Brand Love: Interpersonal or Parasocial Love Relationship?

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ABSTRACT
The emotional relationship between consumers and brands has emerged as a new field of branding. Only a few empirical studies exist which discuss in detail brand love. Current brand love studies are all based on the interpersonal love relationship theory (Sternberg, 1986). The authors argue that the consumer brand relationship is similar to a parasocial love relationship rather than an interpersonal love relationship. Two models are compared, one based on interpersonal love relationship and the other based on parasocial love relationship. By means of a survey with 180 respondents and explorative and confirmatory factor analyses we found that in fact brand love is better explained by the theory of parasocial rather than interpersonal love relationship theory.

Keywords: Brand love, brand loyalty, consumer-brand relationship, parasocial relationship, parasocial love.

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1. Introduction

Researchers have examined the relationships between consumers and products and recently explored the relationship between consumers and brands (Keller and Lehmann, 2006), using concepts such as brand satisfaction, brand loyalty and brand love to distinguish among various types and intensities of relationships (Albert et al., 2008). As consumers form relationships to brands, they often assign human characteristics (Levy, 1985) and personalities (Aaker, 1997) to them. Among the brand relationship constructs studied, the concept of brand love is one of the most recent and the least researched (Ahuvia, 2005a; Albert et al., 2008; Fournier, 1998). Richins (1997) found that love is a typical consumer-related emotion and often has a strong connection to the individual's self-concept and identity (Ahuvia, 2005a; Ahuvia, 2005b; Swaminathan et al., 2007). Chaudhuri (1998) shows that emotions are linked to the perception of risk in products and purchase intention. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) define brand love as the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular brand. Keh, Pang and Peng (2007) define brand love as the intimate, passionate, and committed relationship between consumers and a brand, characterized by its reciprocal, purposive, and dynamic properties. Building on this previous work, we define brand love as a multidimensional construct consisting of a satisfied consumer's history with a brand, which not only leads to brand loyalty (a predecessor of brand love) but to a deeply emotional relationship. Ultimately, brand love is an emotional, affective fulfillment, while brand satisfaction refers to a more cognitive judgment. The objective of this study is to assess on one hand the relationship between brand love to existing branding concepts such as brand loyalty and on the other hand the suitable underlying love relationship theory in which brand love is nested. To achieve these objectives, we first review the current literature on consumer love toward products and brands, then develop hypotheses and examine this issue by conducting an explorative and confirmatory factor analysis. We conclude with a discussion of implications for marketing researchers and practitioners.

2. Literature Review

Several recent studies offer empirical evidence for feelings of love toward products or brands (Ahuvia, 2005a; Ahuvia, 1993; Ahuvia, 2005b; Shimp and Madden, 1988). The marketing literature has applied the idea of love with two distinct approaches.

In the first approach, authors discuss consumer love towards a *product* (Ball and Tasaki, 1995; Rozanski et al., 1999; Thomason et al., 2005; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). A number of studies assessed the emotional attachments of consumers to products (Ball and Tasaki, 1995; Rozanski et al., 1999; Thomason et al., 2005; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988) other used terms like consumer-object or consumer-product relationships (Shimp and Madden, 1988; Whang et al., 2004). Shimp and Madden's (1988) work on love in consumption and their corresponding model of consumer-object-love was inspired by the triangular theory of love by Sternberg (1986). Ahuvia (2005b) provided empirical support for this construct when she compared interpersonal love and love for an object. Whang et al. (2004) conducted a study using the construct of love based on the interpersonal paradigm and measured this feeling with a shortened version of the love attitude scale initially proposed by Lee (1977). In sum, all those study base their work on interpersonal relationship theories.

For the second approach, numerous studies have also examined consumer love for a *brand* or the consumer-brand relationship (Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier, 1998; Monga, 2002; Swaminathan et al., 2007). These authors observed that consumers often consider brands as relationship partners (Keh et al., 2007). Fournier (1998) found that consumers develop and maintain strong relationships with brands and proposed six major dimensions of brand relationships. The consumer's love or passion towards a brand measures the affective depths of such a relationship (Fournier, 1998; Keh et al., 2007). One of the first works to thoroughly examine brand love was Ahuvia's study (1993). More recent studies by Wang et al. (2004) and Ahuvia (2005b) have further contributed to our understanding. In particular, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) examine brand love, which elaborates the consumer's feelings towards a brand, including characteristics such as passion for a brand, brand attachment, positive evaluation of the brand, positive emotions in response to the brand and declarations of love towards the brand.

