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Fashion Brand Love: Application of a Cognition–Affect–Conation Model

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Abstract: A large numbers of studies have supported the crucial role of brand love in consumer–brand relationships; however, research that examines fashion brand love and its relationship with cognitive aspects and self-concept congruency remains limited. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify important factors that are associated with fashion brand love. A questionnaire in which participants provided self-reported responses was created to measure the constructs and structural equation modeling (SEM) and independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to test the hypothesized relationships. Our results indicated that consumers who know more about fashion brands are more likely to have stronger emotional attachment to their favorite fashion brand and brand love, in turn, has a significant effect on performing brand-loyal behaviors. Furthermore, our results demonstrated that fashion brand love is strongly associated with actual and ideal self-congruity. These findings suggest that it is important for fashion brands to focus on developing affective relationships with consumers to gain brand loyalty and one way to achieve this goal is to enhance brand awareness or knowledge among consumers. Fashion brands also need to invest in activities that aim to deliver a brand image congruent with actual and ideal self-concepts of the target market.

Keywords: brand love; fashion brand expertise; brand loyal behaviors; cognition-affect-conation model

1. Introduction

Brand love has become an area of growing interest among scholars and practitioners over the past few decades as consumers' emotional attachment to a brand has been recognized as one of the most reliable indicators of a strong brand (Batra et al. 2012). Thus, developing brand love is considered as a primary goal for customer relationship marketing (CRM) and brand management (Pawle and Cooper 2006). Accordingly, there has been a substantial amount of academic research on brand love and its relationship to consumer behaviors such as shopping/brand experiences (Pandowo 2016; Sarkar et al. 2019), purchase intentions (Fetscherin 2014; Pawle and Cooper 2006), brand loyalty (Alnawas and Alrarifi 2015; Drennan et al. 2015; Fournier 1998; Huang 2017; Thomson et al. 2005; Wallace et al. 2014), brand trust (Albert and Merunka 2013; Langner et al. 2015), positive word-of-mouth (Karjaluoto et al. 2016; Wallace et al. 2014), and willingness to pay (Albert and Merunka 2013; Thomson et al. 2005).

Fournier (1998) argued that consumers are capable of emotionally bonding with certain brands in a similar manner to developing interpersonal relationships and her claim was supported by later research that found consumers can build emotional connections with brands just like developing love in a relationship (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Wallace et al. 2014). Batra et al. (2012) and Bagozzi et al. (2017) further suggested that a brand love relationship lasts for many years and encompasses various affective, cognitive, and behavioral involvements.

Despite brand love being regarded as a crucial factor in brand management, studies that examine drivers and outcomes of fashion brand love are limited. Fashion products carry a strong symbolic meaning due to their ability to enable the expression of an individual's identity, uniqueness, and social status (O'Neal and Lapitsky 1991) more easily and clearly than other products. Because consumers are more likely to be emotionally devoted to brands that convey important features of their identity (Fournier 1998), it would be meaningful to examine the topic of brand love related to fashion products. Through a richer understanding of fashion brand love, we would be able to gain insights into how developing emotional connections with fashion brands can potentially transform into brand-loyal behaviors.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify factors that are associated with fashion brand love. Given the importance of brand love in consumer–brand relationships (Pawle and Cooper 2006), this study tested hypotheses derived from the cognition–affect–conation model (Lavidge and Steiner 1961) to investigate the role of brand love and its relationship to fashion brand expertise and brand loyal behaviors. While the cognition–affect–conation model has been applied extensively in consumer-related studies (e.g., Castaneda et al. 2009; Lavidge and Steiner 1961; Mihart 2012; Sinh 2013; Yoo et al. 2004; Wijaya 2015), very few studies explain diverse conditions of consumer–fashion brand relationships (e.g., Hazel and Kang 2018; Jung and Seock 2016; Park et al. 2008). Moreover, although brand love has received considerable attention in consumer behavior literature, greater emphasis is placed on explaining its effect on purchase behaviors and relatively little is known about the antecedents of brand love (Riivits-Arkonsuo and Leppiman 2015). In particular, there is very little information in the current literature about the influence of consumers' cognitive engagement on brand love. Consumer behavior, from its initial stage of obtaining product-related knowledge to the final stage of purchasing, is not a simple process. The aim of the present study was thus to broaden our knowledge of antecedents and outcomes of fashion brand love by applying the cognition–affect–conation model. The model's three basic dimensions (i.e., cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions) and the suggested sequence can be useful in understanding the role that brand love plays in various stages of consumer behavior.

