

Using the theory of planned behaviour to understand brand love

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Abstract

Purpose – Brand love is perceived as one of the main objectives in brand management. Nevertheless, research into the factors influencing brand love are scarce. This paper aims to apply the theory of planned behaviour to the context of brand love and investigate the influence of several factors on brand love, including attitude towards loving a brand, subjective norm and perceived control factors, namely, the propensity to anthropomorphise and the affordability of the brand. Further, the influence of brand love on brand forgiveness is proven. Additionally, this research investigates the influence of involvement with the product category on the proposed relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey ($N = 274$) was used to test the model in the context of fashion industry with the help of a convenience sample. Exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis and (multi-group) structural equation modelling techniques assessed the proposed model.

Findings – Results show that the proposed model gives valuable insights to brand love, where involvement serves as a moderator. While the attitude towards loving a brand has a strong influence on brand love for both high and low involved consumers, affordability only plays a minor role for experiencing brand love. Subjective norm is found to facilitate brand love for high-involved consumers, while propensity to anthropomorphise leads to higher brand love for low involved consumers.

Originality/value – This paper demonstrates the applicability of the theory of planned behaviour to a consumer–brand relationship context. This adds to a deeper theoretical understanding of the managerially relevant construct of brand love. Further, the study demonstrates that brand lovers are more forgiving in times of disappointment. Introducing involvement into the research model provides valuable insights into the processes underlying brand love.

Keywords Involvement, Theory of planned behaviour, Anthropomorphism, Brand love, Forgiveness

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The concept of brand love has received increasing attention from researchers over the past years, especially in reply to [Batra et al.'s \(2012\)](#) seminal article. Consumer–brand relationships constitute a major shift in the marketing paradigm from a transactional to a relationship viewpoint ([Fournier et al., 2012](#)). Whereas the focus in previously conducted consumer behaviour and marketing studies pointed towards the consumers' interactions with products and brands as a series of exchanges, nowadays, this transactional view has been replaced by a relational view. Brand love is one of the latest developments within the field of consumer–brand relationships. As it is considered the most emotionally intense consumer–brand relationship, brand love constitutes the main objective of brand management ([Langner et al., 2015](#)). Various studies demonstrate that consumers can

actually experience a feeling of love for their brand ([Albert et al., 2008a](#); [Albert and Merunka, 2013](#); [Batra et al., 2012](#); [Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006](#)). Further, consumers' love towards a brand results in many benefits for the brand; brand love is associated with positive word-of-mouth, brand loyalty and increased willingness to pay a price premium ([Batra et al., 2012](#); [Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006](#); [Fournier, 1998](#); [Albert and Merunka, 2013](#)). Another relevant outcome of brand love is the questioning of negative information ([Batra et al., 2012](#)). This becomes especially important considering the detrimental impact that negative information about a brand can have on its reputation and brand equity ([Hegner et al., 2014](#)). As brand forgiveness is perceived as an important managerial outcome variable of brand love, the construct is included in the research model.

Brand managers also acknowledge the concept ([Roberts, 2005](#)), realising that consumers go way beyond pure consumerism of a loved brand by even going as far as getting their favourite brand logo permanently tattooed on their bodies. Jamal Benmiloud, formerly leading the marketing team at the energy drink Monster, states that Monster was able to outsell Red Bull only because they focussed on earning brand love from their consumers, rather than aiming for everyone to just be aware of the brand, they built a marketing

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team of millions (Brown *et al.*, 2015). “Why aim to be liked as a business, when you can be loved?” (Brown *et al.*, 2015, p. 8). Not only brand managers but also advertising industry embraces the brand love concept and its implications for emotional advertising (Pang *et al.*, 2009; Obal *et al.*, 2015) like McDonald’s slogan “I’m lovin’ it”.

Despite the growing interest in the field of brand love, previous studies have mainly focused on conceptualising (Shimp and Madden, 1988; Ahuvia, 2005; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Albert *et al.*, 2008a; Fetscherin, 2014) and operationalising brand love (Albert *et al.*, 2008b; Batra *et al.*, 2012) as well as distinguishing it from other relational constructs like brand trust or brand identification (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Albert *et al.*, 2013; Vlachos and Vrechopoulos, 2012; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010). Very little research is done on the facilitating factors that enable consumers to experience brand love (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Vernuccio *et al.*, 2015). Thus, we respond to the call of Vernuccio *et al.* (2015) and focus on the antecedents of brand love.

The present study contributes to research and practice by applying the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) to the context of brand love. This established theory provides a thorough understanding of the determinants of consumer intentions and behaviours (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2008). Further, this study investigates the moderating role of involvement with the product category. As dual process models confirm that the relationship between consumer attitudes and intentions are usually more consistent for high involved consumers (Cooke and Sheeran, 2004; Petty *et al.*, 1983), this moderator is introduced into the model.

Concluding, the first research question addressed in this paper concerns the influence of the dimensions theorised in the TPB – attitude, subjective norm and perceived control factors – on brand love as well as the influence of brand love on brand forgiveness. The second research question relates to the moderating influence of product category involvement on the relationship between the beliefs suggested in the TPB and brand love. Those questions will be answered with a survey among Dutch participants in the context of fashion industry.

2. Conceptual background

2.1 Brand love

Brand love is perceived as a recent marketing concept in the research stream of consumer-brand relationships (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2016; Vernuccio *et al.*, 2015). The construct emerges as a crucial outcome for brand managers, playing a strategic role in building long-term sustainable consumer-brand relationships (Kohli *et al.*, 2014; Vernuccio *et al.*, 2015).

Love has been defined in a variety of different ways (for an overview, see Fehr and Russel, 1991). Brehm (1985) states that despite the vast amount of literature on love, no single, simple definition has been widely accepted by other social scientists. Though love is often characterised as a prototypical emotion, it is distinct from other emotions which are mainly based on short-term temporary events and slices in time, while love is a long-term condition (Russell and Barrett, 1999). While emotions are transient affective states related to a certain situation, love is a stable psychological phenomenon

that is a combination of attitudes, beliefs, feelings and behaviours. Research in neuroscience shows that love goes beyond an emotion and rather represents a motivation or goal-oriented state that leads to varied emotions and behaviours (Aron *et al.*, 2005). Despite the endurance of love, research shows that love transits through different stages over time making it a dynamic construct (Langner *et al.*, 2015; Huber *et al.*, 2015).

