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# **Conceptualising the effect of brand love on consumers' repurchase intentions for consumer products**

## **Abstract**

This conceptual paper discusses the theoretical intricacies of the relationship between brand love and consumers' repurchase intention. Consumer emotions towards brands, such as love and likeability, are seen as pivotal to longer-term consumer-brand relationships. Some marketing research advances the potential for brand love to generate positive consumer emotions towards a brand, such as consumer gratitude, directly impacting consumer repurchase intentions and, ultimately, improved business performance. However, there is research alerting for possible negative effects on consumers from building strong emotions, such that the implementation of brand love strategies by business must be exercised with caution and requires deep understanding of the concept. Are brand love and brand likeability distinct concepts with distinct effects on repurchase intentions? Considering types of products differentiated by their search, experience and credence qualities, a framework is developed to examine the relationship between brand likeability, brand love, and their relative effect on consumer repurchase intention. Attention is also given to consumer gratitude as a moderator of the effects of brand love on repurchase intentions.

**Keywords:** brand love, brand likeability, repurchase intention, product category, consumer gratitude, conceptual framework.

## I. Introduction

Applicable to products, organisations, symbol, and persons (Aaker, 1996), the American Marketing Association (AMA) defines a brand as 'a name, term, sign, symbol, or design which is intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors'. The complexity in the conceptualisation of branding is further highlighted in the explanation that 'a brand is a customer experience represented by a collection of images and ideas' such that 'brand recognition and other reactions are created by the accumulation of experience with a specific product or service, both directly relating to its use, and through the influence of advertising, design, and media commentary' (AMA, 2015). A brand can be an umbrella for a variety of products (e.g. Nestle), the product can be the brand (e.g. Rolex) and the seller business can be the brand (e.g. Woolworths).

Brands are an important source of sustainable competitive advantage if potential consumers perceive them as unique (Day, 1994). The general purpose of creating a brand is to distinguish the products under its umbrella from other competing products, producers and brands which exist in the consumers' minds and can be recalled when they make consumption choices, buy, use, consume, access, or experience the chosen products (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2011). Hence, a business ultimately develops brand strategies to develop an interface of understanding with its consumers that reflects not only on short-term market share gains and on greater usage/purchase (Rossiter and Bellman, 2012), but also maintains and enhances a good relationship with current consumers for the longer term, enabling a stable and sustainable achievement of business performance objectives (de Chernatony and McDonald, 2003). Arguably, the oversight of the relationship between consumers and the brand may cause brand devaluation, negative performance outcomes (e.g. lower profit), and even brand switching (Keller, 2008).

One way for a business to create and maintain a mutually satisfactory relationship with consumers is to enhance the bilateral motivational investment that is committed to the relationship (Dwyer et al., 1987) by bonding consumers' emotion with the brand (Albert et al., 2009; Barnes, 2003; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Fournier, 1998). The emotional investment requirement is addressed in the marketing literature by applying consumer psychology to brand strategies. For example, brand love is forwarded as generating positive consumer emotions that may explain why a lasting relationship between the consumer and the brand exists (Batra et al., 2012), although there is a lack of empirical evidence on the brand love phenomena (Albert et al., 2008). Emphasis here is on the 'positive' qualifier, because what businesses do to influence emotional involvement may have negative effects on consumers, such as anger or rage (Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2013), and on brands, such as brand hate and brand switching (Fournier and Alvarez, 2013), caused by perceptions of undesirable experience or dishonest purposes (Morale, 2005).

A distinction between interpersonal love and brand love is presented first, followed by the discussion of what is involved in establishing consumer-brand relationships. The concept of

brand likeability, advanced in the literature as an antecedent of brand love (Nguyen et al., 2015) is then discussed, followed by the conceptualisation of brand love and its articulation with brand likeability. An account of consumer gratitude and product type as possible moderators of the effect of brand love on repurchase intentions is also considered.

## **II. Interpersonal love and brand love**

Identified as ‘an intense emotion of affection, warmth, fondness, and regard towards a person or thing’ (The Collins Dictionary, 2015), love involves a set of numerous positive feelings (Sternberg, 1986) that makes it ‘a complex phenomenon and its relations with other constructs are usually hard to define’ (Albert et al., 2009, p.304). Notwithstanding the definitional complexity, there is universal agreement that love can be a powerful motivator on a person’s behaviour and in establishing enduring relationship (Whang et al., 2004). Applied to branding, ‘love’ is used in the literature to convey consumers’ positive emotions and a long-term relationship with a brand (Batra et al., 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Thomson et al., 2005).

