Effects of brand love, personality and image on word of mouth

The case of fashion brands among young consumers

Ahmed Rageh Ismail

Marketing Department, College of Business, School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok – Kedah, Malaysia, and

Gabriella Spinelli

Marketing Group, Brunel University, London, UK

Abstract

Purpose – Fashion brand love is a central concept in the consumer-brand relationship domain. Brand managers tend to create more lovable brands, e.g. McDonald's "I'm lovin it". However, the importance of this concept is not frequently discussed in marketing literature. Furthermore, the impact of brand personality and brand image on brand love has not been investigated in any empirical research. This paper aims to address this gap by developing a causal model incorporating brand love, brand personality, brand image and word of mouth (WOM) to investigate the relationships among them.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected using a survey method and usable questionnaires were completed by 250 undergraduate students. Path analysis was used to test the hypotheses using AMOS 16.0.

Findings – Results revealed that only brand image is considered as a determinant of brand love that affects WOM along with brand personality.

Practical implications – Results provide detailed implications and a platform on which future research can be built.

Originality/value – The extant love research seems to be solely in the US context. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the concept of brand love outside the USA.

Keywords Brand love, Brand image, Brand personality, Word of mouth, Fashion brands, Brand identity

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

For decades, branding in fashion research has gained increasing attention among scholars worldwide and specifically in the UK. Different studies focussed on various topics. To mention just a few; gaining a competitive advantage in fashion retailing (Lewis and Hawksley, 1990), benefiting from the fashion own brand (Moore, 1995), branding strategies in UK fashion retailers (Birtwistle and Freathy, 1998), corporate branding (Burt and Sparks, 2002), factors influencing the willingness to buy retailer own brands (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2004), factors crucial to develop an intentionally appealing brands (Wigley *et al.*, 2005), attitude toward brand extension (Liu and Choi, 2009), luxury fashion brands (Moore and Birtwistle, 2005; Fionda and Moore, 2009; Moore and Doyle, 2010), strategic alliances in the fashion sector (Wigley, 2011), understanding of the centrality of the own brand to fashion retailer brand strategy (McColl and Moore, 2011). Whereas, previous research in this area provides fundamental contribution, still more research is needed to explore other facets of the branding theme. Loving fashion brands is an important aspect of research that is interesting and worth studying. Consumers love their fashion brands that are well

suited to them and make them feel and look good. As a result, consumers develop a relationship with a brand feel emotionally associated to their brands.

Consumer-brand relationship in the last decade has gained much attention from both practitioners and academics. Understanding the relationships between consumers and their fashion brands has practical relevance to marketers due to the significant impact of this relationship on a company's profitability. Therefore, it is important to not only understand how relationships are formed between consumers and fashion brands, but we also must be aware of the factors that drive those relationships. Our purpose in this study is to examine whether fashion brand personality and fashion brand image will make consumers love their brands using framework that integrates fashion brand love as theoretical starting point along with two well-researched constructs of personality and image. We examine the relationships among those constructs due to their potential relevance to the consumer-brand relationship domain. We also link them to word-of-mouth (WOM) as an outcome of the relationship with a brand. The model builds upon the study of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) which has identified some antecedents and consequences of brand love. In this study, however, we identify effects of brand personality as well as brand image on brand love.

This paper is organized as follows. The next section provides the conceptual model of how loving a fashion brand might be influenced by brand image and brand personality and develops related hypotheses. The methods undertaken to examine the relationships between the constructs are then detailed. The results of the empirical part of this study are then presented, followed by the conclusions and implications. Finally, future research directions and some limitations of the study are presented in conclusion.