Furthermore, because fashion products are often used as a tool for self-expression (Reed 1973) and communication (Sontag and Lee 2004), we aimed to understand how self-congruity, the degree to which one believes the image of the brand matches with his/her self-concept, relates to brand love. Self-image and identity are more salient factors in fashion products compared to other product categories (Cheng et al. 2008), and accordingly, self-congruity can be considered a relevant topic in fashion retailing. Malär et al. (2011), however, mentioned that self-congruity is still in its infancy stage in fashion retailing research and more studies in this area are needed to fill the gap in the literature. The current study contributes to our understanding of fashion brand love by addressing the aforementioned gaps in the literature and presenting theoretical and managerial implications based on the results.

This study focused on examining purchase behaviors of young female consumers (i.e., female consumers in their early 20s). Previous studies have stated significant differences between genders in purchasing fashion products as female consumers tend to become more involved in the purchasing process than male consumers (Cho and Workman 2014; Lee et al. 2014; Workman and Cho 2012). Additionally, many fashion brands consider the youth segment as their target market due to its "ability to be trendsetters," "receptivity to new products," and "tremendous potential for becoming lifetime customers" (Bush et al. 2004, p. 109). Because technological changes have become an increasingly important influence on these young consumers, this market segment represents a major behavioral shift from previous generations (Bassiouni and Hackley 2014). Accordingly, a different approach to marketing may be needed to reach them. More information on young consumers' perception of fashion brand love will be helpful in creating effective marketing strategies of fashion brands.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Cognition–Affect–Conation Model

The cognition–affect–conation model (Lavidge and Steiner 1961) provides a sound basis for understanding the three main stages of consumers' buying process: cognitive (thinking), affective (feeling), and conative (doing) stages. In the cognitive stage, consumers become aware and gather knowledge about the brand. Once consumers become knowledgeable about the brand, they move on to the affective stage and develop either positive or negative feelings toward the brand. Then, in the conative stage, consumers' feelings are converted into actions.

Some researchers have applied the model to the context of fashion consumption. For example, Hazel and Kang (2018) examined consumers' cognitive, affective, and conative responses after acquiring information about a fashion brand's corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives from social media. The study confirmed the positive link from cognitive beliefs (i.e., perceived quality of the brand's CSR and brand trustworthiness) to affect (i.e., brand likability), and then from affect to conative stages (i.e., purchase intentions and social media word-of-mouth intentions). Jung and Seock (2016) conducted a similar study by exploring how negative CSR and managerial reputations influence consumers' fashion purchase behaviors. They also confirmed the causal relationships between cognitive (i.e., perceived quality of the product and brand awareness), affective (i.e., attitude), and conative (i.e., purchase intention) dimensions. Park et al. (2008) also applied the model to examine consumers' responses to online apparel presentation. The results indicated that product rotation influenced perceived information (cognitive response), mood (affective response), and behavioral intention (conative response) in the online shopping environment. The effects of both cognitive and affective responses on conative responses were supported in their study.

Although this hierarchical causal model has been developed and mostly used in the advertising literature, researchers have argued that it can be applied beyond examining the effectiveness of stimuli as the model explains the series of steps consumers take from brand awareness to readiness to purchase (Sinh 2013). Derived from the framework of the cognition–affect–conation model, this study examined the causal relationship from the domain-specific knowledge (cognition) to brand love (affect) and next, from brand love to brand-loyal behaviors (conation) in the context of fashion consumer behaviors.