Sternberg (1986) refers to love as constructed based on three main elements, namely intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. Developed from the emotional investment that makes people feel ‘warm’ towards other people when they are closer, intimacy refers to a sense of closeness, bonding, and connectedness. Passion is the emotional response to others, and is considered a ‘hot’ element because it is potentially unstable, affecting the quality of relationships between people, and playing an important short-term role in the state of people emotions, capable of enhancing or destroying the relationship. Decision/commitment is described as a ‘cold’ element because it gives a sense of continuity, compelling people to act in a way that supports relationship sustainability. Each element plays an important role in both the short-term and the long-term. Intimacy is the core element of a long-term relationship, while passion and decision/commitment act as moderator. Eight are generated (e.g. liking and romantic love) depending on how each element’s strength relates to others.

Shimp and Madden (1988) applied the human love conceptualisation to consumers’ relationships with objects (whether a place, people, a product, or a brand), identifying three main elements (liking, yearning, and decision/commitment) and concluding that the structure of consumer-object relationships is somewhat congruent with the concept of interpersonal love. Accordingly consumers may develop positive emotions such as satisfaction and happiness towards a brand and its products (Sakar, 2011). In the context of services, consumers also grow positive emotions with desirable interactions, although they do not develop interpersonal love towards service staff (Yim et al., 2008).

The suggestion, therefore, is that there may be a degree of overlap when applying the concept of interpersonal love to consumer-loved objects; for example, consumers may love a product (or a brand) because it is attractive, and they may experience distress when the product is not available (Ahuvia, 2005). However, this suggestion has been dismissed

because, although interpersonal love may have similarities to aspects of consumers and brand love relationships, they are not the same (Batra et al., 2012; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2009), such that the establishment of consumer-brand relationships justifies separate examination.

### **III. Establishing consumer-brand relationships**

Essentially transactional, traditional marketing strategic perspectives tend to focus on new customer acquisition (e.g. by investing in promotional campaigns) rather than on maintaining relationships with existing ones (Gummesson, 1999). Since the realisation that consumer acquisition costs business more than looking after existing consumers (Mende et al., 2013), the traditional perspective often gives place to relational strategic perspectives, such that successful businesses arguably shift their strategic orientation towards the management of long term consumer-brand relationships (Smit et al., 2007). This primary business objective is to ensure relationship stability and development over time through positive interactions between consumers and brands.

The degree of abstraction in the concept of a brand provides a basis for debate on whether the proposition of positive interactions between customers and brand resulting in sustainable relationships is likely to be a flawed argument (Schmitt, 2013). Based on findings from qualitative research, the counter-argument proposes that when consumers interact with a brand, they assess its performance, gain some consumption experiences, and develop emotions that are responsive to the brand's actions. A strong consumer-brand relationship takes time to develop, and consumers evaluate the relationship quality based on their accumulation of previous experiences (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2011).

Brand experience can be evoked from consumers' daily life such as observation and interaction (Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2009), or even in dream (Chang and Chieng, 2006), with brand stimuli (e.g. product, staff, advertisement, and store environment). This led to the identification of fourteen different forms of consumer and brand relationships by Fournier (1998), such as committed partnerships and best friendships. For example, some consumers name the motorbike they own to indicate the special love relationship they have with it (Whang et al., 2004). In this sense consumers perceive the brand as a reciprocal partner (Fournier, 1998) that provides a valuable benefit to them (Batra et al., 2012; Long-Tolbert and Gammoh, 2012). Arguably, the ongoing process of consumer and brand relationship can break the consumers' privacy protection sphere (Smit et al., 2007), such that consumers integrate a meaningful and loved brand in their lives and keep it in their heart (Barnes, 2003).

Brand-related stimuli influence consumers' emotions toward a brand, and the nature of the relationship with that brand (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008). Discussion in the marketing literature about the relationship between consumers' emotional bonds and a brand explain that, more than delivering a bundle of value embedded in the products it relates to, a brand may cause emotions to develop when consumers commit to, use,

consume, operate, or interact with those products (Leek and Christodoulides, 2012). Conversely, consumer emotions can transfer from the product level to the brand level (Yim et al., 2008) becoming relevant for other products under the umbrella brand. Hence, when positive emotions (such as love, liking, happiness, satisfaction, and delight) are formed relative to products under the umbrella brand, consumers are likely to experience the same emotion toward the brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Fournier, 1998; Sarkar, 2011). This emotional transference justifies that the brand and its products need to be perceived together rather than separately, because the two elements are wired together (Fetscherin, 2014).

