place and there are intense experiences that occur with time; however, the point where highly arousing events occur trigger brand love.		
1993	Development of love prototype pointing that love towards a brand occurs when the level of yearning for integrating an object into oneself and the level of self-integration with the object are both at a high level.	Stage 2	(Ahuvia A. , I love it! Towards a unifying theory of love across diverse love objects, 1993)
1998	Brand acts as a relationship partner due to its animated, humanized, and personalized ways. There is goal compatibility and a match of personality and product attributes.	Stage 2	(Fournier S. , 1998)
1999	Consumer's look forward to attaining 'satisfaction as love' as the most intense type of satisfaction in long-term consumer brand relationships.	Stage 3	(Fournier & Mick, 1999)

2001	Contribution of constructs that initiate the love-like consumer brand relationship, such as brand trust, and result in desired outcome for the brand with brand commitment and brand loyalty.	Stage 1 & 3	(Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001)
2003	Consumers showcased their understanding that brands play an important role to build their identity and construct self-concept to present oneself to others and achieve their identity goals.	Stage 2	(Escalas & Bettman, 2003)
2004	The fundamental similarities between person-to-person love and person-to-object love are supported and the consumer context relationship with a brand undergoes similar transition as interpersonal love.	Stage 1, 2 & 3	(Whang, Allen, Sahoury, & Zhang, 2004)
2005	The idea that the identity of a consumer matches a brand in the customer-brand relationship is boosted.	Stage 2	(Ahuvia A. C., 2005)
2005	Three dimensions (passion, affection, and connection) of emotional attachment between the consumer and a brand are considered.	Stage 1, 2 & 3	(Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005)
2005	Continuance or loyalty displayed by purchase of one brand in long-term portrays the consumer's thought that the brand is better than any other alternative, which could also be due to the high switching costs.	Stage 3	(Fullerton, 2005)
2006	Satisfied consumer's passionate emotional attachment towards brands is showcased with the love like relation, which enhances the desired post consumption behaviors. Overall, brand love was conceptualized as an affective focus that builds as love in the long term. The contribution backs up the self-integration concept and highlighting the consequences of emotional response and prevention of negative feelings.	Stage 1 & 2	(Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006)
2006	A positive attitude is maintained by a consumer towards a brand while willingness to maintain the valued relationship is showcased basing on continuance and affective as two components for a strong consumer-brand relationship.	Stage 3	(Evanschitzky, Iyer, Plassmann, Niessing, & Meffert, 2006)
2009	Measurement scale of brand love was developed with feeling of attachment making a noteworthy contribution, while seven unique first order dimensions were highlighted within two second order dimensions to initiate the affection and passion filled relationship towards a brand.	Stage 1	(Albert, Merunka, & Florence, 2009)
2012	Nature and consequences of brand love were studied to develop a mental prototype of first order and higher order dimensions for brand love, which encircled self-brand integration, passion driven behaviors, positive emotional connection, long-term relationship, positive overall attitude valence, attitude certainty, and confidence and anticipated separation distress.	Stage 2 & 3	(Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012)
2013	Significance of brands being accepted as humans in the customer-brand relationship is emphasized to generate a distinguishable love towards the brand. Focus is on the feeling towards a brand which develops into love due to self-integration as the boost factor and the driver being long-term relationship.	Stage 2 & 3	(Albert & Merunka, 2013)
2013	Humans tend to attribute behavior to an object when knowledge is activated during multiple engagements with the object, which means readily available social beliefs are applied to the brand. Brand is expected to showcase moral worth as well.	Stage 2	(Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, When Humanizing Brands Goes Wrong: The Detrimental Effect of Brand Anthropomorphization amid Product Wrongdoings, 2013)
2014	Consumer's engagement with a self-expressive brand results in the strong ties of love or love-like relationship with the brand resulting in word of mouth or advocacy as its significant outcome.	Stage 2 & 3	(Wallace, Buil, & Chernatony, 2014)

