When love turns to hate. The interplay of brand love, attribution of blame, and personal relevance on consumers' feelings of betrayal in a value-related brand transgression.

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Abstract

This study examines the transformation of brand love to both active and passive brand hate in the context of value-related brand transgressions. Adding to recent literature, it specifically explores how the interplay between brand love, attribution of blame, and personal relevance contributes to consumers' feelings of betrayal. Drawing on quantitative data and structural equation modelling, we shed further light on the transformation from brand love to brand hate: First, brand love can evolve into brand hate when consumers experience feelings of betrayal by the brand. Second, this sense of betrayal is influenced by the degree of blame attributed to the brand for the transgression. Finally, consumers' personal relevance of the transgression—which is not necessarily dependent on prior brand relationships—intensifies feelings of brand betrayal. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of brand relationships and the emotional dynamics transforming love to hate.

1. Introduction

Branding thrives on emotions, and few are more powerful than love and hate. So, what happens when deep love for a brand turns to hate? Research (e.g., Fetscherin, 2019; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008) suggests that loyal customers who feel betrayed by a brand—e.g., due to a brand transgression—may go to great lengths to harm it. What begins as feelings of loss and anger can escalate, transforming once-loyal customers into the brand's fiercest adversaries (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). This sense of betrayal can ultimately drive brand lovers to become brand haters, actively engaging in actions to damage the brand (Fetscherin, 2019).

The luxury brand Balenciaga recently experienced one of the most significant brand crises in its history. In fall 2022, the brand launched a campaign featuring children alongside teddy bears/handbags with sadomasochistic elements, sparking an immediate public backlash. Critics accused Balenciaga of sexualizing children and promoting pedophilia. The outrage quickly spread across social media, where hashtags like #burnbalenciaga and #cancelbalenciaga generated over 300 million views. The incident severely damaged Balenciaga's reputation, leading to store vandalism and a widespread viral boycott (Gárgoles & Ambás, 2023). The outrage also included loyal customers and lovers of the brand. Kim Kardashian, a loyal Balenciaga fan and figurehead of the brand, publicly expressed harsh criticism towards the brand. The question thus arises as to what causes brand lovers to oppose a brand and actively or passively express brand hatred.

Although brand hate and brand love are well-established constructs, they are rarely put in context. Consequently, researchers highlight significant gaps in understanding the role of prior relationships, such as brand love, in shaping consumer responses, particularly the intensity and nature of reactions when brand hate arises due to perceived betrayal (Bayarassou et al., 2020; Jain & Sharma, 2019). Furthermore, questions remain about whether brand hate manifests more actively or passively because of prior relationship dynamics. This underscores the critical need for more research on brand love and its potential transformation to brand hate, especially in the context of brand transgressions.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to address these gaps by shedding light on overlooked factors relevant to the progression from brand love to brand hate. In the following, the constructs of brand love, brand hate, blame attribution, and brand betrayal are explained and put into context. This creates the basis for a conceptual model containing all relevant

constructs and relationships, which is then quantitatively tested via structural equation modelling.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The concept of brand love

Most research locates the concept of brand love within the theoretical framework of intrapersonal relationships (Palusuk et al., 2019). Researchers argue that brand love has parallels to interpersonal love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) as people use interpersonal relationship norms as a guide when building relationships with brands (Aggarwal, 2004).

Brand love is one of the strongest emotions an individual can feel toward a brand, leading to loyalty, resistance to negative information, and positive word-of-mouth (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Key factors influencing brand love include the brand's ability to shape personal and social identity, with stronger identification leading to greater attachment (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). Studies show that brand love drives positive behaviors such as repeat purchases, willingness to pay premium prices, and advocacy, where consumers defend and promote the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Palusuk et al., 2019).

