

CONSUMER BRAND LOVE PROGRESSION AND THE INFLUENCE OF
CULTURE AND CONSUMPTION VALUES

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ABSTRACT

Love in consumption has drawn enormous attention in the recent years in the field of marketing especially in searching for long term sustainability in consumer and brand relationship. The metaphor of human interpersonal relationship has greatly inspired researchers into adopting love concept in consumer consumptions. Although the development of love metaphor in marketing has increased, it is noticeable that the current studies in this area of marketing is still limited and confined to only three major areas i.e., direct adaptation of interpersonal love theory in consumer brand love formation, conceptualisation of consumer declaration of love towards their brand and the antecedents and consequences of brand love. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of consumer brand love relationship formation from its developmental perspectives. The ability to visualise each stages of development may contribute significantly to branding managers in determining the right marketing campaigns, treatments and strategies in achieving brand love and ultimately sustainable brand loyalty. Build upon the interpersonal relationship development theory, this study proposes a framework of progression that conceptualise the stages of development of consumer brand love formation from the initial stage of awareness to the stage of love, i.e. Awareness → Liking → Experimenting → Passion → Love. This study also aims to understand the influence of cultural and consumption values (functional and hedonic) on this proposed framework. Based on the research framework, five hypotheses were developed to conceptualise the developmental stages of consumer brand love relation and five hypotheses were developed to test the proposition of the cultural and consumption values influence towards the progression. The mix-method parallel convergence triangulation research design was used to conduct this study. In the quantitative phase, 535 useable data of various populations' characteristics (i.e. post graduate students and car owners) were collected from the automotive shops and service centre, universities and the automotive fan clubs social media. In the qualitative phase, 18 informants were interviewed in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru. Gamma and Somers'd directional statistics were used to measure the monotonic progression of the brand love relationship stages. The statistical results have strongly supported the monotonic progression in the consumers brand love relationship development. The triangulation process of the qualitative results have partially supported that consumers progressed in the stage liked manner in their brand love relationship formation. These results contribute to the theory of brand love by unveiling the developmental and progression aspect of brand love formations and the influence of cultural and consumption values on the sequence of progression. The findings have also changed the way the brand love concept is perceived previously, where brand love concept is a progressive concept and it develops in stages over time.

