The Origins of Brand Love: A Typology of Starting Points

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Due to its positive outcomes for loyalty, word of mouth, and willingness to pay, brand love has generated great interest in marketing research and practice, yet the fundamental question about the origins of this strong bond remains unanswered. This article identifies three potential sources of the development of brand love: the product and its brand, important events in consumers’ lives, and social influences. Similar to interpersonal love, the development of brand love may be slow or fast; it depends on the experiences a consumer has with the brand. Two studies in turn reveal five starting points, associated with consumers’ unique brand experiences: first love, love at first sight, grown love, inherited love, and arranged love. The resulting recommendations for marketing practice suggest ways to foster the effective development of these different starting points.

1. Introduction

When consumers are in love with a brand, they likely engage in positive word of mouth, pay a price premium, and remain loyal to that brand (Roberts 2005; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Albert et al. 2008, 2009; Rossiter 2012; Batra et al. 2012; Langner et al. 2016). But what drives brand love relationships to start in the first place? This question is critical, because understanding how brand love starts can help marketing practitioners stimulate the formation of stronger brand relationships.

Instead, most prior research focuses on the relations of brand love with its antecedents and consequences (e. g., Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2010; Batra et al. 2012). In introducing the concept of love to consumer marketing research, Shimp and Madden (1988) adapt Sternberg’s (1986) triangular theory; Fournier (1998) provides a detailed taxonomy of consumer-brand relationships but does not explicitly include brand love in it. A more recent contribution offers a dynamic perspective (Langner et al. 2016), highlighting five trajectories by which brand love relationships develop over time. Prior research thus indicates that personally meaningful emotional experiences inform relationships over the course of time but without examining the initial setting that triggers the process of brand love formation to start.

To address this gap and thereby offer managerial recommendations for establishing strong brand love relationships, we undertake a reanalysis of two qualitative studies. We identify the initial experiences that trigger the formation of a brand love relationship and explicate the origins of brand love.
2. Theoretical background

2.1. Definition of brand love

The term “love”, typically used to describe feelings or relationships between persons, moved from psychological research to brand and consumer research more than 20 years ago (Shimp and Madden 1988; Ahuvia 1993). Citing the concept of love in interpersonal relations, these authors describe relationships in which consumers feel a very strong attachment toward objects, including products and brands. The resulting research stream identifies various similarities between interpersonal and object love (e.g., Heinrich et al. 2008).

In psychology, love is “a motivation or goal-directed state that leads to various specific emotions such as euphoria or anxiety” (Aron et al. 2005, p. 335). In turn, brand love entails a consumer-brand relationship that comprises two essential components: intensive affection and separation distress (Langner and Kühn 2010; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2010; Rossiter 2012). That is, consumers in love with a brand experience deep affection for it and anticipate separation distress if they cannot buy or own it anymore. Many Harley-Davidson drivers, for example, love their brand: They deeply enjoy owning and driving a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, and the thought of never being able to drive one again would cause them great distress and intense, negative, loss-related emotions. This two-componential conceptualization, with its positive and negative components, provides the conceptual foundation for substantial research in the domains of brands and interpersonal relationships.

2.2. Origins of interpersonal love

Whereas researchers generally have neglected questions about the initial starting points of brand love, the situation that marks research into interpersonal love is quite different. The initiation of interpersonal love has long been a central research topic (e.g., Dutton and Aron 1974; Aron et al. 1989; Riela et al. 2010). For example, Dutton and Aron (1974) analyse the influence of physiological arousal, noting that heterosexual male subjects were significantly more attracted by a female experimenter while crossing a frightening, shaky suspension bridge over a 70 m canyon than men who were crossing a solid wooden bridge that was 3 m above a small rivulet. These authors conclude that the men misattribute their physiological arousal in the fright-based condition to the woman and interpret it as sexual attraction (see also Meston and Frohlich 2003). Arousal contributes to sexual attraction, as well as to romantic attraction and love (Aron et al. 1989). Furthermore, higher levels of arousal are often involved in rapid transitions to love, rather than in slow growth (Riela et al. 2010), and are typical of infatuations or love at first sight (Sternberg 1986).

However, not everyone meets their future spouses in arousing circumstances like a shaky bridge. Love can also evolve slowly, under conditions of low arousal, as long as a sufficient number of encounters occurs, such as after many dates or positive interpersonal experiences. Sternberg (1971) proposes that even mere exposure can serve as a basis for interpersonal attachment and attraction. In a classroom experiment, Moreland and Beach (1992) show that attraction to other students depends on the frequency of attendance in the class sessions. Specifically, students rated the attractiveness of four women, similar in appearance, who attended a large college course with different frequencies. The more class sessions a woman attended, the more attractive she appeared to her fellow students. Aron et al. (1989) find that propinquity (i.e., spending time together and mere exposure) is an important precursor of romantic love.

