

A comparative, exploratory study of the emotional nature of love across  
different contexts

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# **A comparative, exploratory study of the emotional nature of love across different contexts**

## **Abstract**

For many years interpersonal love has been considered as the basis of brand love in terms of the emotional nature. On the contrary, recently a rising body of researchers (e.g. Langner et al., 2015) examined and found that stronger emotions are observed in interpersonal love than in brand love and thus they are perceived as different emotions. The main objective of this study is to gain initial insights into the similarity, intensity, complexity, objectivity and vagueness of the three notions; the notion of brand love, interpersonal love, and the novel notion of destination love. This study reveals that destination and interpersonal love share more similarities than differences, unlike brand love and interpersonal love. Destination and brand love share marginally more similarities than differences.

*Keywords: brand love, destination love, interpersonal love*

*Track: Consumer Behaviour*

## **1. Introduction**

Nowadays human decisions and actions are much more based on intuition and emotional responses, as consumers become better informed, more knowledgeable and sophisticated in their choices and they take functional features/benefits as a given (Schmitt, 1999). What they really seek is to buy the “wonderful” and emotional experiences around what is being sold and products/ services that amaze and stimulate their senses, hearts, and minds (e.g. Schmitt, 1999). This is particularly true for services or intangibles (e.g. Morrison & Crane, 2007). In the literature, the striking majority of the studies about emotional branding is focused almost exclusively on product (tangibles) brands and not service (intangible) brands, even though the intimate nature of services makes emotions a crucial determinant in the selection and consumption behavior of consumers (Morrison & Crane, 2007).

## **2. Literature Review of Love across different contexts**

Emotions have an impact on various individuals’ perceptions and judgments (e.g. Estes et al., 2012). The most complex of all emotions is, probably, love (Loureiro & Kaufmann, 2012). Various sciences have studied the complex construct of love, such as sociology, psychology and lately marketing. Of course, all types of love are not identical. Empirical evidence suggests that the concept of love is broad enough to be applied to people, destinations, ideas and brands as well as to cover many of the basic dynamics of consumer-object love relationships (e.g. Ahuvia et al., 2009). In psychology, love is characterized as *“the constellation of behaviors, cognitions and emotions associated with the desire to enter or maintain a close relationship with a specific other person”* (Aron et al., 1991: 26). Recently, an unprecedented interest on love is witnessed in the marketing literature and studies have found that consumers are able to experience brand love (e.g. Batra et al., 2012; Hegner et al., 2017). Several studies on non-interpersonal love, such as brand love, have their roots on the theories of interpersonal love and relationships found in psychology and sociology. They demonstrate that the dimensional structure of a consumer’s brand love relationship is conceptually asimilar to that of interpersonal love and attachment (e.g. Shimp & Madden, 1988; Sarkar et al., 2012). The concept of brand love is perceived as the most emotionally intense consumer brand relationship and a cornerstone in building long-term sustainable consumer-brand relationships (e.g. Langner et al., 2015; Hegner et al., 2017). The