ABSTRAK

Konsep cinta dalam kepenggunaan telah mendapat perhatian tinggi kebelakangan ini dalam bidang pemasaran,terutamanya dalam mencari kemampuhan hubungan jangka panjang di antara pengguna dan penjenamaan. Metafora hubungan antara interpersonal manusia telah memberi ilham kepada para penyelidik untuk menerima pakai konsep cinta dalam kajian kepenggunaan. Walaupun perkembangan metafora mengenai cinta dalam bidang pemasaran semakin meningkat, didapati kajian semasa dalam bidang pemasaran masih terhad dan terbatas kepada tiga bahagian utama sahaja iaitu: adaptasi langsung teori cinta interpersonal dalam pembentukan cinta terhadap jenama oleh pengguna, konsep mengisytiharkan perasaan cinta pengguna terhadap jenama dan sebab dan akibat cinta terhadap jenama. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk memahami secara mendalam pembentukan hubungan cinta pengguna terhadap jenama daripada perspektif perkembangannya. Keupayaan menggambarkan setiap tahap perkembangan ini boleh menyumbang secara signifikan kepada para pengurus jenama untuk mengenal pasti kempen pemasaran yang sesuai, perlakuan dan strategi dalam mencapai perasaan cinta terhadap jenama dan akhirnya kesetiaan terhadap jenama yang mampan. Berdasarkan kepada teori perkembangan interpersonal antara manusia, kajian ini mencadangkan sebuah kerangka perkembangan yang mengkonsepsikan peringkat pembentukan perkembangan perasaan cinta pada jenama, dari tahap kesedaran ke tahap cinta, iaitu: Kesedaran → Kesukaan → Percubaan → Keghairahan → Kecintaan. Kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk memahami pengaruh budaya dan nilai penggunaan (fungsi dan hedonik) terhadap kerangka kerja yang dicadangkan. Berdasarkan kerangka kajian ini, lima hipotesis telah dibina untuk mengkonsepsikan tahap perkembangan hubungan cinta pengguna terhadap jenama dan lima hipotesis dibangunkan untuk menguji usulan mengenai nilai budaya dan penggunaan yang mempengaruhi perkembangan tersebut. Kaedah rekabentuk kajian campuran penumpuan selari triangulasi telah digunakan untuk melaksanakan kajian ini. Pada fasa kuantitatif, sejumlah 535 data yang boleh digunakan mewakili pelbagai ciri populasi berlainan (iaitu pelajar pascasiswazah dan pemilik kereta) diperolehi dari kedai dan pusat servis automotif, universiti dan kelab peminat automotif di media sosial. Pada fasa kualitatif pula, seramai 18 informan telah ditemu bual di Kuala Lumpur dan Johor Bahru. Kaedah *Gamma* dan *Somers'd* statistik berarah telah digunakan untuk mengukur perkembangan monotonik tahap hubungan cinta terhadap jenama. Keputusan statistik menunjukkan sokongan kuat terhadap kemajuan monotonik dalam perkembangan hubungan cinta terhadap jenama para pengguna. Proses triangulasi keputusan kualitatif sebahagiannya telah menyokong bahawa pengguna telah maju secara bertahap dalam pembentukan hubungan kecintaan kepada jenama. Keputusan ini menyumbang kepada teori cinta terhadap jenama dengan memperkenalkan aspek-aspek perkembangan dan pembentukan kemajuan cinta terhadap jenama; dan pengaruh budaya serta nilai kepenggunaan pada urutan perkembangan. Hasil kajian ini telah menukar tanggapan konsep cinta terhadap jenama dimana konsep cinta terhadap jenama adalah sebuah konsep progresif dan berkembang secara berperingkat dari masa ke masa.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CVI	-	Content Validity Index
ANZMAC	-	Australia & New Zealand Marketing Conference
AVE	-	Average Variance Extracted
CR	-	Composite Reliability
CFA	-	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
PDPA	-	Personal Data Protection Act
ANOVA	-	One Way Analysis of Variance
JB	-	Johor Bahru
KL	-	Kuala Lumpur
PD	-	Power Distance
INV	-	Individualism
MAS	-	Masculinity
UA	-	Uncertainty Avoidance
LTO	-	Long Term Orientation

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CHAPTER 1

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

1.1 Introduction

The metaphor of human interpersonal relationship has greatly inspired marketing researchers to explore the possibilities of emulating the similar concept into consumer consumption. Love in consumption has drawn enormous attention in the recent years in the field of marketing especially in searching for long term sustainability in consumer and brand relationship.

To date researchers have conducted considerable wide perspectives of studies in consumption love such as exploring the various antecedents and outcomes of brand love (see Carol and Ahuvia, 2006; Bergkvist and Larsen, 2010; Broadbent et al., 2010; Sarkar, 2011, Albert and Merunka, 2013), measuring consumer expression of love concept and dimensions in consumption (see Whang et al., 2004; Albert, Merunka and Florence, 2008; Albert, Boyer, Lefebvre, Merunka and Florence, 2007; Ahuvia, Batra and Bagozzi, 2008, 2012), measuring the effects of brand image, brand personality and brand identification on brand love (Ismail and Spinelli, 2012; Sallam, 2014); factors that affecting brand love (Unal and Aydin, 2013) and very recently Kang (2015) measured the perceived brand love concept that leads to greater brand loyalty. However, the reviews of current brand love studies have demonstrate several issues and limitations in the theoretical and practical perspectives that could be further explored.

Reviewing the past studies for the period of twelve (15) years (from 2000 to 2015), it is noticeable that the current research works in this area of marketing is still limited. Moreover, in general much of the works has tended to focus on the concepts and dimensions of love in consumptions (see Whang et al., 2004; Albert, Merunka and Florence, 2008; Albert, Boyer, Lefebvre, Merunka and Florence, 2007; Ahuvia, Batra and Bagozzi, 2008, 2012) and the aspect of brand love antecedents and consequences (see Carol and Ahuvia, 2006; Bergkvist and Larsen, 2010; Broadbent et al., 2010; Sarkar, 2011; Albert and Merunka, 2013; Kang, 2015), perhaps, more studies are needed to fully explore the potential contributions of love metaphor in marketing.