2. Conceptual development and research hypotheses

2.1 Brand love

Recent decades have witnessed an unprecedented research interest on love. Starting by Rubin's (1973) work, he defines love as "an attitude held by a person toward a particular other person, involving predispositions to think, feel, and behave in certain ways toward that other person" (p. 265). Several studies on love in psychology have identified different love styles (Lee, 1977; Taraban and Hendrick, 1995). For example, Lee (1977) have developed a typology identifying six styles of love: Eros, Ludus, Storage, Pragma, Mania and Agape. Sternberg (1986) has offered a triangular theory of love with three components: intimacy, passion and decision/commitment. The unidimensional construct of love was presented by some scholars (e.g. Hatfield and Sprecher, 1985). Later they have developed passionate love scale (Hatfield and Sprecher, 1986). Aron and Aron (1986) have conceptualized love in terms of self-expansion. Subsequently, scholars have offered an overwhelming amount of measurement items to measure the feeling of love such as: trust, caring, respect, concern for other's well-being, commitment and accepting the other (e.g. Fehr, 1988, as cited in Albert *et al.*, 2008).

Shimp and Madden (1988) have proposed a conceptual model of "consumer-object relationships" inspired by the triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986), in which Sternberg's three components of love (intimacy, passion and decision/commitment) become liking, yearning and decision/commitment in a consumption context (cited in Albert *et al.*, 2008, p. 1063). These three components will strongly contribute to loyalty felt and expressed toward the consumption object. Recently, marketing researchers have investigated the concept of brand love (Ahuvia, 2005; Fournier, 1998). Fournier

(1998) answers the question of whether consumers can experience a feeling of love toward a brand, she established that such a feeling may exist and consumers may develop strong relationships with brands. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006, p. 5) define love for a brand as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment that a person has for a particular trade name." Consumers' love includes the following characteristics: "(1) passion for a brand, (2) brand attachment, (3) positive evaluation of the brand, (4) positive emotions in response to the brand, and (5) declarations of love toward the brand" (Albert *et al.*, 2008, p. 1064).

Consumers love their fashion brand because of the passion it inspires in them. They want to be well dressed and well groomed also they want to be informed with the latest styles. Basically, fashion brands are looking to capture and appeal young consumers markets who desire to express themselves using fashion. Stylish fashion brands such as H&M, Zara and Mango have become more popular all over the world. Their clothes, jewellery and accessories are stylish and reasonably priced. They are successfully winning the hearts of millions of young women who have a stronger bond with their brands. In other words, consumers fall in love with their fashion brands at a young age. Therefore, a solid foundation will be established between the consumers and the brands that will enable the consumers to voice their opinions and give positive feedback to other consumers.

Provided with the literature above, this study is aiming at examining the link between brand love and different conceptualizations of brand personality, brand image and WOM. Therefore, the following section provides a literature review aimed at unpicking the other fundamental constructs of the proposed model (Figure 1) and at developing the research hypotheses.

2.2 Brand personality

Among the functions brands perform is the relational function, where the brand is construed as having a personality which enables it to form a relationship with the consumer (Hankinson, 2004, pp. 110-11). The brand personality scale (BPS) consists of five generic dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. Since its creation, Aaker's (1997) study has been replicated using various consumer brands within different product categories and across different cultures (e.g. Aaker *et al.*, 2001). However, in the present study, the main focus is on the
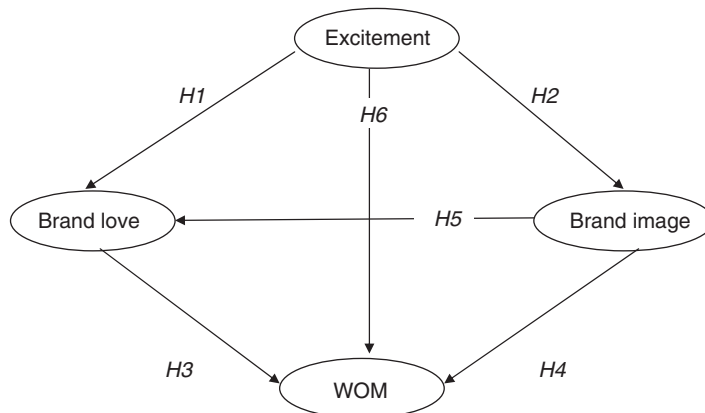
Figure 1.
The relation among the main research constructs

excitement dimension of brand personality. As suggested by many scholars,
excitement and sincerity are considered two fundamental dimensions that capture the
majority of variance in personality ratings for brands (Aaker, 1997; Aaker *et al.*, 2004).
This finding is robust across individuals, product categories and cultural contexts
(Aaker *et al.*, 2001).