Most conceptualisations of brand love are grounded in Sternberg’s (1986, 1997) triangular theory of love and his three proposed components of love: intimacy, passion and decision/commitment. Intimacy includes the feeling of closeness and is mainly derived from emotion or affect. Passion reflects arousals that are mainly derived from motivation. Decision relates to the recognition of the loving relationship by the partner, and commitment reflects the willingness to sustain the relationship in the long-term; consequently decision/commitment is mainly derived from cognition. In this respect, Ahuvia *et al.* (2007, 2008) regard brand love as composed of three aspects:

- 1 cognitive brand love, i.e. beliefs related to the brand;
- 2 affective brand love, i.e. feelings related to the brand; and
- 3 conative brand love, i.e. the willingness to spend resources as well as the desire to use the brand.

Langner *et al.* (2015) show that loving brand relations are driven by rational benefits and have an added rational component. Moreover, Huber *et al.* (2015) prove that rational aspects have an effect on love in a consumer–brand relationship. Interestingly, their research illustrates that rational aspects become weightier for brand love with increasing relationship duration.

Although the conceptualisation of brand love is still in its early stages, and no common conceptualisation exists (Huber *et al.*, 2015), multiple dimensions of psychological factors can be identified (Vernuccio *et al.*, 2015; Batra *et al.*, 2012; Albert *et al.*, 2008b), such as positive emotions towards the brand, positive evaluations of the brand, passion for the brand and declaration of love towards the brand.

Hence, to investigate brand love, we continue along this standpoint and perceive brand love as a multi-faceted construct “including multiple cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, which consumers organise into a mental prototype” (Batra *et al.*, 2012, p. 2).

2.2 Brand forgiveness

In this research, we test the influence of brand love tested on brand forgiveness. Research proposes several theoretical understandings of the construct (Worthington, 2006). Most agree that forgiveness is complex (Enright and Fitzgibbons, 2000). It involves affective (Malcolm and Greenberg, 2000), cognitive (Flanigan, 1992), decisional (DiBlasio, 1998), motivational (McCullough *et al.*, 1997) and behavioural (Gordon *et al.*, 2000) aspects. McCullough and Worthington (1995, p. 55) state that “forgiveness is a complex affective, cognitive, and behavioral phenomena”. Nevertheless, researchers do not agree about which aspects are most important (Worthington, 2006).

Following, forgiveness involves on the one hand rational aspects (Enright, 1996; Lamb and Murphy, 2002; Freedman and Enright, 1996); “forgiveness is not something to be

jumped into but rather to be adopted, if at all, only after some rational thinking” (Lamb and Murphy, 2002, p. 10). On the other hand, forgiveness is an emotion-focused coping strategy. Worthington and Scherer (2004) propose two types of forgiveness: decisional and emotional forgiveness. Forgiveness is a behavioural intention statement that a person might decide to forgive and therefore grants decisional forgiveness and still is emotionally upset, cognitively oriented towards angry, anxious or depressive rumination and motivationally oriented toward revenge or avoidance.

In line with findings from psychological research that individuals are more forgiving to their beloved partners (Rusbult *et al.*, 1991; Wieselquist *et al.*, 1999), research on consumer–brand relationships argues that in case consumers perceive to have a high-quality relationship with a brand they are more willing to forgive mistakes made by the brand (Aaker *et al.*, 2004; Heinrich *et al.*, 2012). Fedorikhin *et al.* (2008) show that consumers with a strong attachment to a brand are more willing to forgive the brand in case of a mishap compared to weakly attached consumers. The risk of not forgiving a loved brand and therefore losing it would be costly and might lead to distress and anxiety. Thus, we propose:

H1. Brand love has a positive influence on brand forgiveness.

2.3 Theory of planned behaviour

The TPB (Ajzen, 1991) is an extension of the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) and has been one of the most influential theories in explaining and predicting behaviour. It offers a comprehensive yet parsimonious psychological theory that identifies a causal structure for explaining a wide range of human behaviour (Morris *et al.*, 2005) including consumer behaviour. According to the theory, attitude, subjective norm and control influence an individual’s intention to perform a given behaviour. Intentions are claimed to be the precursors of behaviour.

According to the TPB, intention is a direct function of the attitude towards the behaviour, subjective norm and control (Ajzen, 2011). Subjective norm refers to the individual’s perceptions of general social pressure. If an individual perceives that significant others endorse (or disapprove of) the behaviour, they are more (or less) likely to intend to show the behaviour. Attitude towards the behaviour reflects the individual’s favourable or unfavourable evaluations of performing a particular behaviour. Overall, the more positive the attitude towards the behaviour, the stronger should be the individual’s intention to perform it (Armitage and Conner, 2001). According to Ajzen (1991), control factors are concerned with the perceived influence of specific factors to facilitate or inhibit behaviour.

An often-raised criticism of the TPB is that the theory is purely rational, not taking account of cognitive and affective factors that are known to bias human judgments and behaviour. As Ajzen (2011) states perceiving the TPB as consisting of solely rational and controlled aspects is a misinterpretation of the theory. This often leads to the deception that the theory posits an impassionate, rational person that reviews all available information in an objective way to arrive at a decision. “In reality, the theory draws a

much more complex and nuanced picture” (Ajzen, 2011, p. 1116). He acknowledges that emotions result from beliefs and affect intentions and behaviour.

In the same line, Bagozzi (1997) argues that emotions serve to motivate action, qualify information processing and regulate consumption. Perugini and Bagozzi (2001) extend the TPB by incorporating desires as the proximal causes of intention, which fully mediate the effects of attitudes, subjective norms and control factors on intentions. The authors argue that intentions become energised by desires and emotions and provide the motivational impetus for intentions and channel the effects of the antecedents. Armitage and Conner (2001) show in their meta-analysis that attitudes, subjective norm and perceived control are the best predictors of desires. The authors conclude that individuals translate their attitudes into desires, taking perceptions of social pressure and control into account. Thus, integrating the determinants of TPB (beliefs about loving a brand, the normative expectations of significant others and the presence of factors that might impede or facilitate loving a brand) and brand love in one model represents an interesting research outlet.

