

Destination love, brand love and interpersonal love; an exploratory,
comparative study of love across different contexts

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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, Schmidt, and Fischer, 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 compare the three notions; destination love, brand love and interpersonal love, in terms of similarity, intensity, complexity, objectivity and vagueness criteria. This study is the first attempt to compare the notion of love across these three different contexts. The findings reveal 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. Several noteworthy implications for both academics and practitioners have emerged.

Keywords: destination love, brand love, interpersonal love

Track: Tourism Marketing

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 consumers 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

Human beings are emotional creatures and emotions prevail our daily lives, drive our behavior and have an impact on various individuals’ perceptions and judgments (e.g. Schmitt, 1999; Estes, Jones, and Golonka, 2012). The most complex of all emotions is, probably, love (Loureiro & Kaufmann, 2012). Various sciences have studied the complex concept 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, Batra, and Bagozzi, 2009). 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, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi, 2012; Hegner, Fenko, and Teravest, 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, Ponnampalani, and Murthy, 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. 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. Buhalis, 2000; Murphy, Pritchard, and Smith, 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, Suomi, and Saraniemi, 2018). Only very recently, tourism academic studies focus their attention on the investigation of destination brand love, since academics found that people can experience real destination brand love feelings (e.g. Swanson, 2017; Aro et al., 2018; Christou, 2018).

2.1. Interpersonal, destination and brand love

In psychology, interpersonal 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, Aron, Tudor, and Nelson, 1991: 26). Brand love phenomena have been explained by consumer research through interpersonal love theories and measurements. However, consumer-object relations are qualitatively different from interpersonal relations, yet there are sufficient similarities to allow meaningful analogies (Shimp & Madden, 1988). Brand love is *“the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name”* (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006: 81). Ahuvia (2005) found that 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. All studies on love in tourism field are destination-specific (destination brand love) as they are focused on specific destination(s) (e.g. Lee & Hyun, 2016; Swanson, 2017; Aro et al., 2018; Christou, 2018). Specifically, destination brand love is described as *philia*, *storge* and *eros* (Swanson,

2017), agape (Christou , 2018), or passionate love, emotional attachment, and self-brand integration (Lee & Hyun, 2016), typical interpersonal and/ or brand love notions. However, Barker, Peacock and Fetscherin (2015:1) stressed that “*marketers need to think about ‘love’ not within a specific product category but across the entire universe of brands*”. Based on this view, this study is the first to perceive destination love a universal concept, surpassing all manner of specific destinations and thus a broader concept than destination brand love. Participants discussed destinations of their own choosing, which gives a universal approach in the research effort. This is in line with the procedure of previous studies in branding (e.g. Hegner et al., 2017), where participants had to answer the surveys with respect to their (most) favorite or loved brand. The present study aspires to shed light on the similarities/differences of the emotional nature of destination, brand and interpersonal love with respect to complexity, objectivity, intensity and vagueness criteria. More specifically, this study explores respondents’ subjective emotional intensity (Sonnemans & Frijda, 1994) as well as complexity of love, which 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.

3. Methodology

The study combined two sampling techniques. The respondents were contacted either directly in Ancient Olympia, 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, most of the

participants were from the USA (20.1%), France (10.8%), UK (10.5%), Greece (10.2%), Germany (9.9%), Italy (7.5%), and Australia (5.7%). Most of the respondents were master graduates (37.4%) and university/college graduates (35.9%). Participants were asked 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 a 0 to 10 scale with respect to intensity, complexity, objectivity, vagueness of the love criteria (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. 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 (75%) 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 partially lies on the bi-directional nature of love. IL is considered bidirectional and DL is also perceived partially 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

participants 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 long-term commitment 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). 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 both academics and practitioners have emerged. In terms of academic implications, the findings

contribute to the broader understanding of love, which is often described as complex phenomenon. Specifically, it gives insights into the novel and under-searched notion of destination love, as well as its similarities/differences to already entrenched love notions such as brand love and interpersonal love. Moreover, it certainly sheds light on individuals' mental prototypes that present a major challenge in the marketing literature, since they are perceived tacit knowledge structures and hence they cannot be easily explained. In tourism, although destination love encompasses a way higher emotional intensity compared to that of brand love, it has escaped tourism academics' attention. More studies on love for destinations would contribute to a deeper and better understanding of tourists' emotional patterns, behaviors and attitudes that in turn could set the basis to create more affective marketing strategies for products and services in tourism destinations. Moreover, branding literature in general could be substantially benefited by exploring destination love characteristics that could ensure the quality and emotional aspect of the entire consumer experience. Specifically, consideration should be given to transmit the benefits and psychological outcomes of destination love to brand love, 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; (c) personal development that is most concerned with personal concern for self-development and satisfaction, self-determination and personality confirmation of individuals; and (d) human element interaction between brand employees and consumers can function as a main conduit for the development of brand love. In terms of managerial implications, the findings of the similar emotional nature between destination and interpersonal love indicate that destination marketing managers need to focus on a variety of emotionally meaningful marketing strategies and campaign activities, e.g. travel festivals and destination exhibitions that could function as emotional stimuli to tourists' minds and hearts and ultimately set the stage for tourists to create their own emotional experiences at all travel stages. In doing so, tourists could build strong, loving -and thus long lasting- relationships with the destination. An additional key managerial implication is that brand managers could successfully entrench service and tourism-oriented values, characteristics 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. Zouni & Kouremenos, 2008; Grönroos, 2017).

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