Some brands are unable to maintain their relationship with consumers because they underestimate the importance of consumers' emotions (Pawle and Cooper, 2006; Yim et al., 2008). Conversely, when consumers develop an emotional bond with a brand, marketers can infer that the consumers established an attachment relationship with that brand (Baumeister and Bratslavsky, 1999; Thomson et al., 2005). Such attachment is likely to involve 'liking' the brand, expressed as brand likeability (Nguyen et al., 2015) and, in some circumstances liking may develop into, or give place to brand love (Batra et al., 2012), both of which, together or separately, may lead to positive repurchase intentions (Baek and King, 2011). Brand likeability is first discussed.

### ***Brand likeability***

Brand likeability refers to 'an assessment of appeal a consumer has for a brand' (Nguyen et al., 2015, p.122), likely to range from dislike to like. The primary objective of creating a positive state of brand likeability is to motivate consumers to like the brand, attracting their attention away from other brands, and creating a positive brand relationship (Nguyen et al., 2015; Ye and van Raaij, 2004). Brand likeability relates to consumer psychology examinations of the impacts of an original source of stimuli such as brand product quality and brand reputation on consumer responses (Reyson, 2005).

Attribution theory maintains that consumers are rational decision makers, who look for the cause of an event and interpret stimulus factors based on their past experience (Orth et al., 2012), such that an interpretation leads to a single emotion of like or dislike. This emotion is important for the success of business brands because consumers purchase intent depends on whether they like a product or a brand in question (Nguyen et al., 2015). In the short term, consumers like a brand and/or its products if they feel satisfied with the attributes and benefits these provide. In this case, if likeability persists relative to other market options, it is conceivable that consumers continue to repurchase the brand/products, developing a strong attachment with these over time (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Shimp and Madden, 1988). If consumers develop an emotion of dislike, dissatisfaction with product or brand attributes and related benefits will ensue (Yang et al., 2011) and their repurchase or the development of attachment is unlikely. Emotions of like/dislike can be caused by several causes, briefly discussed below.

### *Influencers of brand like/dislike emotions*

- **Familiarity** - Familiarity with a brand is viewed as a significant antecedent of brand likeability, impacting on consumers' confidence; specifically, the more consumers are familiar with a brand and like that brand, the more they perceive less risk in product quality evaluation (Nguyen et al., 2015) and the more likely they are of liking the brand. In a service context, consumers prefer to deal with staff that they are familiar with. Familiarity also enhances trustworthiness that guarantees staff's (and brand) performance (Fournier, 1998).
- **Credibility and trustworthiness** - Asymmetrical information between consumers and a brand may cause uncertainty about the brand. To reduce uncertainty, consumers rely on credible sources of information before purchasing (Erdem and Swait, 1998). Trustworthiness pre-empts information accuracy about what a brand delivers to consumers, who may accept the brand promises without question (Priester and Petty, 2003), and who like brands that keep their promises (Hovland and Weiss, 1951). Although the development of trust requires time to establish, it may develop early in the occurrence of consumer-brand interactions (Ahuvia, 2005). Empirical research indicates that credibility and trustworthiness have a positive association with brand affection (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001), brand likeability (Baek and King, 2011), and brand love (Albert and Valette-Florence, 2010).
- **Brand Image and similarity** - Brand image is 'a subjective, perceptual phenomenon of a brand that is reflected by a network of associations in the memory of the consumer' (Chang and Cheing, 2006, p.943). Consumers link brand image to their personality and are presumed to prefer brands that reflect their identity to brands that do not (Barnes, 2003; Fournier, 1998; Tsai, 2011), forming a deep relationship with the brand (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000), that reflects a direct relationship between the degree of brand similarity and consumer satisfaction (Carli et al., 1991). For example, when marketers use celebrities to attract consumers' attention, if there is congruency between the attributes of the brand celebrities and own personal attributes or those of the consumers' friends or family members, this may induce brand likeability (Thomson, 2006). Overall, brand similarity to oneself is a proxy used by consumers in deciding on brand likeability (Nguyen et al., 2013).
- **Quality and satisfaction** – Satisfaction or dissatisfaction are consumer post-consumption evaluation outcomes, presumed to reflect consumers' perceived brand quality and to relate to how they experience the brand (Oliver, 1980). Arguably, consumers like and buy brands of quality they are satisfied with (Nguyen et al., 2013). In the long term, satisfaction provides a necessary basis for strong emotional attachment (Thomson et al., 2005).
- **Reputation** - Product quality underpins brand reputation and consumers evaluate brand likeability based on a good reputation (Campbell, 1999). Reputable brands are perceived to deliver more benefits than unknown brands, justifying a perception of likeability. For

example, consumers prefer luxury brands (e.g. BMW) and accept their high price because brand reputation is perceived as a guarantee of best value of money (Tran et al., 2015).