Fashion brands convey their personalities directly through the clothing items
themselves, or indirectly through advertising, store design, shopping malls, etc. For
instance, Levi Jeans and Victoria's Secret elicit a feeling of excitement, fashionable,
youthful and outgoing. The fit between a fashion brand's personality and the
consumer's personality may have important implications. For example, it has been
argued, that a brand personality contributes to brand equity (Aaker, 1991) and may
lead to a more positive evaluation of the brand by the consumer. Also, by buying a
fashion brand similar to the consumer's actual personality, he/she is communicating
something about him/herself (Aaker, 1999; Keller, 1993). Therefore, in the current
study, we argue that brand personality will contribute to enhancing brand image,
loving the brand and disseminating positive WOM.

2.3 Brand image
Brand management scholars (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 1997) have argued that
brand image is an essential part of powerful brands which enable brands to
differentiate their products from their competitors. Brand image is made up of
brand association (Koubaa, 2008) it is a set of perceptions about a brand as reflected
by the brand associations held in the consumers' memory (Herzog, 1963).
Aaker (1991) defines brand associations as "the category of brand's assets and
liabilities that include anything 'linked' in memory to a brand." Associations are
informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory that contains the meaning
of the brand for consumers (Keller *et al.*, 1998, cited in Koubaa, 2008, p. 141). Dobni
and Zinkhan (1990) argued that the product image is the result of the interaction between
the receiver and the product stimuli. Factors contributing to the development of brand
image are: product attributes, the firm, the marketing mix, the individual perceptions of
the brand, personal values, experience, type of brand users and context variables.
Sources of image formation could be either through direct experience with the brand or
brand communication (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990).

Despite the importance of brand image in the realm of marketing, there is a lack of
theory development that has resulted in much ambiguity in its relationship with brand
personality (Patterson, 1999). At the theoretical level, both terms brand image and
brand personality have been used interchangeably in the literature (Upshaw, 1995;
Graeff, 1997). On the basis of the relational paradigm, brand image literature above and
the notion that consumers may attribute human characteristics to brands (Aaker, 1997;
Fournier, 1998), we suggest that excitement affects both brand love and brand image as
emotional outcomes. Also, we hypothesize that brand image will influence brand love.
Therefore:

H1. Excitement dimension of brand personality will have a positive impact on
brand love.

H2. Excitement dimension of brand personality will have a positive impact on
brand image.

H3. Brand image will have a positive impact on brand love.

2.4 WOM as an outcome

Consumers imitate each other following a social or vicarious learning paradigm (Hawkins *et al.*, 2004), but perhaps more importantly, they also talk to each other. WOM is described as the process that allows consumers to share information and opinions that direct buyers toward and away from specific products, brands and services (Hawkins *et al.*, 2004). There is recent focus on WOM in the literature on relationship marketing as a potential responses that can emerge from efforts directed at forming relationships with consumers (e.g. Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995; Verhoef *et al.*, 2002). The basic idea behind WOM is that information about products, services, stores, companies and so on can spread from one consumer to another. In its broadest sense, WOM communication includes any information about a target object (e.g. company, brand) transferred from one individual to another either in person or via some communication medium (Brown *et al.*, 2005). More specifically, Harrison-Walker (2001) defined WOM as "informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization or a service" (p. 63). In the current study, we expect that brand love, excitement and brand image will have a positive influence on WOM. That is, if consumers feel they love their brands that in turn may translate into a desire of the recommend it to friends and relatives. We are not aware of any previous study that has linked the relationship between brand love and WOM. Nevertheless, prior research in marketing has linked brand image and WOM, for example, Yavas and Shemwell (1996) propose WOM as one of the main sources of image formation. However, in this study, we argue that both brand image and brand personality will have a positive impact on WOM. Therefore, we hypothesize the following hypotheses:

H4. Brand love will have a positive impact on WOM.