As of today, and to the best of the authors' knowledge, only few studies empirically assess brand love. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) proposed a one-dimensional scale with 10 measurement items. Keh, Pang and Peng (2007) developed a three-dimensional scale (intimacy, passion and commitment) with 11 measurement items. Finally, Kamat and Parulekar (2007) proposed five dimensions (friendship, contentment, admiration, commitment and yearning) with 52 items. However, all the brand love scales are based on the same relationship theory - Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of interpersonal love. While we do not disagree, Albert et al. (2008) argues that the theory of interpersonal love relationships may be constraining. Furthermore, Yoon and Gutchess (2006) and Nordhielm (2008) show that consumers process brand relationships in a different part of the brain than they do for interpersonal relationships. This suggests the need for caution in assuming the direct transferability of the theory of interpersonal love to explain the love relationship between consumers and brands.

3. Conceptualization of Brand Love and Hypotheses

3.1. Parasocial Love

The first and perhaps most severe limitation in existing brand love literature is the assumption that love is a bi-directional relationship between a consumer and a brand, rather than a one-directional one. Existing studies are based on the triangular theory of interpersonal love (Sternberg 1986). However, as Whang et al. (2004 p. 320) noted, "although love is an outcome of bi-directional interaction between two partners, when the target of love is replaced with an object (e.g., product or brand), love becomes uni-directional". In other words, a brand cannot reciprocate the consumer's love except in the consumer's imagination. A consumer's love for a brand resembles more to a parasocial relationship. Parasocial interaction (PSI), originally defined by Horton and Wohl (1956), is a perceived relationship of friendship or intimacy by an audience member with a remote media persona, leading to an illusion of a face-to-face relationship. PSI describes a one-sided interpersonal relationship where one party knows a great deal about the other, but the other does not reciprocate the knowledge. The one-sided relations between celebrities and audience or fans (Caughey, 1984) are the most common forms of such relationships studies so far in the literature. Although the parasocial relationship is similar in many ways to the interpersonal relationship, the former is uni-directional compared to interpersonal relationships. Brands, like celebrities, do not reciprocate knowledge of the lover and can only participate in a uni-directional or parasocial relationship. Thus, we would expect a positive relationship between parasocial love and brand love. Alternatively stated, consumers with a strong parasocial love for a brand will love the brand. We test the following hypothesis.

H1: Parasocial love has a positive effect on brand love.

3.2. Interpersonal Love

The second shortcoming is that current brand love studies emanate from the theory of interpersonal love (Sternberg, 1986). Assuming brand love is grounded by the theory of interpersonal love relationship, rather than a parasocial love (see 3.1), there are many other interpersonal love theories in addition to Sternberg's theory (1986). For example, Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) propose the *Love Attitude Scale* based on the original work from Lee (1977). Other love-related scales include Davis and Todd's (1985) *Relationship Rating Form*, Hatfield and Sprecher's (1986) *Passionate Love Scale* and Shaver and Hazan's (1987) *Attachment Styles*. Masuda (2003) states in his meta-analyses of love scales that love encompasses two aspects, sexual attraction between romantic partners (erotic love) and non-sexual psychological closeness to partners (companionate love). The current brand love studies, based on Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of interpersonal love, do not differentiate between erotic love (e-love) and companionate love (c-love). We argue that if consumer's love towards a brand is based on interpersonal love theory, it is closer to companionate love (c-love) rather than erotic love (e-love). We therefore test the following hypothesis (see Figure 1).

H2: Interpersonal companionate love has a positive effect on brand love.