Similar to interpersonal relationships, brand love might evolve slower or faster. In some cases, a single experience can lead to instant love for a brand; other relationships require many years of positive encounters before the feelings turn to love. We propose that these patterns span a continuum. On the one extreme, brand love originates with a single, highly arousing event that serves as a trigger to establish brand love instantly, like love at first sight. On the other extreme, it stems from a multitude of positive but less intense experiences over several years that lead to the slow growth of a feeling of love.

2.3. Impacts of brand experiences on the origin of brand love

Experiences that lead consumers to form relationships with brands can vary a lot. Langner et al. (2016) identify several formative experiences that influence the development of brand love over the course of time, including those with products, childhood events, personal relationships, hobbies, vacations, travel abroad, transitional moments, gifts, and even negative experiences. Consumers’ experiences with loved brands often contrast with a widespread understanding of brand experiences as “subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli” (Brakus et al. 2009, p. 53), in that they can be either endogenous or exogenous (Bruns 2017). Endogenous experiences result from the product and the brand itself, usually created by the company, but exogenous experiences occur outside the company’s control, often by chance. Experiences triggered by product aesthetics, such as the pleasure evoked by Apple designs, are characteristic of endogenous experiences, but childhood experiences or vacations are typical exogenous experiences. In the latter case, the brand has a minor role, such as when someone becomes familiar with a particular brand while on a holiday or when the brand reminds the consumer of a loved one. Against this background, different sources of brand love can be identified. These various sources then determine the occurrence and frequency of experiences with the brand, as well as the emotionality or quality of those experiences.

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2.3.1. Products and brands as sources of love-generating experiences

The first source of experiences is the loved object itself. In interpersonal love relationships, the person is a dominant source of the experiences that lead to love. Critical factors include the person’s physical appearance (Walster et al. 1966; Berscheid and Walster 1974) and other personal characteristics (Aron et al. 1989). Similarly, for brands, certain product attributes tend to be typical of well-loved brands, such as the product aesthetics and interface design of Apple products or the kart-like driving experience of a MINI, which creates excitement and enthusiasm. Brand love also is more common toward brands in product categories that consumers perceive as hedonic (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006), because such products create more intense consumption experiences, which generally lead to stronger arousal, deepening the brand relationship (Chang and Chieng 2006) and enhancing the sense of intimacy and passion (Sarkar et al. 2012).

Other determinants of interpersonal love result from similarities between two partners, whether in terms of their personality attributes, demographic factors, attitudes, or values (Newcomb 1956; Byrne 1971; Clark and Mills 1979, 1993). Similarities may influence the development of brand love too. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen (2010) show that the self-expressiveness of brands and brand identification positively affect the development of brand love.

2.3.2. Meaningful events in consumers’ lives as sources of love-generating experiences

A second source of experiences pertains less to the product and more to the consumer and meaningful events in her or his life. In interpersonal love contexts, falling in love often coincides with early life stages. Infants naturally feel love toward their mothers and later develop love toward fathers, grandparents, and siblings. As teenagers, people usually experience romantic love for the first time, along with platonic love with their best friends. Parents experience deep love toward their children. Brand love also should benefit from experiences that reflect certain life stages. As Ji (2002) shows, consumers form their first brand relationships during childhood; Diehl (2009) finds that brand attachment often develops in childhood. Langner et al. (2016) also report that consumers often recall experiences with a loved brand that date back to their childhood or youth. In early life stages, highly meaningful, emotionally arousing experiences occur in rapid succession, often involving formative life transitions (e.g., earning a driver’s license, moving away from home). These arousing, meaningful events may have brands associated with them (Bruns 2017). Therefore, brand love likely originates from experiences that occur in transitional phases of life, such as childhood or adolescence.

2.3.3. Third-person influences as a source of love-generating experiences

In interpersonal relationships, various forms of social influence determine relationship formation, such as meeting a partner through friends (Knox and Wilson 1981), arranged marriages (Fox 1975), or approval of a partner by the social network (Sprecher and Felmlee 1992). Similarly, third-person influence applies to relationships with objects and brands, which are “always three-way (person-thing-person)” (Belk 1988, p. 147). For example, brand relationships benefit from brand communities (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2010) and socialization processes (Esch and Gawlowski 2013). Interpersonal relationships thus can foster experiences with brands (e.g., parents use the brand) and lead to emotionally intense experiences (e.g., a close friend makes a gift, the brand is a reminder of a joint experience).