Although the development of love metaphor in marketing has only heightened in the recent years, it has been already hugely adopted in branding. Based on the current available literatures, the current studies of brand love may have offered a good fundamental understanding of the how consumer emotionally connects with their brands, such as defining the meaning of love for a brand and the positive consequences of achieving love in a brand. However, from the practical aspect of marketing, the understanding may not be easy for markets to convert into actionable strategies in the real world. For example the current frameworks have offered the assumptions that consumer falls in love with their brand and suggested firms to focus in the love elements in their branding strategies. It seems that the strategic advice is emphasizing on the basis of rigid dichotomy, (i.e., consumer love the brand or consumer did not love the brand). Current studies have failed to acknowledge the relevant of the developmental aspect of love formation between the consumer and the brand. According to the classic understanding of the development of human interpersonal relationship, the relationship between two persons develops through a series of phases of development from a zero contact to major intersection (Michener, DeLamater and Myers, 2004), and this confirmation suggests that the rational of consumer and brand love relationship formation may also develop through a series of phases of development similar to the interpersonal relationship concept rather than in a static context.

In support to the above argument, the developmental aspect is important in providing an overview of the level of emotional involvement between the consumer and their brand. The ability to visualise each stages of development may seems simple, however, its contribution is significantly important to branding managers in determine the right marketing campaigns, treatments and strategies in building brand love.

Another motivation that was drawn to this study is the narrow contextual understanding of brand love research. It seems that to date most studies in brand love have only been carried out in the American and European contexts; none have attempt to study the Asian context. According to Kerschner and Huq (2011) from Morgan Stanley's global investment survey committee, suggest that Asian spending will surpass the United States, Europe and Japan combined spending by year 2022 and in terms of spending power, Asian is expected to contribute about 80% of the estimated USD\$56 trillion dollars global spending by year 2030. Morgan Stanley's survey has clearly indicated that Asian is an important market that cannot be ignored by marketers.

Such issues above are the motivation behind present research. This dissertation is dedicated to the spirit of advancing the efforts of brand building by providing another inside of brand love concept.

1.2 Background of Study

Over the past four decades the concept of 'loyalty' has been an important topic in marketing (McConnell, 1968). Firms spent millions of dollars annually creating and building the concept of loyalty (Reinartz and Kumar, 2002). It is strongly suggested that the concept of loyalty could bring tremendous advantages to corporations, i.e. attracting customer repeat purchases, preventing customer from switching, reducing marketing cost, reducing price sensitivity, encourage positive

word of mouth and improve profitability (Godson, 2009; Dick and Basu, 1994; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001).

The concept of loyalty has grown to become the important drivers to a healthy and profitable company through its ability to reduce marketing cost, maintaining price level and market share. It has attracted considerable amount of interests from the academics and practitioners in further exploring its benefits and has since expanded into various categories such as customer loyalty, brand loyalty, service loyalty, stores loyalty, vendor loyalty (Dick and Basu, 1994).

Then, much study has been conducted to unveil the significant factors that could lead to customer loyalty. One of the significant factors that have been much looked into is the factor of customer satisfaction. The concept of satisfaction has quickly been widely adopted as the benchmark of loyalty measure (Fredericks and Salter, 1995; Anderson, Fornell and Lehman, 1994; Churchil and Surprenant, 1982; Rust and Zahorik, 1993). It has become an important source of indications and measurements to firms' economic benefits such as enhance market share (Rust and Zahorik, 1993), encourages repeat purchases (Churchil and Surprenant, 1982) and improve profitability (Anderson, Fornell and Lehman, 1994).

Although the satisfaction concept is acknowledged, however, some scholars found customer satisfaction is relatively short lived and very subjective to individual customer level of interpretation and often found it difficult for customer to make reliable judgement about their own satisfaction (Little and Mirandi 2003). Reichheld (1994) cautioned that satisfied customers are not necessarily loyal. Reichheld's concern was further validated by Weiser's (1995) survey of customer loyalty in British Airways Company. He found thirteen percent of British Airways completely satisfied customer expressed they did not intend to fly British Airways again. Similarly, Bernnett and Thiele (2004) found banks are having the same issue that satisfied customer does not result in loyalty.

