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ARTICLE

This anthropomorphised brand is so loveable: The role of self-brand integration[☆]

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Abstract Brand love has become an important topic of research in academic literature and applied marketing alike. Most of these studies have resulted in a better understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of the concept, as well as in the identification of some of its antecedents (consumer aspects and personality traits). However, in order to explain how brand love is created, this study focuses on anthropomorphism as a potential antecedent of brand love. Based on the interpersonal theory of love and self-expansion theory, our study tries to shed more light on the process under which brand love is built by focusing on self-brand integration as a key element in that process, and proposing anthropomorphism as the mechanism that helps that integration. Findings from the empirical study conducted amongst a sample of 256 individuals demonstrate that brand love is built, not only through the integration of the anthropomorphised brand, but also that anthropomorphism exerts a direct effect on brand love. The moderating effect of brand attitude is also analyzed.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Amor hacia la marca;
Integración personal
con la marca;
Antropomorfización

El papel de la integración personal con la marca en el amor hacia marcas antropomorfizadas

Resumen La investigación sobre el amor a la marca ha despertado un enorme interés tanto en el ámbito académico como en el empresarial. La mayor parte de estos estudios se ha centrado en mejorar la comprensión del concepto dada la complejidad, riqueza y naturaleza multidimensional del mismo, así como en analizar sus antecedentes relacionados con el consumo y los

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rasgos de la personalidad del individuo. Sin embargo, este trabajo trata de comprender cómo se crea el amor a la marca centrándose en que los procesos de antropomorfización o humanización de la marca pueden favorecer la integración personal de la marca y, por ende, sentimientos de amor hacia ella. Con una muestra de 256 individuos se constata empíricamente que el amor hacia la marca no solo se ve favorecido a través de la integración de la marca antropomorfizada sino que también el antropomorfismo ejerce un efecto directo sobre el amor hacia la marca. El efecto moderador de la actitud hacia la marca es también analizado.

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Introduction

The idea that consumers may see brands as partners and develop relationships with them is referred to as 'brand relationship' or 'consumer-brand relationship' (e.g., Fournier, 1998; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). The consumer-brand relationships literature contains myriad consumer-brand relationship constructs, including brand trust and brand commitment (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Elliot & Yannopoulou, 2007; Fournier & Yao, 1997; Sung & Choi, 2010), brand connectedness (Escalas, 2004), emotional brand attachment (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005), and brand passion (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2013; Bauer, Heinrich, & Martin, 2007). Nevertheless, the past few years have seen a burgeoning fascination for an emerging concept to describe consumer-brand relationships: brand love. It has become an important topic of research because functional differentiation among brands get closer, and building and strengthening emotional bonds between consumers and brands becomes more and more crucial (Grissafe & Nguyen, 1997). For example, empirical evidences demonstrate that brand love is a stronger subject than brand satisfaction and brand liking to predict desirable post-consumption behaviour such as repurchase intentions, positive word-of-mouth and brand loyalty (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Heinrich, Albrecht, & Bauer, 2012; Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011). It also increases consumers' willingness to pay a price premium and forgiveness potential brand failures (Bauer, Heinrich, & Albrecht, 2009; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Thomson et al., 2005).

Practitioners have also recognized the relevance of the brand love concept. Kevin Roberts (2006), CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, introduces the expression "Lovemarks" to refer to those brands that are in the mind of people, and especially, in the heart of them. In Spain, some rankings have topped the most-loved brands among consumers (<http://www.cotoconsulting.com>). In addition, the words "Amour" and "Amor" are among the most frequently used in the European Union in the design of new brand names (ABC, 2013). Since 2012 new Spanish brand names with the word Amor are *Amor Jamón*, *Viajes Amores*, *Amor de Mami*, *Amor con Mayúsculas* o *Más Amor* (Oficina Española de Patentes y Marcas, <http://www.oepm.es>) (see Appendix A).

As a topic of research, the vast majority of the studies have focused on exploring the concept of brand love,

its nature and dimensions to propose a reliable and valid measure (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Shimp & Madden, 1988; Thomson et al., 2005; Whang, Allen, Sahoury, & Zhang, 2004). A second stream of research has centred on identifying its antecedents such as brand quality (Batra et al., 2012), trust and brand identification (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010), brand satisfaction (Sarkar, 2011; Sarkar, Ponnamp, & Murthy, 2012) and hedonic shopping motivations (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), as well as other consumers' personality traits such as materialism, romanticism and extroversion (Alfonso, Delgado, & Peláez, 2014; Rauschnabel, Ahuvia, Ivens, & Leischnig, 2013; Sarkar, 2011).

To move beyond the current state-of-the-art in explaining how brand love is created, new studies are needed to analyze the underlying process that facilitate the emergence of this emotional bond with brands, beyond consumption aspects or personal traits of individuals.

The fact that love is a concept that derives from interpersonal love in psychology ("I love you") to be applied in a consumption context ("I love my car") makes difficult to be understood by consumers as far as brands are inanimate and non-human. However, what happens if brands get placed in the human category? In other words, what happens if brands are seen as people? May this thinking foster brand love? It is possible because people have an innate tendency to see nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics or emotions such as when they have conversations with animals, or see a human face in the moon or human figures in the clouds. This tendency is known as anthropomorphism (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007).

Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014) are the first authors in analyzing the role of anthropomorphism as a potential antecedent of brand love. While they have provided an interesting contribution about the theoretical mechanism linking anthropomorphism to brand love, more research is needed in this domain. They analyze the relationships between anthropomorphism and the different dimensions of brand love identified by Batra et al. (2012), but not the contribution of these dimensions to the generation of brand love as a whole. As Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014) posited, brand love has a fairly large number of dimensions and these dimensions are conceptually quite distinct from each other. Then, a more precise understanding of how anthropomorphism influences brand love through these dimensions is needed, because

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