In summary, we anticipate that intense endogenous and exogenous experiences are responsible for the development of brand love. These experiences have their origins in the brand and product itself, are fostered in certain life periods, and/or are due to a third person’s influence. Depending on the particular experiences, brand love can develop either instantly or over time. The level of arousal experienced while a consumer comes in contact with the brand should determine whether brand love emerges instantly or if it requires frequent encounters with the brand before brand love can arise.

3. Study 1

3.1. Method

With this first study, we seek to analyse the beginnings of brand love and identify the main starting points – or origins – of brand love. Using data originally collected by Langner et al. (2015) to compare brand relationships with interpersonal relationships, we reanalysed the evidence to examine the origins of brand love. The data for this study came from 30 undergraduate and graduate students attending a public university in Germany (50 % female; average age 24 years). Each participant engaged in an individual interview, in which they were asked to name brands they loved and pick the brand they loved most. They named brands and products from different categories, such as cars (10 out of 30 participants, e.g., Ford, BMW), fashion (8, e.g., Tommy Hilfiger, William Rast, Lacoste), food and beverages (4, e.g., Lindt, Nutella), sporting goods (3, e.g., Puma, Nike), and consumer electronics (3, e.g., Nokia).

Next, participants responded several open-ended question prompts, such as “Please describe the origins of this brand love,” “Why do you love this brand?” “What are the outcomes of your brand love relationship?” and “Characterize the relationship to your most loved brand.” The analysis of origins relied predominantly on the answers to the first and second questions. We used open
category coding and constant comparisons based on grounded theory (Charmaz 1995; Glaser and Strauss 1999; Corbin and Strauss 2008). Starting with an analysis of the interviews on an idiographic level, we analysed the responses to the open-ended questions, to identify the causes of the respondents’ love for their brands. On a second, more general level, we aimed to structure these reasons and identify general phenomena across the different respondents, related to the possible origins of brand love development. On the basis of the theoretical background and the similarities and differences in the identified origins, we derived different starting points for brand love. All the authors engaged in this analysis, and any differences were resolved by discussion.

3.2. Findings

3.2.1. Product- and brand-related reasons: Essential for most brand love relationships

The beginnings of brand love are diverse. Many different reasons and causes for loving a brand emerged from the interviews. Regarding the distinction between endogenous and exogenous experiences, loving a brand can relate to controllable endogenous reasons, such as the brand and product, or to exogenous reasons that the company cannot control easily, such as personal experiences.

Unsurprisingly and in line with our propositions, many respondents provide product- or brand-related reasons for loving the brand, including features like the products’ quality, longevity, ease of use, or design, as well as the functional and emotional benefits associated with using the product (e.g., fun, well-being, satisfaction). For example, Respondent 27 (24 years, male) reported that he loves Lindt “because they produce the most delicious chocolate.” Other respondents focused more on brand-related reasons, such as awareness, image, prestige, or identification. Respondent 19 (22 years, female) stated that wearing clothes from Ralph Lauren “gives me self-confidence,” while Respondent 8 (24 years, male) loves the fashion brand William Rast “because... I have a prestige- and image added value.” However, product-related experiences often are not sufficient to explain the occurrence of brand love; the brand experiences and benefits from consuming the products represent an essential basis for brand love. They are essential but often do not suffice to spark the development of brand love.

3.2.2. Early life phases and phases of transition as interpersonal causes of brand love

An important exogenous cause of brand love results from the consumer. In accordance with our predictions, the emotions felt in the presence of a brand result not only from the brand itself but also from situations that are inherently emotionally arousing. For example, some respondents mentioned that they discovered the brand in their childhood, so they associate the brand with joyful childhood memories. Others recalled substantial life changes as causes for falling in love with a brand. Respondent 12 (21 years, male) reported that his love for Volkswagen was caused by receiving his driving license. From these examples, we conclude that certain life phases are more beneficial for developing love for a brand than others. Events such as getting a driving license and life phases in childhood seem to be particularly stimulating for developing brand love, because they tend to be emotionally arousing and inherently positive. A brand that is present during such events may benefit from the consumer’s positive, arousing mood. Early life phases and changes also may be beneficial for the development of brand love because consumers have their first experiences in particular product categories, such as with brands that were present in their parents’ home, the brand of their first football boots, or their first car. Because first experiences are formative and emotionally arousing (LaTour et al. 2010), brands in use during these periods likely form associations with these positive events and then may become top-of-mind brands in the respective product category.