Oliver (1999) suggests that the pursuit of loyalty as a strategic business goal needs a paradigm shift. His literature review found clear instances that satisfaction and loyalty do not move in tandem, for example, citing study on automotive industry in which out of 85% to 95% of reported satisfied customers, only 30% to 40% returned to the same brand. Fredericks and Salter, (1995) further emphasised that firms should look beyond customer satisfaction. They suggest that value driven loyalty is the key to the new sustainable loyalty concept.

Oliver (1999) on the other hand, suggest that to achieve complete loyalty, besides satisfaction, firms should consider other factors such as product superiority, personal fortitude, social bonding and their synergistic effects. Oliver (1999) further argued that there were differences between satisfaction and loyalty. He defined satisfaction as pleasurable fulfilment, such as consumption fulfilment of need, desire and goal, while, loyalty is a deeply held commitment to rebuy the preferred products, brands or services in future despite of situational influences or marketing influences.

Based upon the above suggestions and arguments, the focus of measuring loyalty from the perspective of increasing profitability and real customer retention were sought. The concept of brand loyalty emerged to be a good fit. Dick and Basu (1994), and Godson (2009) suggest that brand loyalty consist of both behavioural and attitudinal components. The behavioural component indicates customers who demonstrate repeat buying behaviour over the period of time and attitudinal component denotes customers who hold positive feelings or emotions towards the brand. Jacoby and Kyner (1973) suggested that brand loyalty incorporates different approach. They argued that brand loyalty is not a random repeat buying behaviour, but it has to be driven of both consumer's attitudinal and behavioural elements, such as one being very selective in their purchase decision, having strong purchase intention towards the brand, having the ability to preserve the relationship with the brand overtime and ability to show respect and faith to the brand.

In practice, Davis (2000) reported fifty percent of brand loyal customer will pay a twenty five percent premium (based on a survey result done on well known brands, such as Coke, Volvo, Honda, Hyatt, Heineken, Pampers and etc) and

interestingly, twenty five percent of the customers stated that price does not matter if they are buying a brand that owns their loyalty. Similar findings were found in Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) that brand loyalty influences firm profitability through customers' willingness to pay premium price.

Clearly, the advantage of brand loyalty is the ability to relate with customers' cognitive, affective and behaviour. This in line with Oliver's (1999) suggestion that in measuring loyalty, other aspects of the brand should be considered such as perceived product superiority, special bonding and personal fortitude, otherwise it is clearly insufficient. In addition, Little and Mirandi (2003) noted, in a loyalty formula, besides the core aspect of satisfaction, other aspects such as attitudinal (i.e. trust) and behavioural (i.e. commitment) is essential to be included.

However, the concerns of sustainability of brand loyalty concept are being questioned by scholars. Following the development of brand loyalty progression in the past 25 years, it is noted that customer are getting less brand loyal than before (Johnson, 1984; Dekimpe et al. 1997; Beemer, 1997; Kapferer, 2005).

Johnson (1984) highlighted several reasons for the decline of brand loyalty, 1) greater concern of price awareness that provide greater comparison in brand evaluation, 2) brand proliferations that leads to more options and 3) greater brand or product similarities that leads to less distinct in brand or product selection. The weakness of brand loyalty is further aggregated as Sondoh (2009) highlighted the entire brand loyalty phenomenon cannot be assessed if the attitudinal loyalty is not extended over to action behaviour.

In addition, brand loyalty is regarded as the transaction facilitator (Hess and Story, 2005). They argued that there are several reasons why consumer often loyal to a brand, 1) reduce risk of trying a new untested brand and 2) enjoy tangible benefits such as frequent user status or benefits that associated with the brand i.e. affiliations and associations.

Learning from the weakness of brand loyalty, scholars explored deeper into emotion connectivity between consumer and brand, in searching of a better sustainability in loyalty. Brand and consumer relationship metaphor is believed to be a new direction in achieving intimate, permanent and stable relationship between the consumer and their brands (Fournier, 1998; Zhou, 2007). Drawing from the theories of animism, arguably Fournier (1998) provided the first working concept of consumer and brand as a relationship partner. She argued that the concept of brand loyalty has lost its nuances in the traditional brand loyalty research. As a result, the basic questions of why consumer seek and valued ongoing relationship with the brand remain largely unanswered. She proposed the consumer and brand relationship model to measure the relationship strength and stability over time between consumer and their brands.