2.4 Integration of the theory of planned behaviour and brand love

This study seeks to investigate the influence of attitude, subjective norm and control factors on brand love. According to Simons (1976, p. 80), an *attitude* is a “relatively enduring predisposition to respond favourably or unfavourably towards something”. It is defined as the sum of the expected outcomes that is weighted by an evaluation of the desirability of the outcome (Fishbein, 1963). Attitudes are restricted to those that are salient and therefore easily brought to mind by consumers. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) argue that thoughts that do not readily come to mind in an elicitation are unlikely to affect behaviour. In line with their argumentation, Batra *et al.* (2012) argue that the strength of an attitude is logically related to brand love. They suggest that the strength of an attitude results in more frequent thinking and talking about the brand. Thus, the following hypothesis is tested:

H2. Attitude towards loving a brand has a positive influence on brand love.

Subjective norm refers to the desire to act as others think you should act and is therefore internally controlled. It consists of a person’s beliefs about whether others who are important think he or she should engage in the behaviour. Subjective norms are assumed to have two components which work in interaction: beliefs about how other people, who may be in some way important to the person, would like them to behave and the positive or negative judgments about each belief. Applied to this study, subjective norms reflect consumer perceptions of whether the feeling of love for a brand is accepted, encouraged and implemented by the consumer’s circle of influence. Peer reviews and recommendations are increasingly influencing consumers’ purchase decisions (Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016). Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) show that self-expressive brands lead to higher brand love due to the fact that self-expressive brands signal personal information to significant others. In the same line, Karjaluoto *et al.* (2016)

argue that consumers select brands they believe members of their reference or aspiration group would choose. Brands are able to elicit greater brand love when they are able to satisfy consumers' social needs (Vernuccio *et al.*, 2015). Thus, it is expected that there is a positive relationship between subjective norm and brand love.

H3. The perceived subjective norm has a positive influence on brand love.

Facilitating and inhibiting control factors are the individual's perceptions of the extent to which performance of the behaviour is easy or difficult (Ajzen, 1991). Individuals who believe they lack the necessary factors to perform a particular behaviour are unlikely to form strong intentions, despite the fact that their attitude and social norm may be favourable. The rationale behind control factors is that it would allow predicting behaviours that are not under complete volitional control (Armitage and Conner, 2001). Sparks *et al.* (1997) point out that perceived control reflects both inner control factors (e.g. information, personal deficiencies, skills, abilities, emotions) and external perceived difficulty factors (e.g. opportunities, dependence on others, income). Literature argues that several constraints or obstacles for loving a brand exist (Sarkar, 2013; Sarkar and Sreejesh, 2014). Applied to the current study, control factors are measured in two ways: the propensity to anthropomorphise as inner facilitating factor and the affordability of the brand as an external difficulty factor.

Anthropomorphism has emerged as a central factor for processes governing human relationships to transfer to brands (Alvarez and Fournier, 2016). According to Epley *et al.* (2007, p. 864), imbuing "the real or imagined behaviour of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions" is the essence of anthropomorphism. Guthrie (1993) argues that anthropomorphising is seeing the human in non-human forms and events that pervades human judgment. In extension of this, Puzakova *et al.* (2009, p. 413) define anthropomorphised brands as "brands perceived by consumers as actual human beings with various emotional states, mind, soul, and conscious behaviours that can act as prominent members of social ties". Alvarez and Fournier (2016) state that anthropomorphised brands incorporate a social nature such that consumer-brand relationships are more similar to interpersonal relationships when brands are anthropomorphised. In the same line, Aggarwal and McGill (2012) as well as Kaufmann *et al.* (2016) argue that anthropomorphised brands make a consumption experience into a more social act; therefore, consumers enjoy a feeling of reciprocity.

Brand anthropomorphisation strategies like the introduction of a mascot or an endorser are likely to lead to consumer perceptions that the brand has human-like characteristics, including motivations and intentions (Kwak *et al.*, 2015; Epley and Waytz, 2009). Anthropomorphisation of a brand activates human schemas like knowledge about certain attributes of a brand formed on the basis of past experiences (Kwak *et al.*, 2015). Thus, by applying activated human schemas, people tend to evaluate a humanised entity like a certain brand similar to how they evaluate other persons

(Aggarwal and McGill, 2012; Kim and McGill, 2011). Considering that brand anthropomorphisation leads to the perception that a brand has human-like intentions, we can assume that this factor facilitates the development of a loving relationship with a brand.

Previous literature provides proof that consumers have a tendency to engage in anthropomorphism, as they apply human principles to brands and products (Aggarwal and McGill, 2007; Landwehr *et al.*, 2011; Delbaere *et al.*, 2011; Kervyn *et al.*, 2012; Puzakova *et al.*, 2013; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014), especially in the conceptualisation and validation of the brand-relationship concept (Fournier, 1998). Hur *et al.* (2015) propose that anthropomorphising a tempting product reduces individuals' perceived control. Thus, it is expected that the propensity to anthropomorphise as an internal factor influences the love towards a brand.

H4. The tendency to anthropomorphise a brand has a positive influence on brand love.

As aforementioned, control factors incorporate besides inner, also external difficulty factors. In consumption context, the affordability of the brand restrains a consumer from pursuing his needs. Literature suggests that prices and price judgements have a major impact on loyalty formation and consumption (Hartline and Jones, 1996; Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Karjaluoto *et al.* (2016) find that the more affordable a brand is perceived, the stronger the relationship between brand love and word-of-mouth. The more expensive a brand is perceived, the weaker the relationship between brand love and word-of-mouth. In the context of luxury brands, Kapferer and Valette-Florence (2016) propose that in the context of luxury products not being able to afford a brand can even enhance desire and brand love for that brand. While affordability plays a role in rejecting a brand (Bryson *et al.*, 2013), the influence of this factor on brand love is still unknown. Park and DeBell (2013) raise the question whether customers assess their closeness or distance from a brand based on the financial affordability of the brand. This study provides an answer to this question by looking at the influence of affordability on brand love.