3.2.3. Interpersonal influence as a cause of brand love

In line with our predictions, third persons exerted different forms of influence on the respondents. In some cases, the first contact with the brand resulted from an initiation through others, such as when respondents first received the brand as a gift. One participant reported that her father prompted her to buy the brand in the first place, and Respondent 19 (20 years, female) stated that her love for Ralph Lauren was caused by a “gift from my aunt.”

Other accounts highlight emotional impacts of third persons on the brand relationship, especially the socializing influence of parents who had used the brand. In some cases, the relationships with brands serve as representative symbols for relationships with other people. Participant 29 (25 years, female) not only reports that her love for her car was caused by her parents, who gave it to her as a gift, but also that she loves the product “because it is a gift!” The example raises a question though, regarding whether the participant truly loves the brand or only the particular item she received as a present.

3.2.4. Intensity and frequency of experiences as causes of brand love

On the basis of our literature review, we anticipated a continuum, from fast transitions toward loving the brand due to intensive emotional events on the one hand, to slow growth into love caused by frequent positive encounters with the brand on the other. Some participants’ accounts indicated the occurrence of many positive encounters before they reached a feeling of love. These accounts highlighted the importance of aspects such as familiarity or satisfaction. Participant 23 (24 years, female) explained that her love for Esprit was due to “frequent purchases” and “satisfaction.” Other respondents re-
ferred to their “daily companion,” having “grown up with products of this brand,” or how it “has accompanied me my whole life.” In contrast, other participants mentioned single events or a limited set of discrete events that caused them to fall in love with the brand. Participant 22 (25 years, female) reported that she fell in love with a beauty care brand after she spontaneously tried it in the supermarket. Similar expressions included, “I got it as a gift for my birthday,” “through the driving license,” and other citations of events, like trying the product at a party. Accounts of concrete events often suggested a rather fast transition to love. Participant 24 (21 years, female) noted that she developed love for her notebook in a sequence: “bought it, tried it, fell in love.”

In our theoretical background, we distinguished intensive, highly arousing, single experiences from frequent exposures to the brand. These two extremes are manifest not only in the speed with which brand love develops but also in the benefits for the consumer. Some brand relationships provide stimulation, breeding excitement, and fun, but others appear to offer stability, constancy, and feelings of security. An example of a stimulating relationship came from Respondent 4 (29 years, male), who loves the Ford brand because of its cars from the 1970s and 1980s. When characterizing his relationship, he uses words like “collector’s passion”, “driving pleasure”, and “enthusiasm for the shape, engineering, and workmanship”. Respondent 17 (27 years, female) explained her love for the fashion brand Esprit: “I love it because it is super!” In contrast, the stabilizing brand relationships are often characterized by less intense feelings, such that respondents used descriptions related to sympathy, comfort, reliability, or well-being. For example, Respondent 2 (25 years, male) described his relationship with Nutella as “friendly”, involving a product “used in moments of tranquility.” Another example comes from Respondent 18 (22 years, female), who reported that she loved her car “because it brings me everywhere and has never let me down.” This stabilizing aspect also applies to her own actions, in that she states, “I try to maintain it, take care that it does not break or get damaged by others.”

3.3. Starting points of brand love

On the basis of these general findings, we identified five different starting points for brand love that reflect the dominant forces leading to this feeling. The labels for each category reflect participants’ descriptions of the beginnings of love for the brand, as follows:

- **First love:** Based on a vivid, emotionally positive recollection of the first experience with a particular product category. Participant 2 (25 years, male) reported that his love for Nutella spread goes back to when he “ate it as a child, at home.” The love that participant 12 (21 years, male) felt for Volkswagen resulted from the time he received his driving license.

- **Grown love:** Begins with neutral feelings or liking of the branded product, not love. Liking then grows into love as a result of a series of favourable encounters. Participant 1 (24 years, male) explained that his love for his preferred computer magazine “has developed over many years.” Grown love often goes hand in hand with feelings of familiarity and intimacy, such that Participant 1 reported that the magazine “is an important and familiar part of my life.”

- **Arranged love:** Begins with an externally influenced adoption of the brand. Third persons provide the impulse for brand usage, through recommendations or gifts. Participant 15 (23 years, female) reported being actively encouraged by her father to buy clothes from the fashion brand Tommy Hilfiger.

- **Love at first sight:** Relationships arise instantly in single moments through intense emotional experiences. In our data, this starting point usually originated with the consumer’s immediate perception of the brand as unique and outstanding in the product category. Participant 25 (23 years, female), for example, reported that she immediately fell in love with a special kind of beer at a party because of its “unique taste”. However, as theory would suggest, it may be that the party, similar to the shaky bridge experiment, caused high arousal, which she misattributed to the product, thereby intensifying her experience with the brand.