Breivik and Thorbjornsen (2008) added that the relationship metaphor could facilitate in depth knowledge about consumer's needs and enhance the understanding of true brand loyalty and further explain the metaphoric transfer of human relationship to brand relationship could enhance the understanding of brand roles in humans' lives. The strength of consumer and brand relationship concept lies in the meaningful relationships between consumer behaviour and brand behaviour that forged the compatibility and bonding between the brand and its owner. This phenomenon has been acknowledged to provide an extensive cohesiveness where the brands cohere into the system that the consumer created (Fournier, 1998).

Although the relationship concept in branding has momentarily gained its acknowledgments among marketers and academia for the past decades, scholars still doubting the legitimacy of brand as relationship partners (Bengtsson, 2003; Patterson and O'Malley, 2006). Specifically, Bengtsson (2003) criticised the absence of reciprocity, interdependency and intimacy in a unilateral relationship between consumer and brand compared to human to human relationships. Patterson and O'Malley (2006) on the other hand, criticised the limitation of interpersonal relationship metaphor usage in consumer and brand relationships context, 1) the concept of interpersonal relationship is too powerful to be directly adapted into commercial environment and 2) the brand conceptual entity is managed by

corporations for its own gain that resulted in lack of personification of natural human attributes that characterised human relationship. In order to forge a deeper understanding into the complex consumers' emotion, feeling, cognition and expectation in relationships, scholars have focused the inside of consumer rather than closer to consumer. Scholars have shifted to engage consumers on the level of senses and emotions that could forge a deeper and lasting relationship connection with their brands (Gobe, 2001). Learning from the perspectives of human emotion, the elements of emotions were extensively adopted into the relationship model in searching for a better bonding between consumer and brands.

Emotional branding adopted the theories of anthropology (Gobe, 2001) and psychology (Huang, 2001) that focuses on attitudes, moods, affections, emotions (Bagozzi et al. 1999), sensory, experience, personality, honesty, trust, communication (Gobe, 2001), passion, participation, sensory and emotion (Thompson et al. 2006) to connect brands or products to consumers. In the recent years, emotional branding has emerged as a highly influential brand management paradigm through its consumer centric, relational and story driven approach that cultivating deeper and enduring bonds between consumers and brands (Thompson et al. 2006).

Although the concept of emotional branding is widely acknowledged by majority of scholars and practitioners, however, some have argued that the concept of emotions are dynamic in nature and it is difficult to understand and interpret the consumer's emotional needs and desires. Bagozzi et al. (1999) argued that there were no consistencies in the use of terminology related to emotions, citing the example of difficulty to identify and interpret between emotion and mood. They explained that it is very difficult to differentiate between mood and emotion but often interpreted by the convention of mood being longer lasting (from few hours to days) and lower intensity than emotion.

The concept of emotions was further explored by scholars. Whang et al. (2004) explored the meaning behind consumer often claim they are in love with a product or brand. They found the consumers' claimed love towards the products or

brands resembles an interpersonal love relationship. This finding has attracted scholars to further study the new concept of love in branding. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) introduce the concept of brand love in searching for the linkage to higher level of loyalty. Their findings are very encouraging that brand love is not only has very positive influence on brand loyalty but also strongly correlates to positive word of mouth. Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi (2008, 2012) found the concept of brand love facilitate passion driven behaviour, (such as strong desires to use the brand and interact frequently with it), create positive emotional connection with the brand and sense of long term relationship and more importantly is the ability to connect to with consumer's life deeper meanings and important values.

In practice, marketers have acknowledged the usefulness of brand love concept, where the adoption have generated positive results such as higher level of loyalty, increase willingness to pay a price premium, forgiveness of brand failure and positive word of mouth (Roberts, 2004).

Scholars found that the brand love concept has the ability to directly adopt the human interpersonal love theories to explain the love relationship between consumers and brands. Some of the popular interpersonal love theories that have been adopted are the theory of prototype of love (Fehr and Russell, 1991) adopted by Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi (2008, 2012), the typology of style of loving (Lee, 1977) adopted by Whang et al. (2004) and the triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986) adopted by Heinrich and Muhl (2008).