Albert and Merunka (2013) argue that the more the consumer values a brand, the more the consumer accepts a price increase as the loss of a loved brand would be costly, in the form of distress and anxiety. On the other hand, a loved brand is valued and perceived as unique (Albert *et al.*, 2008a). Thus, the consumer wants to continue to benefit from the positive emotions linked to the loved brand (Albert and Merunka, 2013), which might make the affordability of a brand a neglectable factor. This is line with Krishnamurthi and Raj (1991) who suggest that for a consumer with a very strong preference for a brand, price and affordability are irrelevant. As the influence of perceived affordability on brand love has not been tested yet and literature does not indicate a clear relationship, we propose the following research question:

RQ1. What is the relationship between perceived affordability of a brand and brand love?

2.5 Involvement with the product category

Additionally, the moderating role of involvement with the product category is investigated in this study. Zaichkowsky (1985, p. 342) defines involvement as “a person’s perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests”. In this line, consumers are personally involved with a product category to the extent that they care about that entity and perceive it as important (Thomsen *et al.*, 1995). Research suggests that higher consumer involvement leads to a more favourite perception of attribute differences, perception of greater product importance and greater commitment to brand choice (Howard and Sheth, 1969). While involvement with a product category does not seem to have a direct influence on brand love (Voorn *et al.*, 2015), this study proposes a moderating influence of involvement on the relationship between the dimensions of the TPB and brand love.

As literature suggests, brand love and involvement share similar elements, such as both are grounded in needs, values and interests and both are influenced by personal importance and relevance (Zaichkowsky, 1985; Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, brand love seems to incorporate an emotional attachment, while brand involvement is solely connected with cognitions (Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016; Batra *et al.*, 2012).

The degree of involvement can be connected to the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). ELM posits two possible routes, or methods, of influence: central route and peripheral route. Central-route processes require the audience to think more and peripheral-route processes do not involve elaboration through cognitive processing. As Ajzen (2011 p. 1,121) states “there is no assumption in the TPB that people carefully and systematically review all the available information before they form an intention”. In line with social psychology research (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Carver and Scheier, 1998; Chaiken and Trope, 1999), he argues that the amount of information processing that people engage in varies along a continuum. Psychological research suggests a fruitful integration of the TPB and the ELM as the TPB model offers guidance and understanding of which constructs are relevant, while the ELM model gives insight to how these constructs are processed and internalised (Conner and Sparks, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2004; Quine *et al.*, 2001; Conner and Armitage, 1998).

As dual process models confirm that the relationship between consumer attitudes and intentions are usually more consistent for high-involved consumers (Cooke and Sheeran, 2004; Petty *et al.*, 1983; Verplanken, 1989), the present research assumes a greater influence of attitude on brand love for high-involved consumers. Petty *et al.* (1983) showed that consumers who are more involved with a product show greater attitude-intention consistency. Petty *et al.* (1995) suggest that involvement moderates attitude-intention consistency because it produces attitudes that are based on greater elaboration. Thus, these attitudes are more accessible, certain and based on more knowledge (Cooke and Sheeran, 2004). These findings are confirmed in the meta-analysis of Cooke and Sheeran (2004). Further research shows that personal involvement with a topic is positively correlated with social norm (Fielding *et al.*, 2008; Conner and Armitage, 1998).

Therefore, it can be expected that social norm has a stronger influence on brand love for high-involved consumers compared to low-involved.

Additionally, literature suggests that anthropomorphisation of a brand takes place automatically and non-consciously (Hart *et al.*, 2013; Miesler *et al.*, 2011). In line with the ELM (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), this study proposes that an anthropomorphic process as an unconscious process works on a peripheral route. Thus, it is assumed that higher propensity to anthropomorphise leads to higher brand love for low involved consumers compared to high-involved consumers.

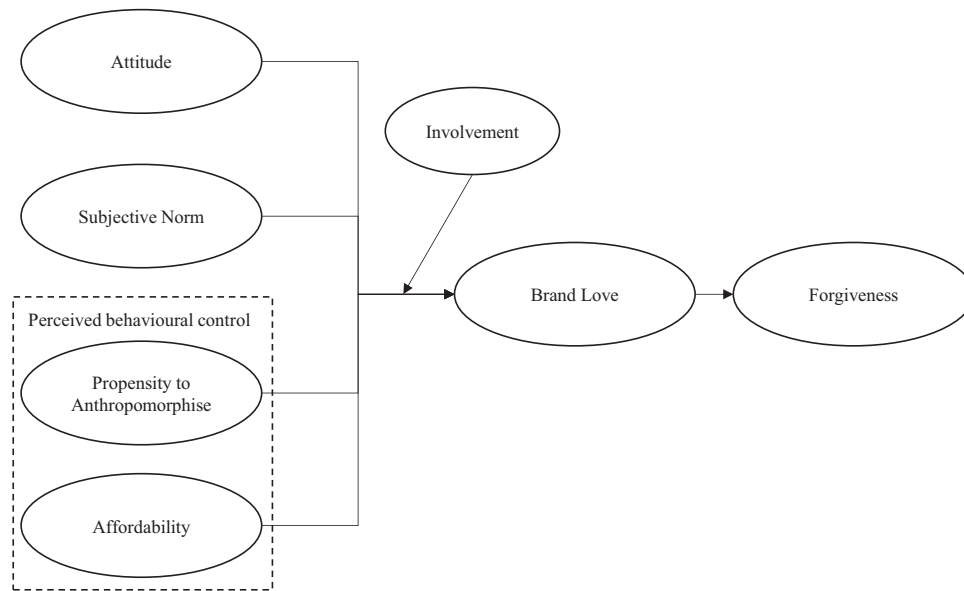
To the best of the authors’ knowledge, no previous study has explored the relationship between affordability of the brand and involvement with the product category. It will be interesting to investigate whether affordability impedes brand love more for high-involved consumers or low-involved consumers. As being highly involved with a product category comes with a rich knowledge about brands belonging to the category (Zaichkowsky, 1985), high-involved consumers have plenty of arguments for why favouring a certain brand. Thus, affordability might play a minor role, as several other arguments are more relevant to the consumer. Low-involved consumers on the other hand usually do not possess such a rich knowledge; therefore, affordability as impeding factor of brand love might have a higher relevance. Furthermore, affordability might even lead to higher brand love for high-involved consumers, as brand love is strongly associated with aspiration of a brand (Batra *et al.*, 2012). A higher price of a brand might even enhance aspiration of a certain brand, thus leading to higher brand love. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H5. For high-involved consumers, (a) attitude and (b) social norm have a greater influence on brand love compared to low-involved consumers; (c) The tendency to anthropomorphise and (d) the perceived affordability of a brand have a greater influence on brand love for low-involved consumers compared to high-involved consumers.