2.1.1. Effect of Fashion Brand Expertise on Brand Love

Previous literature has strongly supported the importance of cognitive components in consumer behaviors (e.g., Brucks 1985; Sujun 1985). Consumers vary in their level of awareness or knowledge about brands that are available in the market. Knowledge is generally gained from both direct and indirect experience a consumer has with a brand including previous usage experiences, exposures to advertising, interactions with sales associates, and information from peers and the media (O'Cass 2004). For products that require relatively low commitment, such as some fashion items, basic brand awareness alone can play a sufficient role in consumers' purchasing behaviors (Bettman and Whan Park 1980; Hoyer and Brown 1990). Lack of awareness or knowledge can be a critical barrier preventing a consumer from purchasing a brand. In an apparel study, Lee et al. (2016) found that the likelihood of purchasing a given product was low because consumers did not have an adequate level of knowledge about the product and its materials.

Consumers who are heavily involved in the marketplace actively seek information and gain expertise in the market, showing a high degree of enthusiasm for shopping, buying, and talking to others about the brands (Feick and Price 1987; Goldsmith et al. 2006). Compared to novices, knowledgeable and experienced consumers can make finer distinctions among brands and products with greater reliability (Rosch et al. 1976). These consumers tend to seek more information and evaluate a brand with a broad set of criteria in mind. In contrast, consumers who are less knowledgeable are prone to making decisions based on simplistic criteria, such as the brand image, and thus may not be able to consider multiple attributes when evaluating the brand (Brucks 1985;

Johar and Sirgy 1991; Sujan 1985). Accordingly, when expert consumers develop favoritism toward a particular brand, they generally would have recognized its superiority based on thorough evaluations using a number of criteria.

We postulate that fashion consumers will respond in a similar manner when examining the effect of domain-specific knowledge on brand love. Fashion brand expertise in this study refers to self-perceived knowledge related to fashion brands (adopted from Chiou and Droge's product-market expertise [2006]). Consumers with greater fashion brand expertise are knowledgeable and experienced in the field with the ability to acquire and process various types of information about fashion brands. It is hypothesized that consumers with greater fashion brand expertise will develop greater affection toward their favorite fashion brand as they have selected it from numerous alternatives in the market by evaluating brands using a method with greater reliability based on domain-specific knowledge. As a result, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1. *Fashion brand expertise will have a significant effect on fashion brand love.*

2.1.2. Effect of Brand Love on Brand Loyal Behaviors

Brand love refers to "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006, p. 81). Brand love includes not only positive evaluations of and emotional associations with the brand, but also passion for the brand and declarations of love for the brand (Ahuvia 2005). Thus, brand love is a concept that captures a more intense emotional response towards a brand than brand attachment does (Hwang and Kandampully 2012).

Brand love also differs from brand satisfaction. While brand satisfaction requires cognitive judgment based on transaction-specific outcomes involving expectancy disconfirmation paradigms, brand love has a stronger affective focus and is often based on a long-term relationship with the brand, which requires neither expectancy nor disconfirmation (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). Therefore, the love relationship between the consumer and the brand is deep, enduring, and irreplaceable by other brands (Albert and Merunka 2013), even if other satisfying alternatives are available.

Consequently, brand love is a key aspect of consumer–brand relationships, particularly in terms of conative loyalty (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Kim et al. 2008). Loyalty is "a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same brand set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior" (Oliver 1999, p. 34). Cultivating loyal consumers is critical to companies as the Pareto principle, also known as the 80–20 rule, illustrates the significance of the vital few consumers who generate most of a company's profits. Companies can generate larger profits by cultivating loyal consumers than by acquiring new consumers, which requires five times the cost of serving established consumers (Reichheld and Teal 1996).