- Advertising – Understood as emotional branding, advertising is one source of brand information that directly relates to brand trustworthiness (Keller, 2003). Used to deliver brand messages to target groups and to stimulate consumer emotions (Rossiter and Bellman, 2012). Successful advertising can generate consumer emotional attachment, increased usage, and positive attitudes toward the brand or product, contributing to brand profitability (Priester and Pretty, 2003). Advertisement likeability influences consumers' attitude towards a brand and brand choice selection, such that consumers may like or dislike a brand based on how liked the advertisement itself is (Obermiller and Sawyer, 2011). Advertising facilitates consumer relationships with brands (Barnes, 2003), such that the more advertising is shown in the media, the more consumers are familiar with the brand (Berger and Schwartz, 2011).

Consumers' relationships with brands developed based on consumers experience, emotions, and brand meaning (Fournier, 1998). In some cases relationships may involve more than liking, something special between consumers and the brand, to justify repurchase intentions (Barnes, 2003). Arguably, when likeability increases over time, it may convert into a stronger emotion, such as love (Rubin, 1970), but there is a lack of clarity about how brand likeability articulates with brand love. The next section discusses brand love, as a necessary requisite for the discussion of articulation issues between brand likeability and brand love.

### ***Brand love***

Interpersonal love is a powerful concept, involving unconditional demands and, potentially, a degree of irrationality (Batra et al., 2012). From a psychological perspective, 'falling in love is often sudden in onset, volcanic in intensity, and sensed as occurring from outside the self' (Levine, 1996, p.193). This is why it is suggested that interpersonal love goes beyond a relationship between consumers and brand. Businesses cannot stimulate consumers to fall in love with brands, questioning the applicability of the concept of interpersonal love in a business context.

Unlike brand love constructs for which a variety of scales is available, interpersonal love is real love and, arguably, real love cannot be measured (Albert et al., 2008). Consumers who receive pleasurable experiences and positive emotions from their interaction with a loved brand are less likely to terminate that relationship (Japutra et al., 2014), and more likely to dream about that brand (Albert et al., 2008), to declare affect emotion for the brand and to spread positive information to others about the brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), to devote themselves to support the brand (King and Grace, 2012), to hold repurchase intentions about the brand (Vlachos and Vrechopoulos, 2012), to reject negative messages about the brand and to be willing to pay a premium price in its repurchase (Batra et al., 2012). However, more intelligence is needed on how brand love can be generated and measured.



Arguably, the process of developing a brand love relationship with consumers is not straightforward (Luo and Kumar 2013), entailing suitable management of consumer deep emotions, positive experiences, and ongoing interactions (Batra et al., 2012; Fournier, 1998).

Consumer-object relationship theory has prompted the development of different theoretical perspectives (unidirectional, bidirectional and multidirectional) related to the consideration of love relationships that consumers may form toward a brand (Shimp and Madden, 1988). The unidirectional perspective identifies brand love as the 'degree of passionate emotion attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name' (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006, p.81). Grounded on para-social relationship theory, unidimensional perspectives propose that a lover can only perform a one-side interaction, which may cause no effect in the object of their affection (Perse and Rubin, 1989). Hence, consumers can love lifeless products, but the products cannot reciprocate such love (Bergkvist and Bech-Larson, 2010; Shimp and Madden, 1988). For example, some consumers feel love toward a fashion brand that is congruent with their image and personality (Ismail and Spinelli, 2012). Others fall in love with hedonic products because these types of products enhance their image and make them happy (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006).

The nature of love by itself conveys a two-way direction (Shimp and Madden, 1988), that extends to relationships between a consumer and a product, with particular attention to interactions involving a consumer and a service provider (Vlachos and Vrechopoulous, 2012; Yim et al., 2008). For example, research found a positive relationship between consumers and service staff in the computer repair sector, showing that consumers feel warmth, happiness, gratitude, and appreciation toward service staff and the brand when staff engages in positive service delivery performance, such as active action and detailed self-maintenance technique explanations (Long-Tolbert and Gammoh, 2012). Alternatively, some brands employ a well-known person as a human brand to establish positive psychological connections between consumers and the brand (Thomson, 2006), presumably based on familiarity premises.