3.3. Brand History

The third limitation of existing brand love studies confirms the findings of Albert et al. (2008), who claim that no single interpersonal theory encompasses all emotions linked to love for a brand. One important aspect they found impacting brand love is the duration of the relationship with the brand and memories it evokes in the consumer. Both deal with consumer's history with the brand. Underscoring the importance of consumer history with a brand, Fournier and Yao (1997) stressed that a brand can generate nostalgic remembrances from childhood. Consumers with a longer history with the brand might not only be more brand loyal, but also might have a positive feeling towards the brand and may exhibit brand love (see Figure 1). We therefore test the following two hypotheses:

H3a: A consumer's brand history has a positive effect on brand loyalty.

H3b: A consumer's brand history has a positive effect on brand love.

3.4. Brand Loyalty

Busacca and Castaldo (2003) propose that the first stage of a consumer-brand relationship is brand satisfaction, which results from the consumer's positive experiences with the brand (see also Ha and Perks, 2005). As the relationship continues, satisfaction may become brand loyalty as numerous studies have found (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999, Berry, 2000; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Lau and Lee, 2000). The relationship between brand satisfaction and brand loyalty have been discussed in the literature extensively and in general they are significantly positively related as numerous studies have shown over the last few decades (Kraft et al., 1973; LaBarbera and Mazursky, 1983; Kasper, 1988; Bloemer and Lemmink, 1992). However, less is known about the relationship between brand loyalty and brand love. On one hand Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) or Kamat and Parulekar (2007) argue that brand love precedes brand loyalty. On the other hand we could follow Aaker's (1991) logic where brand satisfaction leads to brand loyalty and this leads then to brand love. In our model,

we follow Aaker's (1991) logic and extend it by arguing that brand loyalty precedes brand love and we therefore test the following hypothesis (see Figure 1).

H4: Brand loyalty has a positive effect on brand love.

The following Figure 1 illustrates the various hypotheses discussed above.

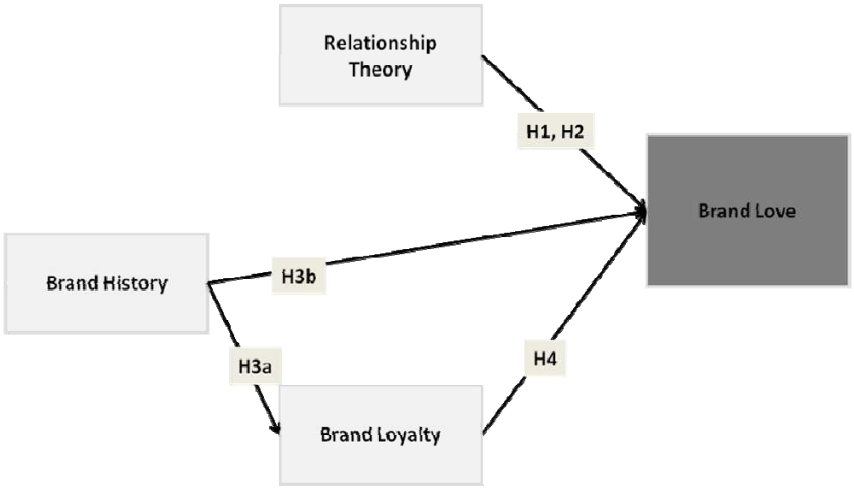


Figure 1: Research Model

3.5. Dependent Variables

We have chosen to take as the dependent variables items which assess of how consumers "feel" about the brand which include items relating to composite affection for the brand. Respondents declare their love for the brand and contemplate life without the brand. We suggest that the more a consumer loves a brand, the more he acknowledges this love when asked. Similarly, a consumer who must live without the ability to express love (i.e., use the brand) would be miserable. The expected acknowledgement and expression of separation anxiety from a brand accords with Fournier's (1998) work and reflects a deep relationship with a brand

4. Method

4.1. Measurement Items

Independent Variables. (1) Parasocial love. The parasocial interaction scale was used in the current study employing the10-item version of the original PSI scale, similar to previous studies (Conway and Rubin, 1991; Perse 1990). The scale was reworded to the context of brands. *(2) Interpersonal love.* We use the Love Attitude Scale (LAS) developed by Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) to measure interpersonal companionate love as applied to a brand. Similar to previous studies, we reworded original items in order to make them applicable to a brand rather than a personal relationship. *(3) Brand history.* Our research model includes three items suggested by Albert et al. (2008) to measure consumers' previous experience with the brand. Inspired by Fournier and Yao's work (1997), we added three additional items to measure the consumer's brand history. *(4) Brand loyalty.* Gremler (1995) suggests that both the attitudinal and behavioral dimensions need to be incorporated in any measurement of loyalty. We follow his advice and included both, attitudinal and behavioral brand loyalty where we reword three items from Quester and Lim (2003) to measure attitudinal aspects and two items to measure behavioral

brand loyalty. For all the scales used, the respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement to certain statements along a five-point Likert scale.