Researchers have demonstrated the positive and significant relationship between brand love and brand loyalty (e.g., Alnawas and Alrarifi 2015; Bairrada et al. 2018; Batra et al. 2012; Bıçakcıoğlu et al. 2018; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Drennan et al. 2015; Huang 2017; Kim et al. 2008; Thomson et al. 2005; Wallace et al. 2014). Likewise, the importance of brand love in brand loyal behaviors was reported in several studies of fashion brands. Brand love directly contributed to brand loyal behaviors or served as a positive moderator that enhanced desirable consumer–brand outcomes, such as positive word-of-mouth, willingness to pay more, active engagement, and resistance to negative information (e.g., Bairrada et al. 2019; Hegner et al. 2017; Nikhashemi et al. 2019). Based on previous findings, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H2. *Fashion brand love will have a significant effect on brand-loyal behaviors.*

2.2. Self-Congruity and Brand Love

Consumers use brands to define, express, create, and communicate their self-concept (Belk 1988). Self-concept is the totality of feelings and thoughts about oneself (Rosenberg 1979). Just as individuals

have a self-concept, brands are perceived to have a totality of images (Newman 1957), and consumers develop a stereotype of the brand's typical user image (Sirgy et al. 1997). When consumers perceive congruity between their personality or characteristics and the brand user image that they stereotyped, consumers develop connection to brands. The match of consumer's self-concept with brand user image is called self-concept congruity (Sirgy et al. 1997). Self-concept congruity, self-congruity, self-congruence, self-image congruence, and image congruence are generally used interchangeably in consumer literature (Kressmann et al. 2006). In this study, self-congruity is used to indicate the association of self-concept with a perceived brand-user image.

Self-concept has been seen as a multidimensional concept, so the congruity between self-concept and a brand has often been treated as a multidimensional concept; actual self-congruity refers to the congruity between the actual/real self and the brand, and ideal self-congruity refers to the congruity between the ideal self and the brand (Dolich 1969; Rosenberg 1979; Sirgy 1985). Consumers' brand use that aims for actual self-congruity can be explained by self-confirmation, self-presentation, or self-verification motives (Festinger 1957; Leary and Kowalski 1990; Rosenberg 1979; Swann 1983); in other words, consumers use a brand to confirm, present, validate, demonstrate, and maintain their existing actual idea of themselves (i.e., actual self-concepts). On the other hand, brand use that represents ideal self-congruity is understood with self-enhancement motives (Ditto and Lopez 1992). To feel closer to their aspirations (i.e., ideal self-concepts), consumers use a brand that reflects ideal images of themselves, that is, the selves that they want to be (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967).

Brands showing high actual and ideal self-congruities meet consumers' need and, in turn, enhance consumer-brand relationships (Kassarjian and Sheffet 1991). A brand with more congruent images (either actual or ideal self-congruity) creates a stronger connection between the self and the brand (Malär et al. 2011). Accordingly, researchers reported positive associations between self-congruity and consumer responses, including brand love (Bıçakcıoğlu et al. 2018), brand relationship quality (in terms of love/passion, commitment, interdependence, and intimacy; Huber et al. 2010), overall experience evaluation (Hosany and Martin 2012), emotional attachment (Yusof and Ariffin 2016), and customer loyalty (Yusof and Ariffin 2016). On the basis of preceding studies, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H3. *Fashion brand love will be positively related to actual self-congruity.*

H4. *Fashion brand love will be positively related to ideal self-congruity.*

3. Methods

3.1. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected from a sample of students enrolled at a land-grant university in the Midwestern U.S. Instructors of four undergraduate courses sent out e-mail invitations to approximately 300 students enrolled in their course requesting participation in the study in the middle of a semester. The e-mail invitation contained a brief description of the study and a web-address hyperlink that directed participants to the survey. The online survey contained items to measure the four constructs (i.e., fashion brand expertise, brand love, brand loyal behaviors, and self-congruity) using Likert-type scales that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Similar to previous studies of brand love (Escalas and Bettman 2003; Batra et al. 2012; Thomson et al. 2005), participants provided the name of their own choice of a brand in the fashion product category. At the beginning of the survey, they were asked to take a moment to think about fashion brands that they have experienced and enter the fashion brand that they like the most. They then provided answers to questions about their relationships with the brand (i.e., brand love and brand loyal behaviors), fashion brand expertise, and self-congruity. General demographic information was also collected at the end of the survey. It took approximately 5–10 min for students to complete the survey. Data collection lasted for two weeks.