The following research model is proposed (Figure 1). The model is tested in the following with the help of an online survey.

3. Methodology

Data were collected through a self-administered online survey, resulting in 274 usable responses. The product category should be recognisable and easy to understand for consumers, resulting in a distribution of involvement. Thus, fashion industry is applied as research context. Only respondents that indicated to have a favourite fashion brand were considered and able to participate in the study. Participants are split in 88 male (32.1 per cent) and 186 female (67.9 per cent) Dutch respondents with an average age of 35.3 years (Table I). Over 60 per cent of our sample is between 18 and 35 years; thus, our study is comparable with relevant studies on brand love in terms of age (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Batra *et al.*, 2012). Data were gathered through a snowball sampling technique, in which researchers asked participating students to recruit more potential participants within their networks.

Figure 1 Proposed research model**Table I** Demographic profile of the sample

Variable	N	(%)
Gender		
Female	186	67.9
Male	88	32.1
Age		
16-18	5	1.8
19-25	86	31.4
26-35	80	29.2
36-45	27	9.9
46-55	43	15.7
56-65	31	11.3
66+	2	0.7
Education		
Compulsory education	26	9.5
Higher education	62	22.6
University degree	186	67.9
Relationship status		
Single/widowed/divorced	61	22.3
In a relationship/married/living together	213	77.7

The participants had to answer the survey in consideration of their favourite fashion brand. Answering the survey for their most favourite brand facilitates responses and is in line with previous research on the focal topic (Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014; Huber *et al.*, 2010; Whang *et al.*, 2004). The construct of brand love was measured with 22 items developed by Albert *et al.* (2008b). The operationalisation of the antecedents of brand love relating to the TPB was developed based on the manual provided by Francis *et al.* (2004). Attitude towards loving the brand is measured with four bipolar items. Subjective norm consists of three items. The propensity to anthropomorphise as internal

control factor is measured based on a modified version of the individual differences in anthropomorphism questionnaire (IDAQ) scale of Waytz *et al.* (2010). The affordability of the brand as an external factor consists of four self-developed items. Forgiveness was measured based on the work of Bauer *et al.* (2009). The personal involvement inventory (Zaichkowsky, 1985) was applied for measuring the degree of involvement with the product category fashion consisting of five bipolar items. Items were measured on a seven-point scale. A full list of items can be found in Appendix.

With 274 respondents, the sample is above the rule of 200, and the sample to item ratio is 5.8 which is higher than the acceptable ratio of 5:1 (Gorsuch, 1983). Therefore, an adequate sample size is achieved. Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) as well as Bartlett’s test of sphericity to measure sampling adequacy are calculated. The KMO is 0.844 (>0.5) and Bartlett’s test of sphericity is significant at 0.000 (below $p < 0.05$); therefore, both values are over the threshold, and the data are suitable for factor analysis.

4. Results

Several analyses were conducted to test our model. Exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, structural equation modelling (SEM) as well as multi-group analysis were used to address the research questions.

First, principle component analysis is used. Analysis resulted in an 11-factor solution, explaining 69.5 per cent cumulative variance. Brand love resulted in four factors, while all other constructs loaded as expected. Albert *et al.* (2008a) proposed seven dimensions of brand love. The factors uniqueness, pleasure and duration were replicated, while intimacy and idealisation merged in one factor as well as memories and dreams. Of the initial 47 items, three items had to be dropped from further analysis either due to significant cross-loadings (>0.50) or a reduction in reliability. All final scales proved to be reliable with Cronbach’s alpha values >0.70 , except for the duration dimension of brand

love, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.58; therefore, this dimension is excluded from further analyses.

To assess multi-collinearity, a series of regressions models are run on the various constructs to calculate the variance inflation factor (VIF) and conducted the tolerance test for multi-collinearity (Kleinbaum *et al.*, 1988). The values for VIF are between 1.01 and 1.13, and for the tolerance test, the values are between 0.89 and 0.98. While no formal, theory-based cut-off values exist, many regard a $VIF < 3$ and tolerance test > 0.33 as cut off values for multi-collinearity. Further, demographic factors are included in the regression model to test the influence of gender, age or relationship status on brand love. As Rauschnabel *et al.* (2013) suggest, women experience greater brand love than men, and single consumers compensate their relationship status by engaging in brand relationships. The model is probed for these effects, but no significant effects on brand love were found.

Construct validity was assessed by convergent and discriminant validity through a confirmatory factor analysis. The convergent validity was examined by calculating the average variance extracted (AVE) and the construct reliability (CR). The AVE needs to be > 0.40 (Floyd and Widaman, 1995) and the $CR > 0.60$ (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). AVE values are between 0.40 (attitude) and 0.74 (propensity to anthropomorphise), and CR values range between 0.71 (uniqueness) and 0.92 (propensity to anthropomorphise). Thus, all AVE and CR values are above the threshold. To test for discriminant validity, all AVE need to be higher than the squared inter-construct correlation estimates (SIC). This criterion is fulfilled; only uniqueness and pleasure have a SIC of 0.54 which is equal to the AVE of pleasure. Nevertheless, this is acceptable as both constructs belong to the higher-order construct of brand love. Details for means and standard deviations of the constructs as well as AVE, CR and SIC values are provided in Table II.