2.2. The feeling of betrayal in a brand transgression

However, strong emotions can turn against a company when a brand commits a transgression, violating the consumer-brand relationship (Aaker et al., 2004). This perceived betrayal, driven by morally questionable actions or unmet expectations, can lead to a "love-becomes-hate" effect (Ma, 2020). Betrayed consumers, particularly loyal ones, may seek to punish the brand, motivated by a desire to restore fairness (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008).

Brand betrayal has significant emotional and behavioral consequences for consumers. It often leads to rumination about the brand's actions, their past support, and the origins of the relationship, which can intensify feelings of betrayal and hinder reconciliation (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Reimann et al., 2018). Betrayal in a strong relationship can evoke a sense of loss, self-blame, and even shame as consumers question their trust and the resources invested in the brand relationship (Rachman, 2010; Reimann et al., 2018). These emotions, coupled with outrage at the brand's actions, motivate consumers to seek revenge as a way to restore their identity and sense of fairness (Bayarassou et al., 2020; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008).

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Research also shows that betrayal can lead to active or passive reactions and is a key driver of brand hate (Ninh Nguyen & Binh Nguyen, 2021; Reimann et al., 2018).

2.3. The concept of brand hate

Brand hate is broadly defined as an intense negative emotional reaction toward a brand, often tied to specific behaviors like negative word-of-mouth, boycotts, or sabotage (Bryson et al., 2013; Zarantonello et al., 2016). It can manifest in two forms: active and passive. Active brand hate involves confrontational actions driven by emotions like anger, contempt, and disgust, often aimed at seeking revenge (Jain & Sharma, 2019; Zarantonello et al., 2016). Passive brand hate, by contrast, is non-confrontational and associated with emotions such as fear, disappointment, and shame, typically resulting in avoidance behaviors (Kucuk, 2018; Zarantonello et al., 2016). Brand hatred can be the result of brand transgressions. These transgressions can be categorized into three distinct types: value-related, performance-related, and image-related transgressions (Fetscherin & Sampedro, 2019). Our study focuses on value-related brand transgressions, which involve corporate wrongdoing characterized by unethical, illegal, or immoral actions.

2.4. The interplay of personal relevance, attribution of blame, and perceived betrayal

So far, we can conclude that brand lovers who feel betrayed following a brand transgression may transform into brand haters, engaging in either non-confrontational actions (e.g., avoidance) or confrontational actions (e.g., boycotts). However, the intensity of perceived betrayal appears to be influenced by various factors. Studies on consumer responses to brand crises (Baghi & Gabrielli, 2021) and product-harm crises (Haas-Kotzegger & Schlegelmilch, 2013) highlight personal relevance as a critical determinant of consumer reactions. A crisis situation that is of personal interest to consumers can intensify their response to the crisis. Consequently, we suggest that feelings of betrayal intensify when the brand transgression holds personal importance for the consumer. Notably, the personal relevance of a crisis to a consumer does not necessarily depend on pre-existing consumer-brand-relationships.

When a brand crisis occurs, consumers actively construct attributions to understand the event and assign blame (Hegner et al., 2018). While attribution processes are well-

documented in the literature on brand crises, most studies emphasize performance-related crises rather than value-based transgressions (Wang et al., 2023). Notably, transgressions involving ethical concerns and a violation of values are deemed particularly significant and are more likely to elicit feelings of betrayal (Kim & Park, 2020). We, therefore, propose that the level of blame attributed to the brand influences the feeling of betrayal, particularly in a value-related brand transgression.