Dependent Variable. Overall brand love was measured by two items taken from Rubin's (1970) multi-item Romantic Love Scale and two items from Albert et al. (2008). Appendix A provides the Brand Love items used for this study.

4.2. Product Category

The brand love construct required looking at heavily-branded products. As Albert et al. (2008) discovered, the product categories strongly associated with the feeling of love include shoes, cars, lingerie, watches, perfumes and personal care, food items, music, cigarettes, and furniture. For our study, we selected cars as the product category. In presenting the car brands to survey participants, we used an unaided brand recall approach. Respondents were asked to first name three car brands that came to mind, which indicated that they had some level of brand awareness. We then asked which car brand was their favorite which they used to answer the survey.

4.3. Data Collection

We collected data through a self-administered survey of undergraduate and graduate students. Students have often been used for marketing studies and scale testing. For example *hedonic and utilitarian consumer attitude scale* (Batra and Ahtolo, 1991), *country image scale* (Martin and Eroglu, 1993), *multi-item measures of values* (Herche, 1994), *buying impulsiveness scale* (Rook and Fisher, 1995), *brand association scale* (Low and Lamb, 2000), *consumer-based brand equity scale* (Yoo and Donthu, 2001), *revised country-of-origin image scale* (Pereira et al., 2005), *ad creativity scale* (Smith et al., 2007), *branded product meanings scale* (Strizhakova et al., 2008), *country image scale* (Lala et al., 2009). Students have also been used in consumer-brand relationship studies (Hayes, et al. 2006; Carlson, et al. 2009) and studies related to cars (Fetscherin and Toncar, 2009). Since student samples are commonly used (Tepper Tian et al., 2001; Voss et al., 2003), they are equally appropriate for the present study. While generalizing findings is always a concern, the fundamental nature of the feeling of love for a brand is more likely to generalize across diverse populations, making the use of student samples more legitimate in this case, than managerial-based scales where business experience is more important (Bello et al., 2009).

5. Analysis and Results

Before conducting the survey, a pre-test with 20 respondents was performed in order to assess any potential issues with the survey and scale. We administered the initial survey to 196 students from the southern part of the United States, 180 usable surveys were drawn upon for the analysis. Through unaided brand recall, respondents mentioned three car brands and then were asked to mention their favorite one. Respondents then answered questions along a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Using a five-point Likert scale for all items allowed consistent coding.

5.1. Reliability

The coefficient alpha and test-retest were used to assess the internal consistency, stability and reliability of the proposed brand love construct (Churchill, 1979). The resulting Cronbach's alpha of .922 suggests a very well-defined item structure and internal consistency. The alpha

values for the various dimensions are: interpersonal love (.905), parasocial love (.794), brand history (.840), and brand loyalty (.850). As we only use one survey sample dataset, we conduct a test-retest reliability by using the split-half coefficient estimates method, which is to split the scale items into two groups and then compare the groups as if they were two separate surveys. Two approaches can be used, the split-half reliability and the odd-even reliability. Reliability test results using the first approach yielded .728 and the second approach .927, both of which indicate good reliability. We also calculated the Guttman split-half reliability coefficient, an adaptation of the Spearman-Brown coefficient that does not require equal variances between the two split groups. Again, the reliability coefficients indicated a good internal consistency.

5.2. Validity

We also assessed content and construct validity. *Content validity* was assured by constructing the proposed items based on the current literature as well as by consulting and validating the proposed measurement scale with other marketing professors. In order to test the *construct validity* was assessed it by the convergence validity (internal consistency, see above) as well as the discriminant validity, my means of an explorative and confirmative factor analysis.