SEM is used by using SPSS AMOS to assess the relationships among underlying constructs and modelling brand love as second-order factor with uniqueness, pleasure, intimacy/idealisation and memories/dreams as first-order factors (Figure 2). The results suggest acceptable model fit with $\chi^2 = 1,116.10$; $df = 600$; $p = 0.00$; $\chi^2/df = 1.86$; Incremental fit index (IFI) = 0.91, tucker-lewis-index (TLI) = 0.90 and comparative-fit-index (CFI) = 0.91; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06. Brand

love positively influences brand forgiveness ($\beta = 0.22$; $p < 0.01$); thus, *H1* is confirmed. Consumers are more forgiving towards a brand the higher their perceived brand love is. Attitude ($\beta = 0.47$; $p < 0.01$), subjective norm ($\beta = 0.27$; $p < 0.01$) and the propensity to anthropomorphise ($\beta = 0.29$; $p < 0.01$) have a strong positive effect on brand love, while affordability is negatively related to brand love ($\beta = -0.12$; $p = 0.046$). This confirms our *H2*, *H3* and *H4* that attitude, subjective norm and the propensity to anthropomorphise positively influence brand love. Further, *RQ1* is answered: the perceived affordability of a brand seems to be negatively related to brand love; nevertheless, this relationship is not very strong. Overall, the model explained 37 per cent of the variance in brand love.

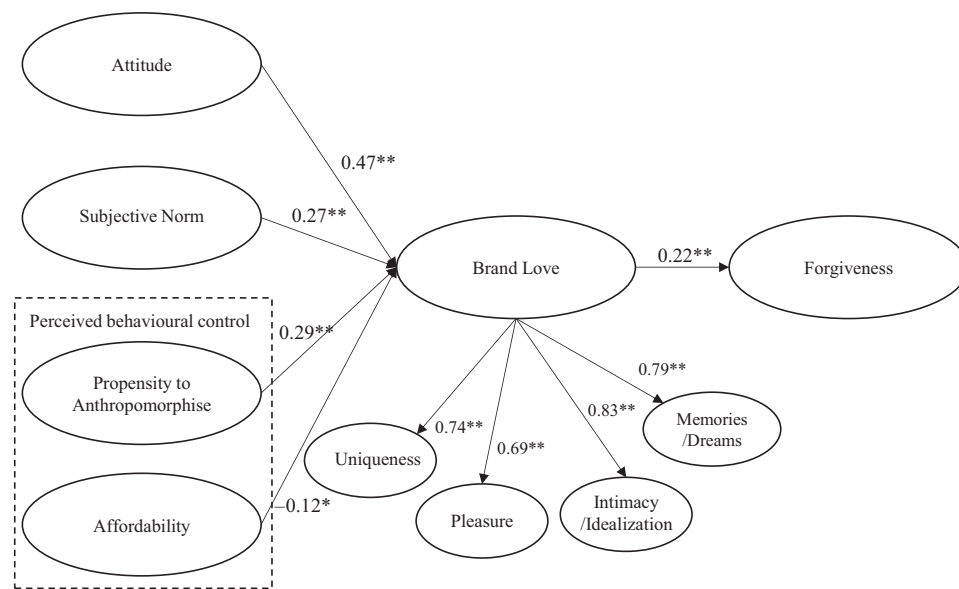
To test the moderating effect of involvement within the fashion industry, a multi-group analysis was conducted. Scores for involvement were split into two groups based on the median value. The median of involvement was 4.40; thus, all respondents who scored below 4.40 were clustered as "low involvement" and those above 4.40 into the "high involvement" cluster. Measurement invariance was tested using the procedure recommended by Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998). A multi-step SEM approach (with maximum likelihood estimation procedure) is used by placing increasingly restrictive constraints on a multiple-group measurement model and testing the changes in the model fit for significance.

Overall, the configural invariance model has a good model fit. The scale shows metric invariance across the two groups. A test for scalar invariance showed that the differential criteria were fulfilled and the global indices show an acceptable fit; thus, it is appropriate to conduct a multi-group analysis (Sharma and Weathers, 2003; Singh, 1995; Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1998; Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 2000).

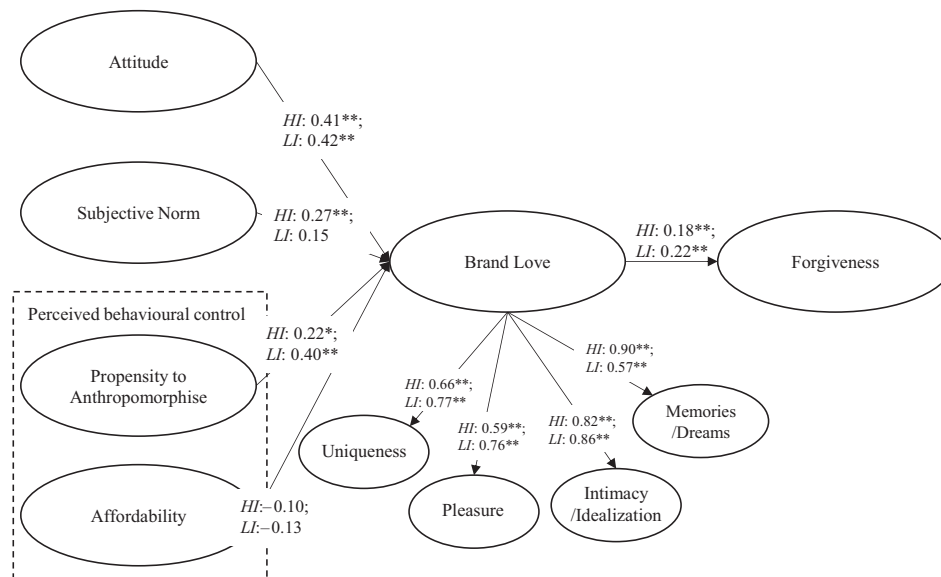
The results in Figure 3 point out that attitude has a strong influence on brand love for both high- ($\beta = 0.41$; $p < 0.01$) and low-involved consumers ($\beta = 0.42$; $p < 0.01$), while subjective norm is only significant for high-involved consumers ($\beta = 0.37$; $p < 0.01$) and not for low involved-consumers ($\beta = 0.15$; $p = 0.062$). Thus, *H5a* is not confirmed, while *H5b* is confirmed. While we proposed that attitude and social norm has a stronger influence on brand love for high-involved consumers, our