The multidirectional perspective sees brand love as a complex phenomenon that can be influenced by multiple factors. For example, Batra et al. (2012) refer to multidirectional brand love as a consumer-brand relationship characterised along seven dimensions: passion-driven behaviour, self-brand integration, positive emotional connection, long-term relationship, anticipated separation distress, overall attitude valence, and attitude certainty and confidence. The implication here is that consumers may develop positive emotions toward a brand, the products it refers to, and the interactions they maintain with service employees and the servicescape (Albert et al., 2008; Thomson et al., 2005). In this sense, as in the case of brand likeability, consumers justify their love for the brand based on their feeling of satisfaction with quality that is provided to them, including favourable experiences in interactions with service providers during the consumption process (Batra et al., 2012).

In some cases, some consumers develop an attachment to a brand because they have been familiarised with that brand since childhood (Fournier, 1998). Through this lens, brand love is not limited to either unidirectional or bidirectional perspectives, widening the scope to other possible factors of influence on consumers' emotion toward a brand (Batra et al., 2012). In order to understand the multidirectional perspective of brand love, the branding literature emphasises the consumer-brand relationship involves as a gradual growth process, determined by how consumers perceive their experience with the brand, its products, and other brand elements such as brand image (Chang and Chieng, 2006), interaction with service employees (Yim et al., 2008), with slogans or brand logo (Walsh et al., 2010), and with the brand store environment (Koo and Kim, 2013).

Overall, the different perspectives are not questioned in the literature, suggesting agreement on the importance of brand love for establishing consumers' emotional bond with a brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Sánchez-García, 2012) capable to influence repurchase intention, hence endorsing the potential contributions that brand love creation can make for marketing purposes.

But brand love research is still at an early stage, lacking in theory development, in measurement and in empirical support (Albert et al., 2008), and making it difficult for businesses to build and manage consumers' emotional bonds. For example, research in psychology proposes love and attachment as two different terms used to describe the same phenomenon (Thomson et al., 2005; Vlachos and Vrechopoulos, 2012) and that brand love is only related to multiple strong positive affection, attachments, and passion (Batra et al., 2012). Contrasting views are that consumers need to attach to a particular brand before they can love it (Loureiro et al., 2012), and that the effect from consumers' involvement with a brand can be positive or negative (Park et al., 2010) such that, instead of resulting in brand love, hate may be the outcome (Fournier and Alvarez, 2013).

Like or dislike are possible outcomes from consumer-brand interactions. But brand love dependent strategies may need to be thoroughly thought out before commercial brands attempt to activate love into their consumers' emotions. Additional to resolving conceptual ambiguity, there is a lack of intelligence and agreement on how and when likeability results in love and on whether this is a necessary or important step in influencing repurchase intention. The articulation of brand likeability with brand love is also in need of research, as discussed in the next section.

#### **IV Articulating brand love with brand likeability**

From a marketing perspective, brand likeability and brand love have their roots on the psychological literature dealing with interpersonal relationship, which proposes that there is a link between like and love emotion (Rubin, 1970; Storm and Storm, 1987) that explains the creation of positive consumer emotions towards brands (Batra et al., 2012; Nguyen et al., 2015). The argument is that a consumer goes through a series of liking experiences before falling in love (Nguyen et al., 2013). More specifically, the contention is that liking occurs in

the early stage of love, apparently implying the existence of a liking-love continuum that involves a transformational metamorphosis, because familiarity is required for repeated likeability to turn into love; consequently it can be concluded that love is stronger, lasts longer, and exerts greater attraction than liking (Sternberg, 1987).

Applied to marketing, the above perspective forwards brand likeability is an early state of brand love; accordingly consumers chose to purchase a particular brand because they like it and are satisfied with its quality (Nguyen et al., 2015). When the likeability associated with consumer satisfaction is maintained for an extended period of time, the cumulative feeling of satisfaction converts likeability into brand love (Sarkar, 2011). But some analysts see brand likeability and brand love as different constructs (Rossiter, 2012), although how the two constructs articulate with each other, if at all, is not explained.

In summary, the marketing literature does not offer an unambiguous distinction of meaning between likeability and love. For example, in the daily life people say 'I love chocolate' and 'I love my children', but the word 'love' hardly conveys the same meaning. Furthermore, the marketing literature neither establishes a clear-cut link between brand likeability and brand love, nor explains how each of the constructs relates to consumers' repurchase intentions or whether there are differences in those relationships. This also reflects in the literature attempting to measure brand likeability and brand love. Because brand likeability and brand love scale emerged from types of interpersonal love relationship (Carli et al., 1991; Sternberg, 1986), researchers try to address the distinction between these constructs; in order to use them as a new marketing tool. Clearly, the relationships between brand likeability, brand love and repurchase intentions are complex, but these links must be understood if the strategic application of brand love is to be considered by business in their marketing strategies.