- **Inherited love:** Also externally induced, it describes the transmission of love for the brand from other people. Unlike arranged love though, for which third persons actively initiate the contact, inherited love results from an indirect process, in which parents, siblings or good friends consume the brand and passively serve as transmitters of the love relationship. Participant 26 (24 years, male) explained that his love for BMW cars resulted from a family tradition: “My parents and my brother always drove a BMW.”

3.4. Discussion

In line with our predictions, a closer look at brand love origins reveals different starting points, structured by three distinct dimensions. First, the speed with which consumers fall in love with brands differs. It either evolves over time (grown love) or occurs immediately after the first contact (love at first sight). Second, we observe a social dimension of brand love origins. The extent to which a third person is involved in the formation of brand love can vary considerably. At one extreme, brand love initiates with an externally induced adoption of the brand (arranged love) or the transfer of love from other people (inherited love). The former implies that a third person makes an active recommendation; the latter involves a third person who is passive, such that his or her influence is limited to consumption of the loved brand. At the other extreme, the impulse for brand love may be intrinsic, so other people’s influence is not given, or at least is marginal. Third, the phase of life in which brand love begins seems to have an impact on the quality of the brand relationship. Brand love relations estab-
lished in early lives (first love) appear exceptionally strong and lasting.

The start of a brand love relationship is described according to all three dimensions. Brand love relations start either quickly or slowly; they are influenced by third persons or not; and they can benefit from love-promoting life phases such as childhood. However, we expect that one of these dimensions acts as the main driver for the development of brand love. Thus, a brand love relationship that starts in childhood might originate instantly and be arranged at the same time. However, it represents first love if the initial, emotionally intense brand experiences in childhood were the primary cause for the feeling of brand love.

We also confirmed that some phases in consumers’ lives are particularly beneficial for prompting brand love. In these life phases, brand love emerges with a greater likelihood than in other phases of life. However, in our sample, only childhood was identified as a love-promoting phase, possibly due to our use of a student sample. We cannot rule out the possibility that other phases of life (e.g., entering a profession) might be similarly effective in stimulating brand love. Thus, for Study 2, we gathered a sample that included older participants and non-students.

4. Study 2

4.1. Method

We had a twofold aim for the second study. First, we sought to explicate the origins of brand love, as identified in Study 1. Second, we wanted to identify further starting points of brand love by using a sample that also encompassed older, non-student participants. Specifically, we considered transcriptions of qualitative semi-structured interviews, originally collected by Langner et al. (2016), and reanalysed them according to the insights they could provide about brand love starting points. Of the 38 new volunteer participants (63 % female, average age 31 years) who provided the data for Study 2, approximately one-third were non-students, and two-thirds were undergraduate or graduate students from the same German university.

Respondents again were interviewed individually, following an interview guide. The qualitative interviews began with a question that asked each participant to name brands for which he or she felt deep affection and would regret if he or she could not have anymore. Next, participants named the brand that he or she loved most. Several questions about this most loved brand followed (e.g., “Please think back at the time when your love for the brand began. Think about how it came about that you love the brand”; “Is there a concrete moment since you are aware that you love the brand? What happened in that moment? What did you feel?”; “When did you notice the brand for the first time? Can you describe the situation?”; “When did you use or buy the brand for the first time?”; “What has changed between the first contact and today?”). Probing, follow-up questions were added as necessary. The most loved brands in Study 2 came from product categories similar to those in Study 1; frequent mentions involved fashion (8 of 38 participants; e.g., Zara, Levi’s, H&M), sporting goods (8; e.g., Nike, Adidas), cars (5; e.g., BMW, Mercedes Benz), food and beverages (5; e.g., Milka, Coca-Cola), cosmetics (4; e.g., MAC, Alcina), and consumer electronics (3; e.g., Apple, Samsung). In an analysis similar to that for Study 1, the first and third authors openly coded the materials. In a first step, we sought hitherto unobserved phenomena that would result in additional starting points. Then in a second step, we conducted frequency counts (Glaser 1965), on the basis of the five starting points defined in Study 1. Agreement about the starting points reached 90 %, and any differences were resolved through discussion.

4.2. Findings

The analysis of the participants’ recollections of the origins of their feelings of love toward their most loved brand revealed the same brand love origins as in the first study. Despite an extension of the sample with non-students, we did not observe additional or unique starting points of brand love. All participants could be assigned

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Brand love origins</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First love</td>
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<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grown love</td>
<td>Brand love slowly developed over a longer period</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arranged love</td>
<td>Family or peer group members actively arranged consumption situations of the brand</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>A family history of brand usage induced an adoption of the loved brand; the parents or siblings serve as passive transmitters</td>
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*Notes: Participants’ (N = 38) origins were classified into a primary type only, based on the participant’s description of his or her experiences with the brand.*
to the five starting points. The most frequent were first love, grown love, and arranged love (see Tab. 1).