This study, therefore, explores the transition from brand love to brand hate within the context of a value-related brand transgression. It introduces brand betrayal as a mediating factor between these two constructs and—to the best of our knowledge—for the first time examines the roles of personal crisis relevance and attribution of blame in this context. We thus—based on the discussed literature and our argumentation above—formulate the following hypotheses (see Figure 1):

> **H1:** Personal relevance positively influences perceived brand betrayal in the context of a value-related brand transgression.
>
> **H2:** Brand love positively influences perceived brand betrayal in the context of a value-related brand transgression.
>
> **H3:** The positive influence of brand love on brand betrayal in the context of a value-related brand transgression is moderated by attribution of blame.
>
> **H4:** Perceived brand betrayal positively influences active brand hate in the context of a value-related brand transgression.
>
> **H5:** Perceived brand betrayal positively influences passive brand hate in the context of a value-related brand transgression.
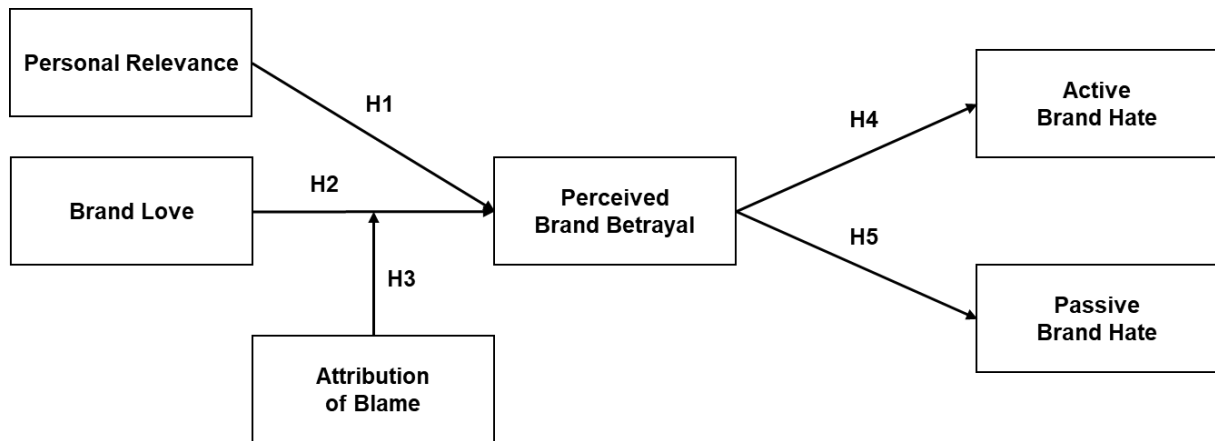
Figure 1. Conceptual Model

3. Methodology

To test our conceptual model, we quantitatively assessed data via an online survey using a structured questionnaire. We first asked participants to recall their most recent purchase of a fashion-related product (clothing, footwear, or handbag) and to specify the brand associated with this purchase. Respondents then completed the questionnaire with reference to the brand they had identified.

The construct of brand love was assessed first, followed by an intervention in which participants were presented with a fabricated news article. Based on real-life events, the article described a hypothetical fire in a factory in a South Asian country where the brand's products are manufactured. The article detailed that, despite repeated warnings by authorities about negligence in adhering to fire safety regulations and poor working conditions, no improvements were implemented, resulting in a devastating fire with numerous deaths and severe injuries.

After reading the article, participants were asked to evaluate the perceived personal relevance of the incident, followed by assessments of attribution of blame, feelings of betrayal, active brand hate, and passive brand hate. All relevant constructs were measured on five-point Likert-type scales adopted from relevant literature and slightly modified for this study: brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), perceived personal relevance (Morris et al., 2016), attribution of blame (Wang et al., 2023), perceived brand betrayal (Grégoire & Fisher,

2008), active brand hate (Zarantonello et al., 2016), and passive brand hate (Bayarassou et al., 2020; Zarantonello et al., 2016).

The questionnaire was distributed through the university's email distribution list and shared via social media. It resulted in a total of 186 completed questionnaires, of which we excluded 37 due to incomplete answers or outliers, leading to a final sample of 149 questionnaires (70.47% female, 1.34% no gender revealed, mean age 26.59 (SD 7.79)).