2014	Anthropomorphisation or humanization of brand is significant step to ignite brand love through seven dimensions (positive attitude valence, positive emotional connection, self-brand integration, passion drive behaviors. Long-term relationship, anticipated separation distress and attitude strength.	Stage 2 & 3	(Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014)
2015	Consumers show liking towards all the owned products, but love to a few and that love relationship represents the consumer while giving him an identity. The identity becomes basis for dedication of money, time, and energy.	Stage 2	(Palusuk & Kitchen, Is brand love real? the nature of brand love and its conceptualization, 2015)
2016	Consumers' relationship of most loved brand and the evolution of it is traced graphically to understand the five trajectories of slow development to liking becomes love to love all the way to bumpy road to turnabout. Overall, development of brand love and its change overtime resulting in anticipated separation distress, deeper affection for the brand and commitment are emphasized.	Stage 1, 2 & 3	(Langner, Bruns, Fischer, & Rossiter, 2016)
2017	Enhancing the existing customer-brand relationship literature, the study aimed to contribute with a recipe for brand love. The idea of lovemark from Roberts's (Roberts, 2004) book and need to develop a lovebrand are significant as love space is fostered and the relationship flourishes.	Stage 1, 2 & 3	(Montaguti & Lelis, 2017)
2017	Initial points of brand love were noted as first love, love at first sight, grown love, inherited love, and arranged love, which is sourced from product and brand or consumer's life events or social influences.	Stage 1	(Bruns, Langner, & Fischer, 2017)
2019	Brand love affects purchase intention and word of mouth due to its three key dimensions – mystery, sensuality, and intimacy.	Stage 1 & 3	(Rodrigues & Rodrigues, 2019)
2019	Consumers purchase as they seek value from every purchase and value comes from products that come as an enabler to entice and enrich the experience.	Stage 1 & 2	(Palusuk, Koles, & Hasan, All you need is brand love': a critical review and comprehensive conceptual framework for brand love , 2019)
2020	Materialism is an antecedent to brand love as status brands are highly desired despite the monetary investment necessary pointing out yearning as an important aspect of purchase and usage.	Stage 2	(Ahuvia, Rauschnabel, & Rindfleisch, Is brand love materialistic?, 2020)
2021	A group of loyal customers on social media is become a brand's necessity and visual aids trigger such attraction and motivate to co-create, while loyalty becomes primary benefit for the brand consumers engage and their satisfaction is driven by rewards and surprises.	Stage 3	(Steele, 2021)

The literature contributions for consumer – brand relationships as summarized above suggests important phase wise possibility of driving brand love. Research on brand love lays importance on emotions that represent consumer brand relationship, which comprises of intensive affection and separation distress (Rossiter, 2013).

III. PROPOSITIONS

Brands have a deep meaning (MacCraken, 1989) and since more than a decade ago, Shimp & Madden (1988) explored the equivalency of interpersonal love to object love, concluding with the triangular love theory's counterpart from intimacy, passion and decision/ commitment to liking, yearning and decision/ commitment. Therefore, in the present paper, the notion of love towards brand is traced through three distinct stages, while considering the trajectories of triangular theory of love. The three distinct stages are: 1) initiate the bond; 2) reflect on self-concept and brand congruency; 3) establish long-term behavior.

A. Stage – 1: Initiate the bond

Shimp & Madden (1988) contributed with liking as the counterpart of intimacy from triangular theory of love. The feelings of closeness with a consumed object, reflected with the description of significance of the object in consumer's life. There is initiation of a bond during usage period, where experience of the product is consequential towards continuation of the relationship. Many products may deliver value and remain in the value circle, however some may be declined due to low functional abilities. The ones that deliver more than value grows a bond with the consumer. Ahuvia A. (1993) claims that there is scope of 'real' or 'true' love towards object rather than loosely stating it.

The bond that begins between the consumer and brand allows interdependency (Fournier S. , 1998). Both the parties involved initiate the affect thereafter defining the relationship parameters and redefining when necessary (Hinde R. , 1979).

Consequently, the present paper proposes that the first stage towards brand love requires the development of liking towards a brand delivering value. In the absence of the value deliverables, consumer cannot initiate the bond with the brand and move the brand among others in a brandscape due to functional benefits or reject the brand altogether.

P1: Initiation of a bond with the brand due to liking is the first stage towards brand love.

B. Stage – 2: Reflect on self-concept and brand congruency

Once the bond develops, the brand is relationship worthy as strong desire develops to consume more and more of the product. The brand takes the role of an affiliate, and is the symbol of self-actualization needs. The universal human activity of anthropomorphization of inanimate objects (Brown D. , 1991) plays a key role. During this phase of yearning (counterpart to passion), consumer reflect's on the congruency of self-concept and brand (Shimp & Madden, 1988). The consumers tend to use brands similar to them to express one's self-concept. While the brand progresses as the relationship partner, the similarity is greater when the need to anthropomorphize exists in order to facilitate the interaction (Fournier S. , 1998) with personality qualities being assigned to the inanimate objects (Aaker, 1997).

Higher positive evaluation of similarities is key during this stage, i.e. the level of self-integration with the brand should be positive. When the desired level is higher than actual, yearning is experienced (Ahuvia A. , I love it! Towards a unifying theory of love across diverse love objects, 1993). It has been observed that during early stages of acquaintance with the brand, the desired level of integration is very high, resulting in higher yearning. The brand must pass above a certain point of actual, warmth. With time and usage, the desired level of integration should grow, else the brand maybe rejected if it falls below warmth (Ahuvia A. , I love it! Towards a unifying theory of love across diverse love objects, 1993).