origin of the research on brand love can be traced back to, among others, the study of Shimp and Madden (1988), who adapted Sternberg's triangular theory of inter-personal love (1986) from psychology, and the work of Belk (1988). Later, Fournier (1998) showed that close and intimate brand relationships, analogous to interpersonal relationships, may occur and thus consumers can develop and maintain strong relationships with brands. Brand love is *“the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name”* (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006: 81). In services, the relational exchanges between consumers and service firms are way more interactive than in the context of brands, since consumers definitely have the tendency to perceive and respond to service firms as active participants (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh, 2012). Consumers' emotional bonds to a service brand stems mainly from their interactions with service staff and, and to a lesser extent, from other brand attributes (Berry, 2000). The human element in services plays a crucial role, since it constitutes the service brand and the conduit for emotional bonding (e.g. Morhart et al., 2009) and influences the consumer experience as well as emotions, such as love, for service brands (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh, 2012). Customers and service employees co-produce the service, as they are both engaged physically, emotionally and psychologically in the service process and exchange (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh, 2012). Interpersonal interaction between service employees and service customers works as the main conduit for the development of service brand love and thus there is transferability of interpersonal love into the services domain (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh, 2012). As it concerns the tourism context, *“tourist destinations are rich in terms of experiential attributes, and the potential to evoke an emotional response is even greater”* (Otto & Ritchie 1996, as cited in Hosany & Gilbert, 2010: 515). A destination consists of both tangible and intangible components (e.g. Murphy et al., 2000) and there is a general consensus that it can be considered as a product or a brand and thus the brand concept can be transferred to that of tourism destination in the same way (e.g. Hankinson, 2015). Even though the significance of brand love has been widely acknowledged, it has rarely been investigated in the tourism field, which is certainly highly appropriate for love research (Aro et al., 2018). Only very recently, tourism academic studies focus their attention on the investigation of destination brand love as well as on distinct species of love, such as destination “agape”. Academics found that people can experience real destination love feelings (Swanson, 2017; Aro et al., 2018; Christou, 2018). Swanson (2017) described tourists' destination brand love as (1) philia, (2) storge and (3) eros and Christou (2018) as agape, typical interpersonal love notions. Thus, *do consumers who form love relationships with brands or/and destinations apply conceptualizations of interpersonal*

*love relationships in their brand/destination love assessments? What is the role of context (services vs brands) in consumers' love?*

### *2.1. Differences between interpersonal and brand love*

Brand love phenomena have been explained by consumer research through interpersonal love theories and measurements. Aggarwal (2004: 87) stated that “*when consumers form relationships with brands, they use norms of interpersonal relationships as a guide in their brand assessments*”. However, consumer-object relations are qualitatively different from interpersonal relations, yet there are sufficient similarities to allow meaningful analogies (Shimp & Madden, 1988). Ahuvia (2005) found that in general interpersonal and object love have more similarities than differences in consumer contexts. However, recent critiques in the field question this approach (e.g. Batra, et al., 2012). Langner et al (2015) found that stronger emotions are observed in interpersonal rather than brand love and rational benefits constitute usually the main trigger of consumer-brand relationships whereas the nature of interpersonal love is often altruistic.

## **3. Methodology**

The study combined two sampling techniques. The respondents were contacted either directly in Ancient Olympia and Athens, Greece, or through a snowball sampling procedure, following the procedure of Batra et al., (2012). A semi-structured questionnaire was used, combined both qualitative (open-ended questions) and quantitative approaches in order to enlarge the insights of destination and brand love notions. The whole procedure ensured the input of a diverse spectrum of individuals, who have been exposed to various brands and tourist destinations, services and experiences. The sample consisted of 334 participants, with an average age of 36.86 years (SD = 11.51) and 52.4% were women. Furthermore, 20.1% of the participants were from the USA, 10.8% French, 10.5% British, 10.2% Greeks, 9.9% Germans, 7.5% Italians, 5.7% Australians and the rest came from other countries. 35.9% of the respondents were university/college graduates and 37.4% master graduates. Participants were asked to answer general questions about tourist destinations and whether they love at least one of them. Those who claimed that they love at least one destination were asked to describe in details what they really mean by stating that they do love a destination and

whether they had as a benchmark their interpersonal love feelings when defining destination love. Subsequently, questions about destination love compared to interpersonal love were asked, from 0 to 10 (with respect to intensity, complexity, objectivity, vagueness of the love relationships: where 0 not at all intense/complex/objective/vague to 10-much more intense/complex/objective/vague than interpersonal love). The same procedure with that of destination love was followed for brand love as well. Complexity of love is about respondents' ability to describe their love relationships feelings with detail and precision or/and their ability to specifically articulate which feelings arise in a love relationship situation, adopting the view of Lindquist and Barrett (2008). Vagueness of love is about the boundary-free nature of the concept, meaning that it cannot be fully classified and articulated as well as understood by the respondents. Emotions are by definition subjective or at least not objective, in the sense that they are bound to individuals who have/feel them (Roeser, 2006). Objectivity of love has to do with whether individuals perceive love as a subjective projection or rather, as a form of objective discernment. Participants needed to think about a person, brand and destination, for each love relationship type, that indicated perfectly their relation and that they loved most, following the procedure of Langner et al. (2015). The selection of the most loved person, brand and destination constituted a comparison of the most dynamic loving relationships. The last questions were about how much each kind of love differs from each other (from 0- completely different to 10- very similar) as well as in what exactly they differ or are similar (open-ended questions).