Despite of its growing popularity, brand love concept is still in its infancy and to date much works has generally focused around the basic definitions, dimensions and concept of brand love (Albert, Merunka and Florence, 2008; Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi, 2008, 2012) and the antecedents and outcomes of brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Sarkar, 2011). There are still much rooms to be explored. It is notable that other fundamental aspects of love relationship are yet to be adopted in the brand love concept, such as the developmental aspect of consumer love towards the brands. The development of interpersonal relationship has been an important aspect of study in social psychology and in every major discussions of dyadic love relationship

(Penrod, 1983; Michener, DeLamater and Myers, 2004; Werner and Baxter, 1994; Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992; Regan, 2003; Trenholm and Jensen, 2004; Diamond, Fagundes and Butterworth, 2010). The above limitations and inadequacy have led to the current study that aims to explore the formation, development and progression of brand love from the consumer perspectives.

1.3 Problem Statement and Research Opportunities and Gaps

The ultimate intention of every branding strategy is to achieve long term and sustainable customer loyalty and retention. However, for over the past four decades the search for sustainable customer loyalty and retention strategies is still on. The issue of declining customer loyalty and brand loyalty are clearly persistence (Dekimpe, 1997; Beemer, 1997; Kapferer 2005). Hoffman and Bateson (2006) highlighted the current trend of consumer behaviour indicates that consumers have forgone brand loyalty and going for products that offers the best value.

The problems of declining loyalty is further aggregated by the current trend of global economic vulnerability and volatility, and worst, the progressive declining of new market base due to several global issues such as declining of population growth in some major markets (Soubbotina, 2004) and cautioned consumers that have experienced past economic crisis (Nielsen Report, 2009). In addition, the increasing of competitions, rising marketing cost and changing consumer behaviour have further aggregated firms difficulties in strategizing the decisions in achieving long term loyalty and retention of their customers.

Hoffman and Bateson (2006) further cautioned that this 'non-brand' loyalty phenomenon has led firms into constantly chasing for new customers in order to maintain their survival and this move has resulted in firms focusing in attracting new customers instead of keeping the customers. In the long run this strategy could lead to the demise of the brand or firm due to low margins and escalating marketing cost.

To address this issue, the urge for a sustainable 'loyalty' strategy has led scholars into searching, reviewing and establishing concepts and theories from various perspectives of consumer behaviour. Scholars have examined and developed concepts and models from the customers' expectation and satisfactions perspectives, customers' relationships perspectives, customers' emotional perspectives and interpersonal love perspectives, however, the latest adoption of interpersonal love perspective has been acknowledged to have the edge over the previous concepts with the ability to gain deeper emotional connections and unconditional relationships between consumer and the brand. Academic researchers on brand love have discovered the stronger sides of brand love concepts that have not been found in previous proposed concepts and theories such as positive emotional connection and passion driven behaviour (Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi, 2012), simulate dreams, memories, pleasure and attraction (Albert, Merunka and Florence, 2008), simulate the feeling of intimacy, passion and commitment (Heinrich and Muhl, 2008) which has resulted to a stronger outcomes such as higher loyalty and positive word of mouth, increase willingness to pay a price premium and forgiveness of brand failures (Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi, 2012), simulate positive brand image, higher brand engagement and greater loyalty (Kang, 2015).

Although it is noticeable that the contributions of brand love concept to marketing and branding is enormous, there were limitations in existing brand love studies, especially in the theoretical perspectives. The review of past studies have shown generally there are only three main areas of focus in the theoretical aspect, that are the direct transferability of love theories in branding, the conceptualization of consumer declarations of love toward brands and the antecedents and consequences of brand love (Albert, Merunka and Florence, 2008; Ahuvia, Batra and Bagozzi, 2008; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Besides, it has also indicated a slow expansion in the theoretical contributions in this aspect of branding.

Very recently, Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi (2012) further emphasized that there are still lack of unanimous agreement among scholars on the concept of brand love. Following the theoretical perspective, it is clear that there are many rooms to be explored. One of the theoretical contexts that are clearly not being studied to date is

the developmental aspects of consumer brand love. The developmental context of interpersonal love relationship is arguably one of the most essential aspects to understand in order to explain and manage the formation of love in mankind. It has been the major topic of discussions in social psychology (see Penrod, 1983), human psychology (see Gross, 2009), interpersonal communication (see DeVito, 2002; Knapp and Vangelisti, 2005; Wood, 2004; Flyod, 2009) and marriage and love (see Regan, 2003). To emphasize the importance of developmental context, Forgel (1993) argued that it is impossible to describe the continuous progression of a relationship without resorting to a discrete stage of explanation to the progression.