H5. Brand image will have a positive impact on WOM.

H6. Excitement dimension of brand personality will have a positive impact on WOM.

3. Methodology

3.1 Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was designed as the survey instrument including all the constructs in the proposed model to investigate the hypotheses of interest. The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part of the questionnaire deals with the measurement of the constructs of the study by asking the respondent to think of a fashion brand they feel emotionally attached to. The fashion brands have been selected because we believe that fashion brands are hugely popular among young consumers who love the latest and most popular designs of those brands (see the Appendix). Similarly, fashion brands managers are trying to create and retain emotional attachment to their brands. The measures for all the constructs in the study were drawn from previous research. Brand image was adopted from Low and Lamb (2000). Brand love was captured using scale developed by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Excitement is one of the five dimensional BPS (Aaker, 1997). All the items were measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale, with anchors (1) and (5) consistent with Aaker's (1997) study. WOM in this study modified based on a scale developed by Gremler and Gwinner (2000).

The second part of the questionnaire presents respondents' demographic information (i.e. gender and age).

3.2 Sample design and data collection

The study was carried out in the UK using self-administered questionnaire. Applying the convenient sampling technique, a total 250 questionnaires were obtained from Brunel University students who were selected randomly as participants; they were instructed to think about a fashion brand that they are emotionally attached to, a list of fashion brands that frequently mentioned by students are presented in Appendix. All the respondents were from British nationals. The respondent profile is summarized as Table I. The sample was 38 percent male, 62 percent female and, in terms of age group, 1.2 percent were between 16 and 18, 29.2 percent were between 18 and 20, 47.7 percent were between 20 and 22 and 21.8 percent were 22 or above.

3.3 Data analysis

The relationships of brand love, brand image, brand personality and WOM were empirically tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) technique AMOS 16.0.

4. Empirical results

4.1 Measure reliability and validity

In this study, confirmatory factor analysis was employed. The result of the factor analysis for the study constructs is shown in Table II.

One item (up-to-date), two items (being useful and being natural) and three items (I have a natural feeling about this brand, I have no particular feeling about this brand and I am passionate about this brand) were removed from the scales measuring excitement, brand image and brand love constructs, respectively, because their loading factors <0.5 after CFA first run. Reliability for each of the factors was obtained using the calculation of a Cronbach's α coefficient. The Cronbach α coefficients ranged from 0.82 to 0.91 (see Table II). In the second run, all the items were above the cut-off point of 0.5 recommended by Hair *et al.* (2006) and t-values for all the standardized factor loadings of the items were found to be significant ($p > 0.01$). In addition, convergent validity is assessed based on the factor loadings of each item of a unidimensional construct. Convergent validity is achieved because the factor loadings of the measurement items are significant and substantial, i.e. > 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2006), as well as the model receiving a satisfactory level of fit. Also, the convergent validity of the measures is assessed by measuring the composite reliabilities of each of the constructs.

Demographic characteristics	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	93	38
Female	152	62
Age		
<16	1	0.4
16-18	2	0.8
18-20	71	29.2
20-22	116	47.7
>22	53	21.8

Table I.
Respondent profile

Constructs	Factor loadings	Cronbach α
Excitement		
Daring	0.71	0.82
Spirited	0.77	
Imaginative	0.83	
Brand image		
Fashionable and trendy	0.78	0.89
Reputation for quality	0.84	
Elegant	0.80	
Sophisticated	0.72	
Well known and prestigious	0.78	
Brand love		
This is a wonderful brand	0.84	0.91
This brand makes me feel good	0.90	
This brand is totally awesome	0.87	
This brand makes me very happy	0.71	
I love this brand	0.81	
This brand is a pure delight	0.57	
I'm very attached to this brand	0.60	
Word-of-mouth		
I encourage friends and family to buy this brand	0.81	0.90
I recommend this brand whenever anyone seeks my advice	0.85	
If the brand been mentioned in a conversation, I would recommend this brand	0.83	
I have actually recommended this brand to my friends and/or family	0.83	