Table II Reliability and validity tests

Construct	Mean (SD)	AVE (> 0.40)	CR (> 0.60)	SIC									
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	7
1. Uniqueness	4.49 (1.35)	0.55	0.71	1									
2. Pleasure	5.28 (0.98)	0.54	0.82	0.54	1								
3. Intimacy/idealisation	3.06 (1.11)	0.54	0.87	0.39	0.41	1							
4. Memories/dreams	2.05 (1.16)	0.55	0.89	0.10	0.12	0.35	1						
5. Attitude	4.67 (0.75)	0.40	0.72	0.20	0.29	0.27	0.10	1					
6. Subjective norm	2.28 (1.11)	0.68	0.86	0.06	0.05	0.10	0.13	0.05	1				
7. Propensity to anthropomorphise	3.19 (1.59)	0.74	0.92	0.08	0.05	0.18	0.13	0.12	0.04	1			
8. Affordability	4.76 (1.38)	0.61	0.86	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.08	0.01	0.00	0.00	1		
9. Forgiveness	4.35 (1.13)	0.59	0.80	0.02	0.09	0.04	0.01	0.09	0.02	0.02	0.05	1	
10. Involvement	4.25 (1.45)	0.65	0.90	0.10	0.09	0.08	0.04	0.10	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	1

Figure 2 Results of the overall model

Notes: * $p > 0.05$; ** $p > 0.01$

Figure 3 Results of the moderating effect of involvement

Notes: * $p > 0.05$; ** $p > 0.01$

research shows that only social norm provides a differential effect on brand love. As proposed, the propensity to anthropomorphise has a stronger influence on brand love for low-involved consumers ($\beta = 0.40$; $p < 0.01$) compared to high-involved consumers ($\beta = 0.22$; $p = 0.012$) confirming $H5c$, while affordability has neither an influence on brand love for low- ($\beta = -0.13$; $p = 0.13$) nor for high-involved consumers ($\beta = -0.10$; $p = 0.24$); therefore, $H5d$ cannot be confirmed. The influence of brand love on forgiveness is significant for both high- ($\beta = 0.18$; $p < 0.01$) and low-involved consumers ($\beta = 0.22$; $p < 0.01$).

5. Discussion

Brand love is considered as one of the highest aims of brand managers. Inarguably, brand love can have positive ramifications for the brand's reputational and financial assets like positive word-of-mouth or willingness to pay a price premium (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Albert and Merunka, 2013). These positive consequences of brand love increase the relevance of exploring antecedents of brand love. Investigating the facilitating and impeding factors of brand love adds to our understanding of this important construct.

This study addressed two questions pertaining to the applicability of the TPB to the context of brand love and consumers' involvement in this relationship. The first research question focuses on the effects of attitude towards loving a brand, subjective norm and two control factors, namely, one internal factor, the propensity to anthropomorphise, and one external factor, the affordability of the brand, on brand love. The second question focuses on the impact of consumers' involvement with the fashion industry on the relationship between the beliefs suggested in the TPB and brand love.

Results indicate that the TPB offers a valuable framework for the context of brand love in our sample. Attitude towards loving a brand provides a strong positive influence on the actual love for the brand of our respondents. Thus, consumers enjoying the love towards a brand, seeing it as rewarding, experience also greater brand love. Thus, the first facilitating factor of brand love is the rewarding element of loving a brand. These findings hold true for high- as well as low-involved consumers. Therefore, it seems to be a universal factor of brand love in our research.

A second facilitating factor of brand love is subjective norm. If our respondents hold the belief that loving the brand is encouraged by significant others, brand love receives a boost. As proposed, this relationship holds only true for high-involved consumers in our sample. The results suggest that subjective norm, more concrete the belief that others would encourage the love for a brand, can be perceived as a conscious evaluation. As dual process models propose, high-involved consumers put more emphasis on the evaluation of conscious processes in their evaluation of a brand. Thus, the belief about the opinion of relevant others is only a facilitating factor of high-involved consumers in our research, why consumers that are low involved with the fashion industry are not concerned with the view of relevant third parties.

In this study, control was split in two factors, one inner control factor and an external perceived difficulty factor: the propensity to anthropomorphise as inner control factor and the affordability of the brand as an external difficulty factor. The findings suggest that propensity to anthropomorphise is a facilitating factor for loving a brand, which holds especially true for low-involved consumers. The findings are in line with literature suggesting that anthropomorphisation of a brand takes place automatically and non-consciously (Hart *et al.*, 2013; Miesler *et al.*, 2011), but further experimental research is needed to confirm that.

The affordability, on the other hand, seems to play a minor role in the development of brand love for our respondents. The present research suggests only a minor negative relationship between affordability of the brand and loving the brand. Thus, whether consumers can afford a brand has neither an impeding influence on brand love for high-involved consumers nor for low-involved consumers.

As brand forgiveness is perceived as an important managerial outcome variable of brand love, this research, additionally, investigated the influence of brand love on the consumers' forgiveness in case of a brand failure. For both high as well as low involved consumers, a strong positive relationship between brand love and brand forgiveness is found, thus confirming that consumers are more forgiving towards their beloved brands.

Although the research results have crucial implications for brand managers, the theoretical contributions of the paper should not be overlooked. First, the current study is the first to apply the TPB to the context of consumer–brand relationships showing its applicability to the context of consumer relationships. Further, introducing involvement into the research model provides valuable insights into the processes underlying brand love. Our research confirms that the propensity to anthropomorphise rather triggers an unconscious process, and the influence of relevant others is processed on the central route, thus influencing high-involved consumers.

6. Practical implications

An important implication of these findings for practice is that brand love is essential for the preservation of consumers' forgiveness in times of failure. Thus, brands would benefit from consumers' love. Achieving and maintaining a high consumers' level of brand love is a beneficial strategy for brand managers. Though, securing consumers' brand love prior to a failure does not mean that the brand can be consistently affronted by nonfulfillment of consumers' expectation, but at least consumers will forgive a beloved brand more easily than a non-beloved brand. Love violation due to the inaction or negligence of the brand, especially if it happens for the first time, might be seen as an isolated case if that brand has acquired consumers' love before the failure. Nonetheless, as previous research shows the protective shield of love can only be activated if the beloved brand engages in actions expressing genuine concern for consumers' well-being and willingness to reform ways of doing things (Hegner *et al.*, 2014).