More specifically, Fournier (1998) found that when the self-integration with the brand is not congruent, the consumer brand relationship is weak or halted. The increased attention to self-integration in brand love literature focuses on congruency that is based on the impression of values that consumer portray for a brand (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1976). According to Puzakova et al. (2009), "consumer's consequential psychological process that results in making decisions about the level of perceived similarity or dissimilarity between one's own self-concept and image of a brand is defined as the self-concept brand image congruity".

The increased congruency of the self-concept and brand image leads to greater possibility towards love in the consumer-brand relationship. That is, consumers who reflect high positive congruency between self-concept and brand image may tend to grow richer feelings towards the brand and sense love like cues more strongly than those who are low on congruency.

P2: Reflection on self-concept and brand congruency is the second stage towards brand love, which is possible due to anthropomorphisation of the brand.

C. Stage – 3: Establish long-term behavior

In the final stage behavioral cues take shape. In the short-run consumer decides on love towards the brand. However, in the long-run varying degrees of commitment towards the brand is expected. An established long-term behavior of commitment showcased with repeat use, preference over competition, positive word of mouth, and support during rough times reflects the consumer truly loves the brand. The result of such behavioral activity will strengthen individual's relationship with the brand and facilitate growth of feelings of love. Moreover, the existence of feelings of love for brands among consumers due to long-term behavioral adaptation will serve favorably in establishing commitment towards the brand due to willingness to spread positive word of mouth, resistance to competition's move and resistance to negative information. Taken jointly, these results suggest the following proposition:

P3: Establishment of long-term behavior is the final stage towards brand love. The behavioral founding fosters commitment. That is, for consumers who are committed, they are willing to spread positive word of mouth for the brand and they are likely to resist competition's move and negative information about the brand.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

Although consumer's love towards object has become an extensively utilized phenomena in the practitioner's world, the present study argues that the marketing literature has been lacking the stages towards developing such love. Theoretically the three stages of brand love in consumer behavior literature is introduced. Further, theorizing of the key indicators (liking, yearning and decision/commitment) and actions (initiate, reflect and establish) while tracing the development of brand love has been carried out. Establishing the notion of consumers' movement from set stages towards brand love discloses new avenues for research pursuant to the creation of stronger consumer-brand relationships and provides new perspectives for understanding these relationships in light of psychological theories of interpersonal love. Prior research has shown that brand love occurs due to attachment and/ or want for a brand as well. However, foundational research in consumer-brand relationships has provided evidence supporting attachment due to brand usage and experience. Thus, the major contribution of the present paper is to provide the process mechanism towards brand love. Future empirical testing of the propositions defined in this paper should provide significant insights for both academic researchers and practitioners regarding what factors could influence the validity of the stages towards brand love. The theoretical underpinning of the present paper sheds light into the path in which consumers traverse once the brand is experienced. Furthermore, the theoretical findings of the present paper illustrate a more clear understanding of the manner in which the consumer-brand relationship can be heightened to achieve sought consequences (loyalty, resistance, etc.).

Future directions for marketing researchers might be to delve deeper into the role of the antecedents and outcomes of brand love within the proposed stages. For example, one potential line of research may investigate the manner in which anthropomorphisation of a brand may influence the relationship initiation stage. Moreover, there are additional avenues for future examination regarding how advertising variables and marketing communications efforts may impact the inferences about brand love. Furthermore, future research may better clarify the conditions under which a consumer forms strong bonds with a brand, however, still may yet not have transcended their feelings towards the brands as love.

Although, the present paper argues the self-concept and brand image congruency as one stage towards brand love, future research may be directed towards investigation of whether life stage of consumer impact's their own self-concept and the images of the brand. As brands and their products are becoming more complex and important entities, consumers are left confused. Thus, a fruitful line of future inquiry is the process of examinations of the underlying psychological processes that leads into the consumer-brand relationship and contributes to initiation of the bond. Additionally, research to address important questions regarding under what particular conditions do brands get rejected or remain in the larger brandscape is necessary.

In conclusion, the present paper advances the marketing literature regarding the development of stronger feelings towards a brand in the consumer-brand relationship. The contribution of this study is a first step in gaining a better understanding of the stages that underlie towards development of brand love. The practical implications of these findings show that, in an attempt to generate strong feelings towards a brand, marketing practitioners may follow the laws and principles of interpersonal love as counterparts to brand love in order to eventually trace the development of person-to-brand relationship and elicit brand love.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

I assure that this paper does not have any financial interests or connections, direct or indirect, or other situations that might raise the question of biasness in the work reported or the conclusions, implications or opinions stated – including pertinent commercial or other sources of funding for the individual author.



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