#### **4. Results**

DL (Destination Love) vs IL (Interpersonal Love): 26.3% of the respondents claimed that DL is as intense as IL, 40.5% claimed that DL is less intense than IL and 33.2% reported that DL is more intense than IL. Accordingly, 38.5% stated that DL is less complex than IL, 13.8%, that DL is as complex as IL and 47.7% that DL is more complex than IL. Moreover, 24.7% claimed that DL is as objective as IL, 9.7% that DL is less objective than IL and 65.6% that DL is more objective than IL. In addition, 17.4% stated that DL is as vague as IL, 31.2% that DL is less vague than IL and 51.4% that DL is vaguer than IL. Concerning the overall similarity between DL and IL, 37.2% claimed that IL and DL are not similar, 5.7% were neutral and 57.1% claimed that DL and IL tend to be similar.

DL (Destination Love) vs BL (Brand Love): 11.8% claimed that DL is as intense as BL, 11.8% that DL is less intense than BL and 76.4% that DL is more intense than BL.

Additionally, 21.2% believe that DL is as complex as BL, 10.6% that DL is less complex than BL and 68.2% that DL is more complex than BL. Furthermore, 32.1% consider DL as objective as BL, 51.2% that DL is less objective than BL and 16.7% that DL is more objective than BL. 27.1% of the participants conceive DL as vague as BL, 10.6% that DL is less vague than BL and 62.3% that DL is vaguer than BL. In addition, 40.7% perceive that DL and BL are different, 8.1% are neutral and 51.2% consider DL and BL as similar.

BL vs IL: 78.4% of the respondents claimed that BL is not (at all) intense compared to interpersonal love, 14.4% conceive BL as intense as IL and 7.2% consider BL more intense than IL. 70.1% think that BL is less complex than IL, 16.5% are neutral and 13.4% that BL is more complex than IL. 69.1% of participants claimed that BL is more objective than IL, 17.5% that BL is as objective as IL and 13.4% that BL is less objective than IL. Moreover, 59.8% perceive BL less vague than IL, 10.3% that BL is as vague as IL and 29.9% consider BL as vaguer than IL. Finally, 58.8% of the respondents perceive that BL is different from IL, 29.9% consider that BL and IL tend to be similar and 11.3% are neutral.

## **5. Discussion**

The findings of this study shed some light on the debate concerning the procedure that consumer research usually explains brand love phenomena using interpersonal love approaches (Batra et al., 2012; Langner et al. 2015), by introducing and examining for the first time those notions in relation to destination love. When it comes to love emotions, a great majority of the participants (73.7%) claimed that they do love a destination, whereas only 27.9% love a brand. Almost two out of three of the participants (65.3%) had as a benchmark their interpersonal love feelings when articulating destination love. First, there is a slight difference between IL and DL in their emotional nature regarding three love criteria. The majority of respondents (59.5%) perceive DL to be as intense as IL and even slightly more intense, as well as slightly more complex and vaguer than IL. DL is much more objective than IL. An interesting finding is that the majority of the respondents (57,1%) consider IL and DL to be similar. Their similarity also lies on the bi-directional nature of love. IL is considered bidirectional and DL is also perceived bi-directional concerning individuals' interaction and relationships with locals. The vague and complex nature of DL can be considered as a logical outcome since people are more familiar with the concept of IL, so they seem to articulate easier their love for their beloved ones. Accordingly, it seems easier for respondents to articulate their love towards brands, as BL is rational oriented