While recourse to consumer psychology stands as a logic guide for examining liking and love relationships between consumers and brands, a systematic approach is needed to investigate the relationship between brand likeability, brand love and repurchase intentions, so their importance for marketing purposes can be established. Is brand likeability a requirement for brand love to develop? Does brand likeability necessarily become brand love over time? How can a business action brand likeability and brand love? Does the articulation apply equally for different types of products? Arguably, it is necessary to question whether the examination also needs to consider the consumers' ability to engage in quality evaluations for different types of products (Albert et al., 2009) and how these evaluations influence repurchase intentions. Little is known about the answers to these questions. How brand love impacts on consumer products is discussed in the next section.

## V Brand love and product type

Business use of brand love as a strategic tool might depend on whether consumption refers to goods or services. Brand love research tends to focus on intangible service-products and bilateral relationships involving service providers.

The difference between goods and services remains an important foundation in the development of marketing strategies. Tangibility refers to the physical attribute of a core product (Levitt, 1981). For highly tangible products, consumers can easily assess quality by using normal sensory perceptions, to understand what is being offered, and to evaluate alternative (Legg and Baker, 1987). In contrast, intangibility emphasises services as performances resulting in service experiences, which makes it difficult for consumers to assess the quality of the services being offered (Friedman and Smith, 1993).

Related to the ease of quality assessments based on the degree of product tangibility, products can be distinguished by their search, experience or credence qualities, (Nelson, 1970). Highly tangible products (e.g. a fashion brand) are considered high in search qualities, such that consumers can evaluate product quality before purchasing. In the case of experience products (e.g. restaurant services), consumers can only discern product quality after purchase or during consumption. In contrast, highly intangible credence products (e.g. medical services) may be impossible for the consumers to evaluate even after consumption takes place (Darby and Karni, 1973). Differences in ease of assessment also extend to consumers' perceptions of risk. For example, although consumers perceive high quality in reputation brands, the consumers' perception of risk may not be equal for search, experience, and credence products, with credence products being perceived as riskier. Figure 1 provides a representation of a suitable intangibility based product typology as a continuum with reference to ease of evaluation.

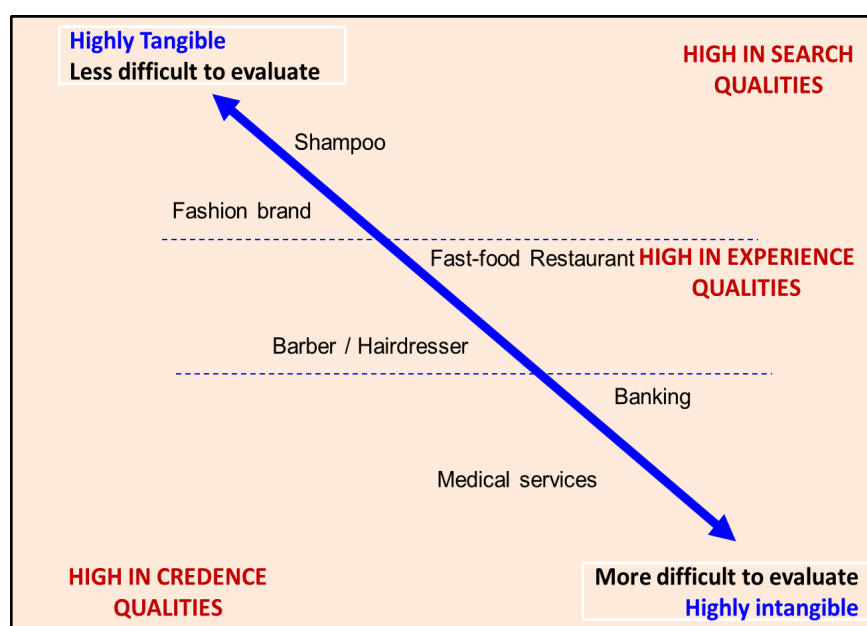


Figure 1: Selected service products in a continuum with reference to ease of evaluation.

While the brand love literature generally focuses on hedonic products as more likely to stimulate stronger love associations with this type of product (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Whang et al., 2004), there is an implicit assumption that consumers may form emotional attachment with products of any type (Fournier, 1998). But the brief discussion above suffices to suggest that tangibility based differences in perceived risk and ease of quality assessment of consumer products can influence brand likeability and brand love perceptions, because these variables depend on consumers' ability to easily confirm quality expectations. Arguably, consumers can reduce their perception of risk of quality assessment, if the relationship with brands is strong (Berry, 1995) and this assists in post-consumption decision making (Alba et al., 1997), clearly relevant to consumers repurchase intentions.