5.2.1 Explorative factor analysis (EFA)

We used the principle components extraction method with varimax rotation. The results reveal four factors with Eigen values greater than 1. Items which had a factor load of less than 0.5 were excluded as well as those which had significant cross loadings (higher than 0.4) in order to prevent any multicollinearity. Of the 26 initial items, 24 items were retained for the confirmatory factor analysis. Appendix B provides more details about the results of the explorative factor analysis. Overall, our proposed model in Figure 1 is well specified. The proposed model seems to neatly reflect nomological validity since the factors that contribute to brand love are related to other constructs in the theoretical context of brand relationships.

5.2.2. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

We ran a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) by means of a structure equation model (SEM) and obtained a satisfactory solution. Table 1 outlines the standardized regression weights for the relationship between the independent variables and dependent one. Hypothesis 1, 2, 3a and 4 are all supported. Only hypothesis H3b is rejected. Moreover, our results show that the results based on the parasocial relationship theory are stronger compared to those based on the interpersonal relationship theory.

Table 1: Summary Resuls

	Model I Parasocial Relationship	**Model II Interpersonal Relationship**
Hypotheses Testing		
H1&2: Relationship Theory → Brand Love (+)	.747***	.347***
H3a: Brand History → Brand Loyalty (+)	.435***	.431***
H3b: Brand History → Brand Love (+)	.061	.036
H4: Brand Loyalty → Brand Love (+)	.347***	.600***
***** p < .01; ** p < .05; * < .10**		

Moreover, the explained variance for brand love is 70% in the case of model I compared to 46% in model II. The Goodness-of-fit criteria are somewhat satisfactory with The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) of .816 (model I), .860 (model II); and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) of .770 (model I), .826 (model II). Unfortunately the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of ..098 (model I) and .092 (model II) are higher than the .08 Hu and Bentler recommends (Hu and Bentler, 1998). These results suggest opportunities for future improvements of the model through adding variables or other measures items. However, the relative chi-square (Chi-square/df) is 2.733 (model I) and 2.525 (model II) are well below the cutoff value of 3 (Schumacker, 1992; Schumacker and Lomax, 1996). For more details, see in the Appendix C.

A number of interesting observations can be drawn from our analysis. (1) As for our H1 and H2, our results show that both relationship theories explain to some degree brand love. However, the explanation power of brand love is higher when the model is based on the theory of parasocial relationship compared to interpersonal relationship theory. (2) We tested the idea that a consumer's history with a brand positively affects brand loyalty (H3a) and brand love (H3b). Our analyses support our hypothesis that the history with the brand does influence brand loyalty H3a, but does not influence brand love directly H3b. Future research should investigate this since much of the literature suggests strong connections between history and product or brand evaluation (Fournier and Yao, 1997). (3) Another objective of this study was to understand more clearly the relationship between brand loyalty and brand love. The literature suggests two contradictory propositions: brand love precedes brand loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Kamat and Parulekar, 2007) and brand loyalty precedes brand love (Aaker, 1991). We tested loyalty as a precursor to love, with our results supporting the notion that brand loyalty is a precursor of brand love (*H4: Brand loyalty has a positive effect on brand love).*

6. Conclusion and Limitations

Both academics (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Fournier, 1998; Whang et al., 2004) and practitioners (Roberts, 2004) emphasize the importance of the feeling of love toward a brand. Although the literature on the emotional relationship between consumers and brand is increasing, only a few empirical studies about brand love have been conducted and all exhibit certain limitations. Our study provides an important contribution as we show the construct of brand love is nested in the theory of parasocial love rather than interpersonal relationship love, which contradicts existing findings and provides a new perspective on this topic. We also show that brand loyalty precedes brand love. For marketing academics, this paper provides a new perceptive on brand love. The proposed research model tightens the nomological net of the numerous consumer-brand relationship constructs.

There are some limitations. First, a second dataset is needed to conduct and test our findings. Moreover, surveying a larger, more diverse pool of respondents, including non-students and people from different countries, would allow us to generalize the current findings. Extending the research beyond the present US sample would allow investigating the links between brand love and culture. Second, we should test the proposed model using other product categories as well as services. Third, we should extend the current model to incorporate other categories of variables influencing brand love in order to improve the model fit. Fourth, for the dependent variable, also behavioral data should be collected next to feeling expression.