3.2. Measurements

Fashion brand expertise captures the overall fashion brand knowledge. The four items of fashion brand expertise were adapted from [Chiou and Droge \(2006\)](#) product-market expertise. The items involve knowledge related to purchasing fashion brands and new information (e.g., Compared to average people, I thoroughly understand how to purchase fashion brands; I know all kinds of new information regarding fashion brands). Brand love captures the degree of passionate emotional attachment to a brand. The four items of brand love were adopted from [Carroll and Ahuvia \(2006\)](#) brand love scales (e.g., I love this brand!). The scale of brand loyal behaviors captures the degree of purchase commitment toward the brand by consumers. The three items of brand loyal behaviors were adapted from [Selin et al. \(1988\)](#) and [Muncy \(1983\)](#) (see also [Pritchard et al. 1999](#)) (e.g., I consider myself a loyal patron of this brand). The actual and ideal self-congruity measures were adapted from [Sirgy et al. \(1997\)](#). Four items were included to measure actual self-congruity (e.g., Brand XYZ reflects who I am in private) and another four items were included to measure ideal self-congruity (e.g., Brand XYZ reflects the image of how I want to be).

3.3. Sample

A total of 130 participants completed the survey. In the data cleaning stage, responses from six participants were excluded because they showed poor data quality (e.g., missing responses). Due to possible bias from imbalanced gender data, an additional 14 responses from male students were excluded. The process resulted in 110 eligible responses, all from female students. As seen in [Table 1](#), the majority of the participants were Caucasian (86.36%), had an annual income under \$20,000 (58.18%), and had received some college education (83.64%). While seven students selected “high school or less” as their education level, their actual education level would most likely be included in “some college” category as data were collected from students enrolled at a University. The mean age was 21.31 with a standard deviation of 4.12.

Table 1. Demographic summary of the sample (n = 110).

Variable	Frequency	%
Race		
Caucasian	95	86.36
African American	2	1.82
Hispanic	2	1.82
Asian	10	9.09
Other	1	0.91
Annual personal income		
Under \$20,000	64	58.18
\$20,000–\$29,999	4	3.64
\$30,000–\$39,999	5	4.55
\$40,000–\$49,999	2	1.82
\$50,000–\$59,999	4	3.64
\$60,000–\$69,999	2	1.82
\$70,000–\$79,999	4	3.64
\$80,000–\$89,999	3	2.73
\$90,000–\$99,999	1	0.91
Over \$100,000	19	17.27
No response	2	1.82
Education		
High school or less	7	6.36
Vocational/Technical school (2-year)	1	0.91
Some college	92	83.64
Bachelor’s degree	10	9.09
Age	M = 21.31	SD = 4.12

3.4. Data Analysis

In order to test the causal relationships between cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions (H1 and H2), structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using the AMOS 25.0 program (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). A two-step approach, a measurement and a structural model (Anderson and Gerbing 1988), was used for the statistical analysis. In addition, to test H3 and H4, participants were categorized into two groups based on their level of brand love and independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to compare means between groups.

4. Results

This study used 110 participants, which satisfies the minimum sample size required for SEM based on previous studies: Hair et al. (2010) minimum sample size needed for simple models of five or less constructs and Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) rules-of-thumb of 10 observations per indicator. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was first conducted on 11 indicators of 3 latent constructs. The results showed an acceptable model fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.06, p < 0.001, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.09$. As reported in Table 2, a satisfactory level of measurement reliability was achieved: Cronbach’s alphas ranged from 0.78 to 0.92 and the composite reliabilities ranged from 0.80 to 0.92. Convergent validity and discriminant validity were also verified. All AVE values exceeded the 0.50 threshold (Fornell and Larcker 1981), and standardized factor loadings were significant and were higher than the 0.60 threshold (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). In addition, as shown in Table 3, AVE values were larger than squared inter-construct correlations (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

Table 2. Measurement model results.