4. Results

Data was analyzed via partial least squares structural equation modeling (SEM) with the software SmartPLS (Ringle et al., 2024). We thereby applied the pls-algorithm and bootstrapping with 5000 samples. We first assessed validity and reliability following the two-step procedure proposed by Anderson & Gerbing (1988). Factor analysis led to removing four items with factor loadings < 0.7 related to passive brand hate to ensure convergent validity. Average variance extracted (AVE) reached values above 0.5 for all constructs. Values for Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were above the threshold of 0.7 for all constructs, thus ensuring reliability (Hair et al., 2016).

The second step consisted of estimating predictive power, examining path coefficients, and determining significance. All R^2 were beyond the threshold for weak effects of 0.25 (perceived brand betrayal 0.440, active brand hate 0.569, passive brand hate 0.485). Effect size f^2 indicated small, medium, and large effects across all paths (Hair et al., 2016).

Our results offer strong support for all hypotheses. **H1** was positive and significant, indicating a positive influence of personal relevance on perceived brand betrayal ($\beta = 0.415$, $t = 5.571$, $p < 0.01$). **H2** covered the positive influence of brand love on perceived brand betrayal and was also supported ($\beta = 0.153$, $t = 2.079$, $p < 0.05$). **H3** hypothesized a moderating effect of attribution of blame on the influence of brand love on perceived brand betrayal. The moderating effect was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.210$, $t = 2.879$, $p < 0.05$), supporting **H3**. We further found support for **H4**, addressing a positive influence of perceived brand betrayal on active brand hate ($\beta = 0.755$, $t = 24.031$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, **H5**, hypothesizing a positive influence of perceived brand betrayal on passive brand hate, also proved significant ($\beta = 0.697$, $t = 16.879$, $p < 0.01$).

5. Discussion and Implications

The results of this empirical investigation into the roles of brand love, blame attribution, and perceived relevance lead to several relevant findings. We show that consumers' personal relevance of a crisis—which is not necessarily related to the pre-existing brand relationship—has a significant impact on perceived brand betrayal. Furthermore, we show that the impact of brand love on betrayal is moderated by consumers' considerations regarding brands' responsibilities. Finally, we demonstrate that perceived brand betrayal leads to active and passive brand hate, thereby showcasing the path from love to hate via betrayal.

What motivates brand lovers to transform into brand haters? Returning to the example of Kim Kardashian and Balenciaga, parallels can be drawn with our research findings. As a mother of four, Kim Kardashian may perceive the crisis involving kids as personally relevant, blame the brand for making a significant mistake, and feel betrayed. Due to her strong identification with the brand as a prominent figure associated with it, this betrayal might also impact her self-identity, leaving her feeling violated and treated unfairly (Bayarassou et al., 2020; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). In an effort to restore her personal image and as a means of self-preservation, she publicly distances herself from the brand. This perceived violation of self-identity, coupled with the need to justify or express their discontent as individuals strongly connected to the brand, likely prompted other Balenciaga fans to cease wearing its products publicly or even to engage in public acts of destroying their fashion products (#burnbalenciaga).

The contribution of this article to the recent scholarly discussion covering the transformation from brand love to brand hate is three-fold. First, we add the role of consumers' personal relevance to the investigation of value-related brand crises. Second, we address the impact of blame attribution by consumers to the formation of feelings of brand betrayal. Third, we thereby shed light on the role of perceived brand betrayal on the path from brand love to active and passive brand hate. Future researchers are encouraged to deepen the understanding of the role of personal relevance and blame for perceived betrayal, address differences to performance-related crises or image-related crises and strengthen empirical findings with diverse samples from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Against this backdrop, we recommend brand managers to take proactive steps in case of a value-related brand transgression by prioritizing customers with a strong emotional bond to

the brand. These individuals are often more likely to feel anger, dissatisfaction, and betrayal—especially when the crisis is personally relevant to them. By implementing targeted recovery strategies for this group, the company can help alleviate their negative emotions and mitigate the "love turns to hate" phenomenon.

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