Table II.
Scale factor loadings

The results indicated high levels of construct reliability and average variance extracted for all latent variables (see Table III). Because all *t*-values were significant ($p = 0.05$) and the average variances extracted were > 0.50, convergent validity was established. Discriminant validity "assesses the degree to which measures of different concepts are distinct" (Bagozzi, 1994, p. 20). Discriminant validity is assessed using criteria suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). In this approach, in order to establish discriminant validity the researcher needs to compare the variance extracted estimate for each construct with the squared interconstruct correlations associated with that construct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All construct pairs in the model were tested for discriminant validity using Fornell and Larcker's (1981) stringent criteria. All the variance extracted estimates are greater than the corresponding interconstruct squared correlation estimates (see Table IV).

To summarize, the measures in the measurement model have adequate reliability, convergent and discriminant validity. Assessment of nomological validity is based on

	IC	SIC
EX – BL	0.365	0.13
EX – BI	0.361	0.13
EX – WOM	0.525	0.28
BL – BI	0.737	0.54
BL – WOM	0.711	0.51
BI – WOM	0.608	0.37

Table III.
Interconstruct squared correlation estimates

the correlation matrix (Hair *et al.*, 2006) provided in Table IV. The results support the prediction that these constructs are positively related to one another and these relationships simply make sense.

The results of SEM analysis were depicted in Figure 2, the overall model were CMIN $\chi^2 = 413.782$, df $= 146$, $p = 0.0$. The fit indices were all in acceptable ranges with CFI $= 0.91$, TLI $= 0.90$ and RMSEA $= 0.079$. Models with cut-off values above 0.90 for CFI, and below 0.08 for RMSEA are considered to have a good fit between the hypothesized model and the observed data (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

4.2 Structural model results

The structural model displayed a good fit with the data, compared with the suggested fit criteria. The fit statistics were CMIN $\chi^2 = 355.544$, df $= 129$, $p = 0.0$. The fit indices were all in acceptable ranges with CFI $= 0.93$, TLI $= 0.91$ and RMSEA $= 0.076$. Models with cut-off values above 0.90 for CFI, and below 0.08 for RMSEA are considered to have a good fit between the hypothesized model and the observed data (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Figure 2 displayed all of the structural relationships among the studied constructs; path coefficients and their significance, R^2 for each dependent construct are also presented in this figure. As indicated in Figure 1 all hypotheses, except for *H1* and *H5* were supported by the data. The hypothesized relationships (*H2-H4* and *H6*) were found to be significant in the proposed directions. Additionally, in terms of the predictive power, excitement explained 13 percent of the variance in brand image. Excitement and brand image together account for 55 percent of the variance in brand love. Also, the model accounts for 59 percent of the variance in WOM.

Constructs	Variance extracted %	Composite reliabilities
Excitement	59.33	0.81
Brand image	61.80	0.89
Brand love	58.85	0.91
WOM	69	0.90

Table IV.
Composite reliability
and variance extracted
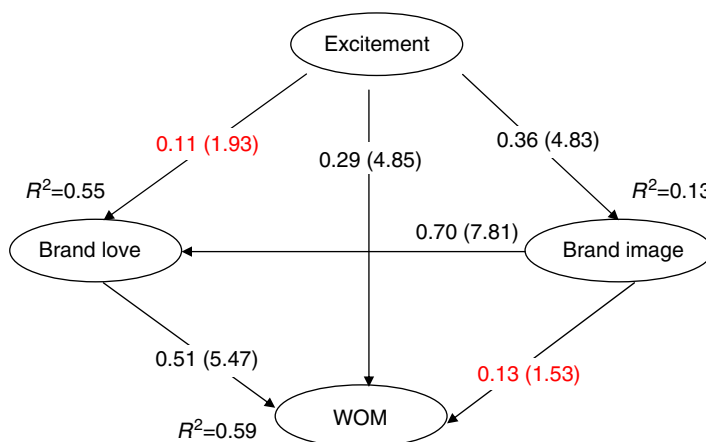
Figure 2.
Validated research model