First love
In this study, first love described 14 of the 38 brand love relationships, based on an early consumer experience and related to a vivid, emotionally positive recollection of the first experiences with the product category. Participant 37 (27 years, male), for example, reported that the brand Puma is important to him because his first experiences with the brand go back to his childhood:

“It may sound a little kitschy, but my first football boots were Pumas. It went so far that I only wanted to play in these shoes.... I think, I just took them off, when I took a bath.... Well, they were the first football boots. Like the first Barbie for girls, for us it is the first toy car, first football boots, first football.... [You] play with it, you feel that it fits, you somehow harmonize together, even if the shoes themselves don't do anything special.”

This example reveals the critical importance of the product in a particular phase of the participant's life. Being the first brand that a consumer experiences in a category has important advantages for the brand. First or unique events often produce emotionally intense, meaningful experiences and result in strong and stable memories (e.g., Talarico 2009). When brands are present at these events, they may become associated with these emotional experiences. Another theme in brand love relationships is nostalgia (e.g., Albert et al. 2008; Ortiz et al. 2011), and a special form of first love that emerged from our interviews pertained to “late first love,” such that consumers have known the brand since their childhood or youth but develop love toward the brand only many years later, because they adhere to their nostalgic memories connected with the brand and remind them of their childhood or youth. One participant (41 years, female) reported her love for Levi’s jeans, which she liked (but did not love) in her youth and that she associates with “parties and freedom”. “Back then,” she said, “one used to get into the bathtub with the trousers on ... so they got tighter when they dried.” She reported that her feelings diminished when she had children but then “came back. Well the ardent love came, because one knows, that it is connected with one's youth.”

Grown love
We observed grown love in 11 of 38 cases. It does not emerge immediately; rather, it begins neutrally or with liking, then grows into love as a result of a series of favourable encounters with the brand. Participant 66 (24 years, female) reported on her love for Adidas:

“At the beginning ... it was relatively neutral but I liked it because I noticed that it suited me.... But, over time, I bought the brand again and again and accordingly, the love to the brand grew as well, because I repeatedly realized 'it is good, it is sustainable, the quality is super and they have a wide selection.”

As this example shows, grown love often starts with rational grounds, then turns into product satisfaction and enthusiasm. Participant 43 (35 years, male) mentioned that before he bought his first Samsung television, he had “read a 1,000 test reports and ultimately decided for this Samsung device, that performed best.” His love for Samsung then developed over many years:

“Well, it increased with the other devices. So it was rather a gradual process. Of course, I was happy at first when I got the TV, which was the first device.... [The relationship] to the brand definitely became stronger.... [Because] of the satisfaction with each product and everything working perfectly, it truly strengthened. Like I just said, gradually, I become more and more fixated on Samsung.”

Arranged love
Arranged love was present in 8 of 38 brand love relationships. This love begins with an externally influenced adoption of the brand. Typically, love is arranged through gifts or recommendations. One respondent (Participant 9, 25 years, female), for example, reported that her love for Gauloises cigarettes developed, “because my then heartthrob and later boyfriend started smoking these cigarettes and offered them to me. So, of course, I thought, ‘I have to smoke them too.’ And then I always had to think of him”. The influence of third persons on brand relationships can be so strong that the characteristics of the brand itself become less important: “It could have been any other brand. If he had offered me Ernte 23 [an old German cigarette brand], that would now be the brand of my choice.” Often, the love for brands symbolizes relationships with loved ones, loved hobbies, or cherished memories. These exogenous reasons for loving a brand go beyond mere initiation of the first contact and use of the brand. They provide extrinsic reasons for brand love; it is not uncommon for these reasons to grow much more important to the consumer than the product itself is.

Love at first sight
We identified love at first sight in 3 cases, mainly caused by intense emotional experiences. When consumers fall in love at first sight, they often regard the brand as unique. Participant 67 (22 years, female) immediately fell in love with the car brand Fiat because of its unique design:

“... and then I just saw the Fiat and it was love at first sight.... It was just ... I saw it for a second and then I thought ‘I want nothing else, I want this one’. [Interviewer: Love started from that moment?] The moment when I sat into it ... the inside being all red and white.... I felt completely comfortable. It was a great feeling. I was sitting there and everything was shin-
Inherited love

Finally, we identified inherited love in only 2 cases. Parents and grandparents served as role models in these cases. Participant 36 (28 years, male) responded, to a question about how he came to love Alfa Romeo vintage cars:

“Basically, I grew up with it because my dad ... had them and tinkered or restored them. That shaped me from the cradle.... [Interviewee: When did you notice the brand for the first time?] Well, I drove with my dad to a vintage car Grand Prix. That was the first time. 1987. I was five. That was the first time when I saw more than just the own [vintage] car.”