Construct	Items	Factor Loadings	α	CR	AVE
Fashion Expertise	Compared to average people, I know fashion brands well.	0.88	0.92	0.92	0.75
	Compared to average people, I thoroughly understand how to purchase fashion brands.	0.92			
	I know all kinds of new information regarding fashion brands.	0.83			
	I know fashion brands thoroughly.	0.82			
Brand Love	This brand is a wonderful brand.	0.69	0.90	0.91	0.72
	This brand makes me feel good.	0.93			
	This brand is totally awesome.	0.85			
	I love this brand!	0.89			
Brand Loyal Behaviors	I consider myself a loyal patron of this brand.	0.79	0.78	0.80	0.57
	If I had to do it over again, I would choose this brand.	0.71			
	I try to use this brand because it is the best choice for me.	0.76			

Note. CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted.

Table 3. AVEs, correlations, and squared correlations.

	1	2	3
1. Fashion brand expertise	0.75	0.10	0.14
2. Brand love	0.31	0.72	0.20
3. Brand loyal behaviors	0.38	0.45	0.57

Note. Diagonal elements in bold are AVEs, numbers below the diagonal are correlations, and numbers above are squared correlations.

An analysis of the structural model followed to assess the relationships between constructs. Fit indices showed an acceptable fit to the data: $\chi^2/df = 2.16$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.09. As shown in Figure 1, fashion brand expertise had a significant effect on brand love ($\beta = 0.31$, $p = 0.003$), and brand love, in turn, had a significant effect on brand loyal behaviors ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$). As a result, H1 and H2 were strongly supported in this study. Squared multiple correlations of brand love and brand loyal behaviors were 0.10 and 0.21, respectively, indicating that 10% of the variance in brand love was explained by fashion brand expertise and 21% of variance in brand loyal behaviors was explained by brand love.

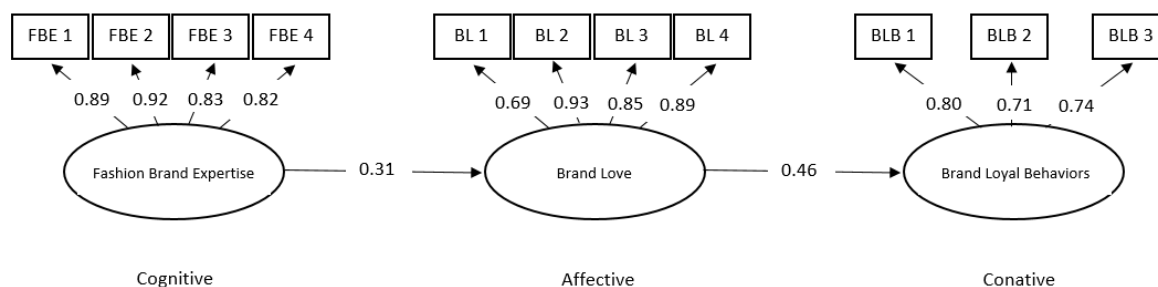


Figure 1. Summary of SEM results.

In addition, a decomposition test using the bootstrapping method (with 2000 bootstrap samples) was conducted to examine the direct and indirect effects of fashion brand expertise on brand loyal behaviors. A summary of the results is presented in Table 4. There was a significant indirect effect of fashion brand expertise on brand loyal behaviors (estimate = 0.09) through brand love. The bias-corrected 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect excluded the value of zero (0.01–0.20), showing that brand love significantly mediated the relationship between fashion brand expertise and brand loyal behaviors.

Table 4. Total, direct, and indirect effects of fashion brand expertise on brand loyal behaviors.