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Appendix A: Proposed Brand Love Items

Interpersonal Love (Hendrick and Hendrick 1986; Lee 1977)

- IPL1 When I think of this car brand, it is hard for me to say exactly when the friendship turned into love for this brand
- IPL2 In truth, the love I have for this car brand required friendship first
- IPL3 I expect to always be friends with this car brand
- IPL4 The love I have for the car brand is the best kind because it grew out of a long friendship
- IPL5 The friendship with the car brand merged gradually into love over time
- IPL6 The love relationship is really a deep friendship, not a mysterious, mystical emotion
- IPL7 The love relationship is the most satisfying because it developed from a good friendship

Parasocial Love (Perse and Rubin 1989)

- PAR1* I feel sorry for this car brand when there is negative news
- PAR2* This car brand makes me feel comfortable, as if I'm with friends
- PAR3 I see this car brand as a natural, down-to-earth person
- PAR4 I'm looking forward to using this car brand
- PAR5 I miss seeing this car brand when it's not available at a rent-a-car agency
- PAR6 This car brand seems to understand the kind of things I want
- PAR7 I find this car brand attractive
- PAR8* If there were a story about this car brand in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it

Brand History (Albert et al. 2008)

- BHI1 This car brand evokes memories
- BHI2 I have a long relationship with this car brand
- BHI3* This car brand has never disappointed me
- BHI4 I have known this car brand all my life *(NEW)*
- BHI5 I have used this car brand for a long time *(NEW)*
- BHI6 This car brand provides nostalgic remembrances from childhood *(NEW)*

Brand Loyalty (Quester and Lim 2003)

Attitudinal brand loyalty

- BLa1 I am committed to this car brand
- BLa2 I pay more attention to this car brand than to other car brands
- BLa3 I am more interested in this particular car brand than in other car brands

Behavioral brand loyalty

- BLb4 It is very important for me to buy this car brand rather than another car brand
- BLb5* I always buy the same car brand because I really like it

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

Overall love for brand (Albert et al. 2008; Rubin 1970)

- OBL1 I feel attracted to this car brand
- OBL2 I have strong feelings towards this car brand
- OBL3 I'm in love with this car brand
- OBL4 If I could never use this car brand, I would feel miserable

* Item removed for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

Appendix B: Results Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

	1 Interpersonal Love	2 Parasocial Love	3 Brand History	4 Brand Loyalty
IPL7	.866	.082	.073	.143
IPL5	.820	.281	.092	.124
IPL4	.771	.150	.250	.168
IPL2	.761	.182	.024	-.058
IPL1	.746	.132	.220	.150
IPL6	.709	.177	.330	.155
IPL3	.512	.370	.184	.251
PAR6	.218	.722	.029	.084
PAR7	.121	.722	.205	.039
PAR4	.262	.683	-.047	.212
PAR1	.133	.658	.084	.253
PAR2	.289	.643	.023	.099
PAR5	.096	.612	.140	.207
PAR8	.002	.501	.204	.324
BHI6	.142	.170	.806	.111
BHI2	.178	.027	.792	.191
BHI1	.205	.114	.768	.086
BHI4	.179	.203	.722	.062
BHI5	.105	-.056	.716	.110
BLa3	.019	.271	.083	.805
BLa2	.219	.265	.123	.744
BLb4	.119	.383	-.012	.707
BLa1	.209	.287	.163	.707
BLb5	.101	.199	.221	.559
BHI3*	.335	-.121	.183	.447
PAR3*	.223	.061	.139	-.022

* Item removed from confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

Appendix C: Summary Model Fit

	Model I Parasocial Relationship Theory	Model II Interpersonal Relationship Theory	Threshold
Brand Love	$R^2 = 70\%$	$R^2 = 46\%$	
Chi-square/df	2.733	2.525	≤ 3
Normal Fit Index (NFI)	.744	.792	$\geq .9$
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	.770	.826	$\geq .9$
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	.816	.860	$\geq .9$
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	.098	.092	$\leq .08$