## **VI Brand love and repurchase intention**

Consumers who are satisfied with a brand, whether in absolute terms or relative to other brands, are likely to form some positive feelings of attachment (such as likeability or love) to their preferred brand. These feelings of attachment are forwarded in the as a good predictor of consumer purchase behaviour and consumer intentions of resource spending (Park et al., 2010), reflected in repurchase intentions. The question is, if a link exists, is it stronger for brand love than for likeability? If managing brand love attracts costs to the business, is there a real payoff from stimulating brand love? Furthermore, what is the effect, if any, of product type on the link between brand likeability/love and repurchase intentions? These are questions addressed in this research.

It is necessary to explain here that, while satisfied customers are usually more likely to re-buy, and repurchase intention is often a proxy for purchase behaviour (Morwitz et al., 2007), it can be questioned whether intentions actually convert into actual actions; for example, barriers to switching to a competitor may give way to false loyalty (Jones and Sasser, 1995). The point to note is that repurchase intention may not imply loyalty, although it is difficult to conceive how loyalty may ensue as an outcome of brand love if repurchase intention is not present, since truly loyal consumers must hold a favourable attitude toward the brand in addition to repeatedly purchase it (Day, 1969). The implication is that repurchase intention does not measure loyalty towards what is being repurchased and from whom; hence, it is appropriate to separate repurchase intentions from loyalty, which is not examined in this research.

With or without loyalty, the premise from the discussion is that repurchase intentions follow from consumer satisfaction with a brand, reflected in the link between brand likeability/love (as independent, actionable variables) and repurchase intentions. The link depends on consumers' satisfaction with their interaction with the brand and, as discussed earlier, this satisfaction has the potential to involve feelings of gratitude toward the brand (Long-Tolbert and Gammoh, 2012). This suggests that brand love may or may not involve sentiments of

consumer gratitude, and how this affects repurchase intentions is not known, as discussed below.

## **VII Brand love and consumer gratitude**

Positive continuous experiences between a consumer and a brand engaged in reciprocal exchanges drive the dyad to maintain a relationship (Morales, 2005). Engaging in reciprocal changes is perceived as a voluntary action, possibly moderated by consumer gratitude (Kolyesnikova et al., 2009), understood as ‘an action to repay that helps create a cycle of reciprocity between giving and contributes to an ongoing construction of a relationship’ (Palmatier et al., 2009, p.3).

The marketing perspective is that gratitude underpins relationship quality (Raggio et al., 2014) and encourages reciprocal norms such as the desire to repay (Emmons and McCullough, 2003). When consumers experience a positive relationship this may lead to developing consumer gratitude, driving grateful consumers to gain affection for the brand that cares or gives them special attention (Long-Tolbert and Gammoh, 2012). Arguably, gratitude surrounds brand love with a sphere of warmth (Emmons and McCullough, 2003) which drives consumers to feelings of a close connection with the brand (Von Tevenar, 2006). Hence, it is justified to account for consumer gratitude as a possible moderator of the effect of brand love on repurchase intentions, given its potential to strengthens the sense of intimacy that is at the root of love and successful relationship (Sternberg, 1986).

One further related aspect to consider is that, according to attribution theory, consumers attribute their positive experience of love to the perceive source, and this is what explains the behaviour (Weiner, 1985), possibly strengthening related repurchase intentions (Xia and Kukar-Kinney, 2013). Feelings of love towards a brand may compel consumers to repurchase that brand, but whether this effect applies to different types of products/brands is not clear from the literature, justifying examination of the role of consumer gratitude on repurchase intention for different products.

## **VII Theoretical framework**

Based on the theoretical discussion carried out in previous sections of this paper, a theoretical framework is developed that accounts for the relationships between brand likeability, brand love, and repurchase intentions. Possible moderators, namely consumer gratitude and product type, are also shown. Figure 2 shows the links between related constructs that impact on consumer repurchase intention.