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect
Fashion brand expertise	Brand loyal behaviors	0.30	0.21	0.09 (95% CI: 0.01–0.20)

In order to examine the relationship between brand love and perceptions of self-congruity associated with the fashion brand, participants were classified into two groups based on their level of brand love. The first group (n = 50) was associated with a lower level of brand love (m = 4.01, SD = 0.37) compared to the second group (n = 60) (m = 4.95, SD = 0.10); the difference in brand love was significant, $t(70.37) = 18.95$, $p < 0.001$. As seen in Table 5, participants with a higher level of brand love had significantly higher scores in both actual and ideal self-congruity than those with a lower level of brand love. Therefore, H3 and H4 were supported.

Table 5. Differences in self-congruity measures between low and high brand love groups.

	Means (Standard Deviation)		t-Test
	Low Brand Love	High Brand Love	
Actual self-congruity	3.53 (0.53)	4.01 (0.67)	4.18 ***
Ideal self-congruity	3.43 (0.80)	3.90 (0.76)	3.10 **

Note. ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Discussion

How does our knowledge or awareness affect the level of attachment to fashion brands? Does our positive emotion toward a certain brand influence us to become loyal customers of that brand? Do we have stronger emotional connections with fashion brands that are more congruent with our self-concept? These are important topics for fashion brand management. Previous literature has supported the crucial role of emotional aspects in consumer–brand relationships as consumers are more likely to have greater commitment to brands that they are emotionally attached to and love (Fetscherin 2014; Pawle and Cooper 2006; Thomson et al. 2005; Wallace et al. 2014). Although there are many studies on brand love, research that examines its relationship with cognitive aspects and self-concept congruency for fashion products remains limited (Willems et al. 2011). This research extends the theoretical discussion of fashion brand love by incorporating the cognition–affect–conation model and self-congruity measures. Focusing on young female consumers, factors that are strongly associated with fashion brand love were identified. Our study built on prior literature by illustrating the function of brand love within a causal model and demonstrating how cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements work together. In particular, it contributes toward understanding the role of fashion brand expertise as a strong antecedent of brand love. We showed that fashion brand expertise can create a pathway through which consumers develop a strong emotional bond toward a brand.

The causal sequence of cognitive → affective → conative dimensions was strongly supported in this study. Our results indicated that consumers who know more about fashion brands are more likely to have stronger emotional attachment to their favorite fashion brand, and brand love, in turn, has a significant effect on performing brand loyal behaviors. These findings were in line with previous studies that found that brand love is crucial in motivating positive consumer behaviors such as showing greater commitment to the brand (Thomson et al. 2005) and maintaining a long-term relationship (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Fournier 1998). Results of the current study confirmed the importance of developing brand love in brand management. Brand love had a direct effect on brand-loyal behaviors, as well as significantly mediating the knowledge–behavior relationship. Understanding the attributes that build consumer loyalty is particularly critical to fashion companies because alternatives are prevalent and associated with low switching costs (Jones and Sasser 1995). Our findings suggested that it is important for fashion brands to focus on developing affective relationships with consumers to gain brand loyalty and one way to achieve that goal could be to enhance brand awareness or knowledge in fashion among consumers. A central managerial issue for fashion brands is to find ways to turn their brand into a brand that consumers love and continue that relationship over time. Fashion brands could attempt to become a valued and reliable source for developing knowledge, perhaps by offering detailed fashion-related information and advice, to create a strong emotional bond with consumers. Fashion brand managers may also develop marketing activities that incorporate not only standard communication strategies but also experiential marketing strategies, which lead to creating a closer connection between the brand and consumers by engaging consumers in an interactive and memorable experience with a product or brand (Schmitt 1999).