whereas DL is more emotional and experiential oriented. Consequently, DL for the customers is characterized by more complex and abstract notions such as self-actualization and self-expansion, concepts that are by their nature difficult to be articulated. Moreover, DL and BL differ in their emotional nature. It was found that DL encompasses higher emotional intensity, complexity, vagueness but less objectivity than BL. An interesting finding is that only a slight majority believe that BL and DL tend to be similar. The greater objectivity of BL in relation to DL also seems logical as brand love found to be predominately based on rational features (e.g. quality, characteristics of brand), and on clear preference over the other available brands in the market. In detail, BL can be mainly considered as rational, characterized by brand features, as well as social and self-image. On the other hand, DL is more emotional and experiential, characterized by higher self needs such as self-actualization, self-expansion and self-fulfillment as well as personal interaction with locals, culture and customs, nostalgia and memories. The common characteristics of BL and DL are mainly commitment/loyalty and positive attitudes & emotions, such as excitement, happiness and joy. In terms of theory, the elements that affect tourist experience should be sought in order to be a guide to brand love research. In relation to the visitor's tourist experience, a number of elements have an impact on it, since tourist experience is considered a multidimensional phenomenon (e.g. Ryan, 2000). From a sociological point of view, consideration should be given to the incentives to examine the benefits and psychological outcomes of the tourist experience, such as (a) direct experience (immediate) which includes entertainment, relaxation, excitement, (b) experiential learning which has an impact on the improvement of abilities and knowledge, but also on the physical and psychological health of individuals; and (c) personal development that is most concerned with personal concern for self-development and satisfaction, self-determination and personality confirmation of individuals. Finally, in line with previous studies (e.g. Langner et al. 2015), it was found that IL and BL constitute different emotions. The emotional nature of IL and of BL is different. IL exceeds BL regarding the intensity, complexity, and vagueness, but not in terms of objectivity, where BL exceeds. A very important finding is that less than 1 out of 3 respondents think that those kinds of love are similar in their emotional nature. Results also showed that rational benefits constitute usually the main trigger of brand relations whereas the nature of IL is often altruistic. That is, the emotional experience of BL differs, in quality and nature, from that of IL. All in all, DL and IL seem to share more similarities than differences, unlike BL and IL. Thus, transferring theory and scales from an interpersonal to a brand love context should be considered with caution by researchers. In any case, there



should be careful examination of each item of an interpersonal love scale before its transfer to the brand love research.

## **6. Implications & Conclusion**

From the results of the current study, several noteworthy implications for practitioners have emerged. The foregoing analysis reveals that tourist experience results from a combination of visitor emotions and attitudes as well as objective and subjective assessments of the visited destinations. Otto and Ritchie (1996: 404) state that “*the emotional reactions and decisions prevail in tourism*”. Zouni and Kouremenos’ research (2008) confirmed that tourists rated higher those dimensions of tourist experience with non-tangible features. Hence, alike in tourism field, consumer experience should be treated as an interactive socialization process and a multifaceted phenomenon with dimensions of freedom, individual choice and personal autonomy, but also taking into consideration factors relating to the social context in which consumer experience is gained each time (e.g. Knobloch et al., 2017). This can be achieved primarily by the adoption of a market orientation. Another key managerial implication is that brand managers should focus on ensuring the quality and emotional aspect of the entire consumer experience and not just on the provision of the core product or service. This study is critical because it could be extremely useful for brand management to successfully entrench service and tourism-oriented values and characteristics, such as affectionate gestures (Hadi & Valenzuela, 2014) and behaviors in order to reach each target market with a ‘comprehensive range of emotional and experiential offerings’ and to propose an ‘integrated emotional solution’. Such an approach also lies with the concept of co-creative marketing which includes both the company and the customers that both interact in all aspects of the design, production and service delivery (e.g. Grönroos, 2017).

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