As this example shows, inherited love can overlap with first love. However, in this case, the positive emotions are rooted in a shared history with a third person, rather than in one’s own individual development or coming of age. This finding also is manifest in the example of a participant’s love for Brandt rusk. Her feelings for the brand date back to her childhood but are mainly affected by her parents and grandparents, who passed the brand relationship down to her and her siblings (Participant 53, 22 years, female): “My siblings and I always used to go to this gorgeous Brandt store with our grandmother and she bought us everything that we wanted. Those are fond memories.” Inherited love is not only initiated by family members and friends but also maintained by the memories of these relationship experiences. In this example, the relationship with the brand was caused by family experiences in childhood, but her memories of these experiences are also reasons for loving the brand in the present: “I think I love this brand because it gives me a feeling of home.... Since I moved away from home, I always buy this Brandt rusk and think back to this time.”

5. General Discussion

Considering the positive outcomes of brand love, establishing love between customers and their brands is an important goal for marketers. We identify different origins and starting points for brand love that provide new insights into the emergence of consumers’ love for their brands and possible ways for marketers to promote the development of brand love. In two studies, we reanalysed qualitative interviews to identify the reasons and causes for brand love. Our findings suggest that three dimensions, each reflecting a continuum, structure the starting points of brand love: speed (fast to slow), social (socially triggered to socially independent), and life stage (young to old). Brand love can be characterized on all three dimensions, such that a brand relationship might begin during childhood and grow into love over time. Our data reveal the five different starting points of brand love as (more or less) distinct phenomena that locate on the extreme points of one of the three dimensions and represent the dominant forces that initiate love for a brand.

First, brand love development differs in terms of its speed and the number of experiences necessary to develop love toward a brand (Fig. 1). In our investigation, we find that brand love may emerge from discrete events that result in fast transitions to love or may involve a series of positive encounters that lead slowly to the growth of love. With this continuum, we distinguish two starting points: love at first sight and grown love. Whereas grown love takes a long time to develop, requiring many positive experiences that strengthen the relationship in the long run, love at first sight develops almost instantly from a single or just a few highly emotional contacts. With our theoretical foundation, we predicted different mechanisms that might underlie these starting points. That is, grown love stems from a multitude of positive encounters that, at the extreme, may result from mere exposure processes (Zajonc 1968). Love at first sight instead results from arousal, induced directly by the endogenous product experience or excitation transfer (Zillman 1971) from exogenous experiences to the brand. The probability of brand love formation appears to increase with the intensity and number of experiences.

Second, the onset of brand relationships, which turn into love, may be self-determined or imposed by others (Fig. 2). Social relationships are important for brand relationships; they can serve as sources of exogenous experiences (Langner et al. 2016). Brand relationships also can help consumers nurture their relationships with family members or friends who are associated with these brands (Olsen 1993). We identify two distinct forms of third-person influence: Arranged love begins from an externally induced adoption of the brand, and inherited love starts with the transfer of love from other people. The former implies active encouragement of brand usage, such as through gift giving (Belk and Coon 1993) or recommendations. The latter is a more indirect effect, such that the brand relationship is adopted or copied from others (Fournier 1998; Moore et al. 2002) who, intentionally

![Fig. 1: Continuum of brand love development over time](https://example.com/brand-love-figure.png)
or not, serve as role models (Olsen 1993; Esch and Gawlowski 2013). At the other extreme, the brand love origin may be intrinsic, such that other people’s influences are marginal at best. We predict in turn that the probability of brand love formation increases with third-person influences. Furthermore, the social influence on brand relationships likely depends on the significance of the relationship with the third person, such that brand love should be more likely when prompted by close others like parents, siblings, spouses, and friends.

Third, the phase of life in which the brand love begins affects the formation of the brand relationship (Fig. 3). Certain life phases, including childhood, youth, and adolescence, are more emotionally arousing than others. Changes in life status can evoke both positive feelings and stress, which may be compensated for by changes to consumption patterns and new brand preferences, or else coping strategies that involve the reinforcement of established consumption patterns and brand preferences (Andreasen 1984). Products or brands thus might reflect and also contribute to life stage changes and personal development (Myers 1985), such that they take on emotional and personal meaning for the consumer and trigger feelings associated with the brand-related experiences. Brand relationships that begin in these phases likely are more emotional and meaningful than relationships that develop without external emotional enhancements. Brand love relations established in early life phases (e.g., first love) appear exceptionally strong and persistent. In turn, we predict that the probability of brand love formation decreases over people’s lifetimes.