Our results also demonstrated that fashion brand love is strongly associated with self-congruity, that is, consumers are more emotionally attached to fashion brands that express their identity. Consumers in love with a brand to a greater degree perceived a better match between the brand image and their self-concepts; both actual and ideal self-concepts were significantly related to brand love. Hwang and Kandampully (2012) examined the consumer–fashion luxury brand relationship and found that self-congruity increases brand love. Their study only employed actual self-congruity concepts to measure self-congruity; however, it is important to note that the ideal self-congruity was also significantly related to brand love as it provides practical implications for fashion brands. For fashion-related purchases, consumers may place greater emphasis on symbolic aspects of the brand because products such as clothing and fashion accessories are highly visible to others and thus serve as a tool to express who they are and what is important to them (O’Neal and Lapitsky 1991). Therefore, fashion brand managers need to invest in activities that aim to deliver a brand image congruent with

actual and ideal self-concepts of the target market. It would be critical for them to clearly understand the characteristics of their target market by obtaining more knowledge about consumers' attitudes, values, and lifestyles, and reflect them in defining their brand personality. Encouraging participation in brand communities and creating advertising or events that show who the customers of their brand are and highlight what they share in common may be particularly effective in enhancing brand love. Furthermore, brand managers also need to take into account aspirational branding strategies that target ideal self-congruity. Creating an ideal image can be important because there are many consumers who prefer brands that do not necessarily match their actual image but, rather, signify an aspiration (Sirgy 1982). Similar to the finding of ideal self-congruity, previous research (Batra et al. 2012) suggested that creating a brand that symbolizes self-identity by connecting to life's ideal values is important. Thus, developing marketing communications that highlight social responsibility (e.g., social marketing campaigns) or core life values (e.g., creativity, fairness) may contribute to developing brand love. In sum, engaging in a customer-oriented point of view by achieving a brand personality that displays a good balance between an ideal and a realistic image would be helpful in increasing brand love and motivating consumers to become loyal to their brand.

6. Conclusions

This study was conducted to provide insights into young female consumers' perception of fashion brand love as they are recognized as a critical market segment by many fashion companies (Bush et al. 2004). A study examining shopping experience of Generation Z consumers (born between 1995 and early 2010s) suggested that self-expressiveness is a critical feature to them because they strongly value the opportunity to express and communicate something about their self-image (Kapusy and Lógó 2017). The findings of self-congruity and fashion brand love relationship in this study confirmed the importance of the self-expressive role of brands. Because this market segment represents a significant behavioral shift from previous generation cohorts (Bassiouni and Hackley 2014), it would be worthy to identify major characteristics that affect their purchase behaviors for brand managers who are targeting this particular segment. The members of this generation are social and sharing images and information in social media is a central part of their communication (Kapusy and Lógó 2017); uploading videos or images of products can be a way to start conversations and gain social acceptance. Therefore, promoting fashion brands using social media may increase the brand's visibility and Generation Z consumers' interest and reinforce the brand image. Fashion brand managers should strategically position their brands and develop marketing strategies to provide a vehicle for consumers to express their self-image.

Even though the current study provided a basis for understanding the role of brand love in the consumer-fashion brand relationship, several weaknesses should be addressed. The most critical limitation lies in the small sample size. The sample of the present study only involved 110 female university students, which may limit the generalizability of our results. Further research needs to be carried out using a larger and more heterogeneous sample to investigate diverse consumer segments and identify varying results based on geographic and demographic characteristics of consumers. Moreover, given the small sample size, this study tested a simple SEM model that included only three constructs based on minimum sample size recommendations in previous literature (Hair et al. 2010; Nunnally 1967). Future research may validate our results by using a larger sample. Particularly, it would be interesting to assess a more complicated SEM model that includes diverse cognitive, affective, and conative elements, as well as self-congruity constructs to simultaneously examine their causal effects. Finally, further experimental investigations that examine the relationship between actual/ideal self-congruity and brand love and moderators affecting the direction and/or strength of the relationship are recommended as the findings of this study lack such information. Perhaps, self-esteem levels may have an effect on the strength of self-congruity and brand love relationship (Sirgy 1985). For example, consumers with low self-esteem may perceive greater love toward fashion brands that reveal their ideal self-image than those with high self-esteem to compensate for their low

self-confidence. Additional research on these topics would provide practical managerial implications that can enhance brand love, and accordingly, strengthen the consumer–brand relationship.

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