Common method bias test. The common method bias implies that the covariance among measured items is driven by the fact that some or all of the responses are collected with the same type of scale (Hair *et al.*, 2006, p. 833). To determine the presence of common method variance bias among the study variables, a Harman's (1967) one-factor test was performed following the approach outlined by Podsakoff *et al.* (1984). All the items of the study were entered into a principal component analysis with varimax rotation to see if a single factor emerges from the factor analysis or one general factor accounts for more than 50 percent of the covariation. The results indicated that there is no single factor in the factor structure. Therefore, it does not appear to be a common method bias concern in the present study (Table V).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between brand image and brand love, as well as the impact of the excitement dimension of brand personality upon brand love. Furthermore, the influence of those constructs on the WOM. The results of the study indicate that excitement will not have a direct impact on brand love, however, the indirect impact through brand image were found to be significant. This is the first research to test this relationship. The same constructs were found to influence WOM with the exception of brand image. Also, the variables were found to capture the majority of the variation in WOM. These results may be explained by the relational paradigm, and the notion of attributing human characteristics to brands (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998), which will lead to loving the brand as an emotional outcome.

Following this causal model, the strategy should be for fashion brand to use brand personality and brand image to increase the emotional relationships with their brands. As a result of building an emotional relationship with their customers, companies will make their customers positively talk about their brands. If this is attained, the number of customers using the brand could probably be increased and in turn the company may report a jump in profits. Another result worth discussing is that the insignificant influence of brand image on WOM, we think this relationship need to be replicated and further more investigated in future research. Although the significant impact seems to be absent, it can be argued that the effect of brand image on the WOM is mediated by loving the brand. This is logically valid from a practical point of view, when the projected brand image fit with the image customer wants others to hold about him/her, it will make him positively talk about the brand.

Based on the above findings, the conceptual model has shown the direct effects of brand personality and brand image on brand love and WOM. In general, the reliability and validity of the results presented in this study is considered acceptable. However, validity is limited to the constructs, measures, samples and fashion brands we have

Hypotheses	Path estimates	*t*-values	Test results
H1: Excitement → brand love	0.11	1.93	Rejected
H2: Excitement → brand image	0.36	4.83	Accepted
H3: Brand love → word-of-mouth	0.51	5.47	Accepted
H4: Brand image → word-of-mouth	0.13	1.53	Rejected
H5: Brand image → brand love	0.70	7.81	Accepted
H6: Excitement → word-of-mouth	0.29	4.85	Accepted

Table V.
Hypothesis-testing results

studied. Thus, conclusions regarding the different effects in the study are, in principle, limited to the sample used in the study. The extant love research seems to be solely in the US context. To the best of our knowledge, we think that this is the first study to investigate the concept of brand love outside the USA. Therefore, future research also could examine whether these effects are different depending on the types of brands being investigated in other contexts. Also, we think the examination of the brand experience as comparatively new construct may contribute to our understanding of the consumer-brand relationships.

Future research could examine the proposed relationships and use moderators such as gender or age. Research could also examine this framework on different categories of brands. Finally, our results have a number of implications for brand managers. First, brand managers should undertake ongoing research with their target customers to understand the relationships between the brands and their customers. Second, brands should give careful consideration to the concept of love and how can they develop it.

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Appendix

Brand	Brand
NIKE	FCUK
Topshop	Dior
Gucci	Primark
Adidas	Abercrombie & Fitch
River Island	Prada
Armani	Next
Diesel	Louis Vuitton
Dolce & Gabbana	Zara
LACOSTE	DKNY
Converse	New look
Hollister	Ralph Lauren
G-star	Chloè
Guess	Miss Sixty
Ed hardy	Topman
MAC cosmetics	H&M
Dorothy Perkins	Chanel
Hugo Boss	Pineapple
Mango	Levis
Miu Miu	Esprit
Vivienne Westwood	Burberry
Christian Louboutin	Jane Norman
Roxy	

Table AI.
Fashion brands that frequently mentioned in this study

Corresponding author
Ahmed Rageh Ismail can be contacted at: rageh_a@yahoo.com or ahmed@uum.edu.my