The question is how to activate this beloved protective shield of love? As we mainly considered the age group between 18 and 35 years, one important finding of the present research is that consumers perceive loving the brand as a pleasurable and rewarding experience. Thus, brand marketers should provide gratifying experiences for their target consumers by employing loyalty programs (Yi and Jeon, 2003) or offering community interactions with the brand on social media (Laroche *et al.*, 2013). The Chinese smartphone brand Xiaomi was able to build brand love with an interesting community interaction. Rather than buying awareness, the brand build relationships with its developer community in forums by creating interactions between their consumers and Xiaomi engineers. Over time, early adopters of the operating system not only provided invaluable feedback but also got engaged in the development process with their ideas (Brown *et al.*, 2015).

Additionally, successful brand strategy includes focusing on the target group's social environment. Sarkar (2013) suggests that brand advertisement should display romantic themes to enhance the acceptance of brand love within the target group. Displaying romantic scenes having the brand in the focus suggests a feeling of belonging to a community by loving a brand, which is supported by people consumers can identify with.

Stimulating anthropomorphism allows great opportunities for brand managers. Whether it is the implication of facial expressions in the product design or logo, or the employment of spokespersons like celebrity endorsers, CEO or opinion

leaders of a community or just communicating in the first person, creativity is not restricted (Puzakova *et al.*, 2009; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014).

Interestingly, as affordability of a brand seems to play a minor role in generating brand love, this is good news for managers of luxury brands as well as low-budget brands. As price does not restrain consumers from loving brands, it also cannot serve as an excuse for brand managers not to focus on winning their consumers' love.

7. Limitations and future research directions

Research into the antecedents of brand love is an emerging domain, which implies that several issues still remain to be addressed. First, future research should replicate this study with different samples and love objects. As this study focused solely on the fashion industry, no conclusions can be drawn about other product or service categories. The respondents were able to evaluate their own favourite brand, which limits the generalisability of the results.

Additionally, our study was based on a convenience sample, which might bias the research towards certain types of respondents. Thus, our findings should be extended to additional, more specified target groups. Further, this study was conducted in The Netherlands. Drawing on Hofstede's cultural dimension, The Netherlands can be described as a feminine culture. In more masculine societies, brands often serve as a sign of status confirmation (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005), while status symbols are rather rejected in Dutch society. Fitting in instead of standing out can be seen as a major Dutch principle. For example, the expression *Doe Normaal* which translates to "just be normal already" reminds Dutch consumers that showing off is not an acceptable behaviour (Geske, 2014). It would therefore be interesting to validate the findings in a masculine culture to compare the results.

Additional research could explore the link between brand love and forgiveness in greater detail. The used scenario vaguely described any brand failure, though it would be interesting to see how the relationship between brand love and forgiveness changes based on the failure scenario. For example, one could imagine that consumers might be more forgiving to a product quality failure, while an immoral behaviour of a brand like the engagement in child labour might not be forgiven too easily.

Further, it would be interesting to investigate the link between affordability and brand love. As the present research finds a rather small negative effect, future research could investigate whether ownership of the brand might play a role in this relationship. Further, it would be interesting to study why people love brands they actually cannot afford and why brand lovers actually buy certain brands though they cannot afford them.

Other mediating and moderating variables might help contributing to our research framework. In this respect, we invite future research to analyse characteristics of the brand (e.g. luxury vs non-luxury brands) or individual characteristics (e.g. personality factors) in this research model.

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Appendix

Table AI Construct operationalisation

Brand love (22 items)	Cronbach's α
Uniqueness	0.703
This brand is special	
This brand is unique	
Pleasure	0.815
By buying this brand, I take pleasure	
Discovering new products from this brand is a pure pleasure	
I take a real pleasure in using this brand	
I am always happy to use this brand	
Intimacy/idealisation	0.868
I have a warm and comfortable relationship with this brand	
I feel emotionally close to this brand	
I value this brand greatly in my life	
There is something almost "magical" about my relationship with this brand	
There is nothing more important to me than my relationship with this brand	
I idealise this brand	
Duration ^a	0.576
(I feel that) this brand has accompanied me for many years	
I have been using this brand for a long time	
I have not changed brand since long	
Memories/dreams	0.885
This brand reminds me someone important to me	
This brand reminds me memories, moments of my past (childhood, adolescence, a meeting)	
I associate this brand with some important events of my life	
This brand corresponds to an ideal for me	
I dream about that brand since long	
This brand is a childhood dream	
I dream (or have dreamt) to possess this brand	
Theory of planned behaviour (16 items)	
Attitude	0.714
The love I feel for brand X, is to me:	
Uninteresting – Interesting	
No Fun – Fun	
Punishing – Rewarding	
Undesirable–Desirable	
Subjective norm	0.849
People who are important to me think that I should love brand X	
People who influence my buying behaviour think that I should love brand X	
Society thinks I should love brand X	
People that are important to me, think it is ok that I love brand X ^a	
Propensity to Anthropomorphise	0.916
Brand X has intentions ^a	
Brand X has a free will	
Brand X experiences emotions	
Brand X has a consciousness	
Brand X has a mind of its own	

(continued)

Table A1

Brand love (22 items)	Cronbach's α
Affordability	0.860
I cannot afford buying brand X (rev)	
Brand X is very expensive (rev)	
I would not consider buying this brand because of its high price (rev)	
I can easily afford this brand	
Forgiveness (4 items)	0.739
Imagine a scenario where brand X disappoints you, for example due to disappointing quality or bad customer service. To what extent are you . . .	
Willing to defend brand X	
Willing to seek revenge on brand X (rev) ^a	
Willing to consume brand X in the future	
Willing to repurchase brand X in the future	
Involvement with the product category (5 items)	0.902
In general, fashion and fashion brands are to me	
Relevant – Irrelevant (rev)	
Boring – Interesting	
Important – Unimportant (rev)	
Valuable – Worthless (rev)	
Fascinating – Mundane (rev)	
Notes: ^a Excluded from the analysis; (rev): reversed item	

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