Sometimes, the usage or consumption of branded products evokes memories of emotional experiences and triggers feelings of nostalgia (Holak and Havlena 1998). In our study, these memories were often related to highly emotional experiences with loved persons or to certain life stages. Emotional experiences with brands or products can result in nostalgic bonding (Holbrook and Schindler 2003). These nostalgic relationships may overlap with love for the brand. However, many of the brand relationships observed here were not nostalgic in their nature, so it seems that nostalgia is just one of several possible origins of brand love.

6. Limitations and implications for further research

One limitation of our studies relates to the sample. In Study 1, all participants were students; in Study 2, two-thirds of the participants were students. Other age groups, such as senior citizens, might report different brand love origins. We cannot rule out the possibility of other starting points or other dimensions of brand love origins in other consumer segments. Furthermore, the frequencies of the different origins reported in Study 2 might vary across age groups. Among teenagers, for example, grown love probably is less frequent than it would be among older consumers. Continued research could investigate these relationships and particularly the development of the brand love relationships among elderly consumers.

Due to the retrospective nature of this investigation, we also cannot rule out a hindsight bias. The participants’ reports about their brand love origins may be influenced by their recent feelings toward the brand and the product category. Thus, the feelings they experienced years ago, when their brand love relationship was established, might differ from what the respondents report currently. Some reported relationships had lasted for more than 20 years; considering the long process of relationship devel-
opment, we considered a retrospective survey procedure the best alternative.

Additional research could analyse further determinants of different brand love starting points. For example, it would be interesting to assess the impact of consumer personality on the formation of brand love. Love at first sight might correlate with consumer personality characteristics such as extraversion, whereas inherited love and first love might relate to consumers’ tendency toward nostalgia (Holbrook and Schindler 2003). Variables such as private or public consumption also could be objects of research. For example, arranged love might be more prevalent for brands consumed in public, for which a strong peer group effect exists.

7. Managerial implications

These findings advance our understanding of brand love and its different beginnings, which is necessary to promote customers’ love for a brand. The origins of brand love provide some helpful insights for brand managers seeking to stimulate such emotions. In this sense, knowledge about the sources of brand love is valuable, because it enables marketers to focus on these sources and thereby promote falling in brand love among customers. Specifically:

- First love emphasizes the importance of early experiences with the brand, likely to occur during childhood; in age-stage transitions, such as reaching the teen years or adulthood; or in life stage transitions such as moving away from the parental home or living with others as students or partners. Marketers could monitor these stage transitions, for example, to gauge the best timing of trial offers.

- Inherited love, which often models parental uses of the brand, is amenable to life cycle database marketing when it is company practice and consumers grant their permission. The encouragement of family experiences (e.g., brand lands, vacations) and the promotion of agents of socialization might foster such inheritance of a brand.

- Arranged love often involves older siblings and peers. Database marketing might be applicable in the family situation; word-of-mouth or social media marketing might work in a peer situation.

Knowledge about the speed of falling in love is important too. If users of a brand typically fall in love at first sight, it is important to focus on the first impression with the brand and foster extraordinary experiences. If customers usually take longer to develop love for the brand, marketers must ensure frequent positive contacts. In particular,

- Love at first sight is very much up to the brand manager, who can position and advertise the brand as unique in the product category. A comparative advertising strategy could be an effective communicative strategy. Furthermore, love at first sight depends on intense emotional experiences and may be susceptible to event marketing, flagship stores, or trade fairs focused on memorable, extraordinary experiences (Arnould and Price 1993).

- Grown love, which begins with neutral feelings or brand liking, takes time and is probably the least controllable starting point. Nevertheless, brand managers should try to increase the frequency with which consumers encounter or buy their brand. Loyalty or bonus programs might be a promising opportunity for growing brand love.

Finally, we cannot forget that falling in love with a brand is something that happens more or less serendipitously and is not fully under the control of any brand manager. Exogenous experiences that turn brand liking into brand love usually take place on an individual basis and vary across different customers. However, brand managers can take care to ensure that their products are of superior quality and provide unique customer experiences. Then, they can make sure that their brand is present any time consumers undergo potentially brand love-stimulating experiences (Langner et al. 2013). By doing so, brand managers increase the likelihood that consumers will fall in love with their brands.

References


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Keywords

Brand Love, Brand Relationship, Brand Experience, Relationship Development.