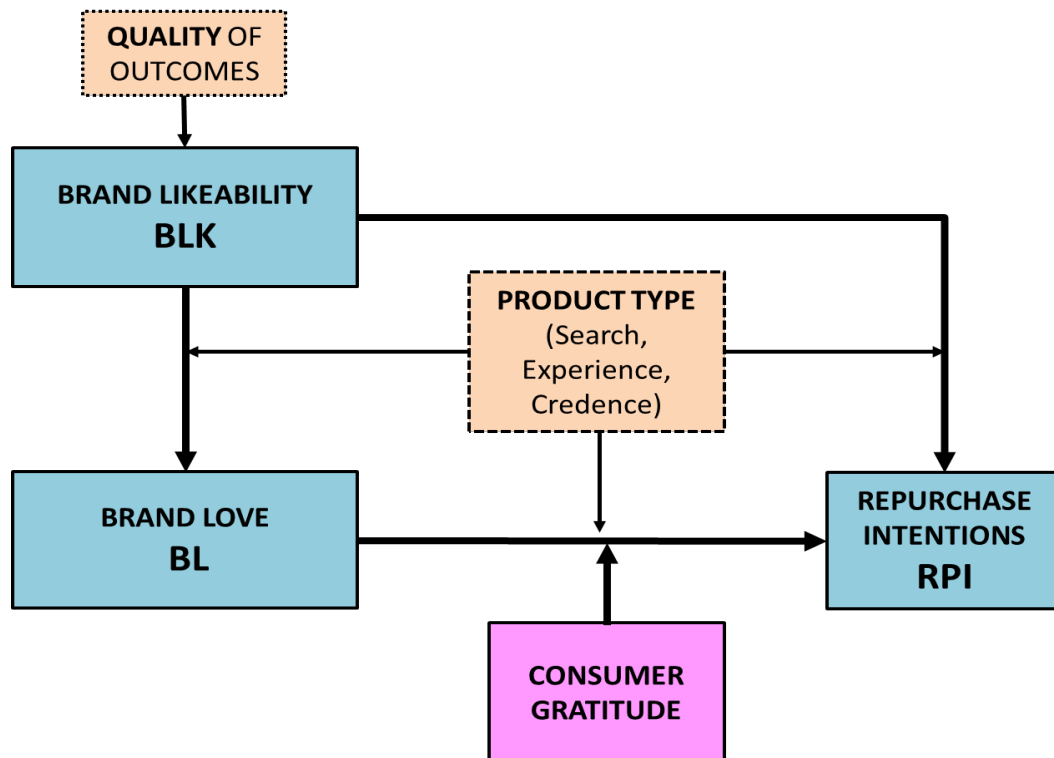


Figure 2: Theoretical framework

Reflected in the theoretical framework, consideration of the importance of brand love for marketing involves the formulation of five research questions and associated hypotheses to guide the research, as follows:

RQ1: What is the relationship between consumers' brand likeability and brand love for different types of products?

H1.1: There is a direct relationship between brand likeability and brand love for search, experience, and credence products.

RQ2: What is the relationship between consumers' brand love and repurchase intentions for different types of products?

H2.1: There is a direct relationship between brand love and repurchase intentions for search, experience, and credence products.

RQ3: What is the relationship between consumers' brand likeability and repurchase intentions for different types of products?

H3.1: There is a direct relationship between brand likeability and repurchase intentions for search, experience, and credence products.

RQ4: What is the effect of consumers' gratitude on the relationship between consumers' brand love and repurchase intentions for different types of products?

H4.1: The relationship between brand love and repurchase intentions is moderated by consumers' gratitude for search, experience, and credence products.

RQ5: What is the importance of different types of products (search, experience, and credence) for the relationship between brand love and repurchase intentions?

H5.1: The relationship between brand love and repurchase intentions is stronger for credence products than for experience products.

H5.2: The relationship between brand love and repurchase intentions is stronger for experience products than for search products.

## **VIII Conclusion and limitations**

Intense competition is a characteristic in many markets, and competitive advantage is a recurring objective for business operating in those markets. Brands have long been researched for their potential in assisting with augmented service-product differentiation, hence often a means to avoid price competition and to generate positive influences on repurchase intentions. Hence, creating a positive relationship between consumers and brands has received extensive attention, reflected in an abundance of branding related studies examining the relationship between consumer satisfaction and repurchase intentions.

Businesses invest their resources on a brand in order to create an emotional bond with consumers who like the brand, in the hope of establishing and enhancing lasting relationships based on consumer perceived psychological benefits from what the brand can do for them during interactions with, and consumption or usage of the brand. Satisfied consumers who like the brand are perceived to gain positive experiences from the bonding process, and to express positive behaviour toward the brand that reflect on repurchase intentions.

Research suggests that, in contrast with consumers merely liking a brand, businesses benefit if they are able to instil a feeling of love on their consumers about their brand. But brand love research is complex and still in its infancy. This discussion paper shows that there is conceptual ambiguity associated with brand likeability and brand love, as well as a lack of intelligence on how their link to repurchase intentions behaves for different types of service-products and under conditions where consumer gratitude towards the brand may be, or not be present.

A critical review of the literature in this discussion paper yields sufficient evidence that the concept of brand love merits further attention in theory and practice, before brand can be used effectively for marketing purposes.



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