Reviewing the current studies of brand love, it raises a major concern that past studies of brand love have placed the love formation between consumer and brands in a static context and none of the scholars address the changes and growth in a journey of a relationship. Psychologists have observed that naturally relationships evolve with the passage of time such as increasing amounts of commitment and involvement (Regan, 2003), or it moves forward or backward, where the forward moving is moving towards increasing intimacy, involvement and commitment and the backward is moving towards decreasing of intimacy and involvement (Knapp and Vangelisti, 2005). The implication on the progression of a relationship is important to understand the changes occurring between two individual throughout the different stages of relationship. In the context of branding, the consumer and brands love relationship are expected to develop in the same manner as an interpersonal relationship where it will evolve with increasing amount of commitment and involvement over time. The implication of growth in consumer and brand love is equally important where brand owners can measure the level of intimacy, passion, trust and commitment in different stages of consumer brand love relationship in order to design effective marketing programs.

In addition, Albert, Merunka and Florence, (2008) criticized that in terms of the knowledge learned from different contextual aspects of brand love, the current studies is only limited to the American socio-cultural context. They extended the brand love research into the French socio-cultural context and their findings suggested that the symbolic conceptualisation and interpretation of the love meaning

towards the brand differed in different cultures. Although Albert, Merunka and Florence, (2008) have found differences among different socio-cultural contexts, unfortunately, based on the available literatures none have explore the non western socio-cultural context and the implications drawn from these literatures are generally describing the western consumer behaviour and culture which cannot be a universal representation of all consumers. Studies have shown, cultural orientations differ between the western society and non western society such Asian, Middle Eastern, African or the South American in the aspects of values, behaviour, rituals, practices and symbols (see Hofstede, 2001).

Besides the lack of studies on the non western cultural context above, there is also lack of knowledge from the developmental aspect of a consumer and brand love relationship. To date no study has acquired the knowledge of how the developmental sequence of brand love relationship differs among different cultures. The implication of sequence of development is significant to understand the level of stability in a relationship. According to Michener, Delamater and Myers (2004) as couples move through the stages of development, they will progressively increase their mutuality, self disclosure, trust and interdependence among each other and each stage of the sequence denotes different intensity of closeness that can be used to assess the fragility and stability of a relationship.

The review of the past literatures have strongly indicated that the theories of relationship development suggest that couples move through a systematic and sequential series of stages, experiencing every steps of relationship development in terms of increasing amount of commitment and involvement (see Regan, 2003; Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992). The generalisability of these proposed theories above is expected to be widely adopted to describe the brand love relationship developmental sequence, however, this widely acknowledged interpersonal relationship theories above have yet to be adopted in the brand love research.

Scholars have also found that the formation of love differ in different cultural perspectives. For example, some society believed that love is an autonomous choice of two people that should be developed through a systematic sequence of phases

from a zero contact level to a major intersection, while some others believed that love formation is a family affair that the choice of partner is strongly influenced by the family opinions (Dion and Dion, 1993; Floyd, 2009; Weiten, 2010). Albert, Merunka and Florence (2008), further suggest the importance of understanding how consumer perceive the concept of brand love and do consumers feel this love relationship in the same manner across cultures. Therefore it is worth exploring the non western culture in order to have a complete understanding of the perception of brand love globally.

In addition, it is even more significant and fruitful to study the Malaysian context, where it provides a more complex and diverse multicultural consumers. Theoretically, Malaysian cultures consist of three major ethnicities (i.e. Malay, Chinese and Indian) with different cultural orientations that constantly post great challenges to academics and practitioners to understand their culture and the influence in their consumption behaviour. Based on the vast literatures that have been reviewed, surprisingly none of the studies have look at the consumer brand love relationship in the Malaysian context and definitely no attempt was made to acquire the knowledge on the developmental aspect of Malaysian consumers and their brand love relationship. Perhaps the reason of lack of attempt in Malaysian context is due to the high complexity of Malaysian cultural sensitivities which make up of the diverse racial and ethnic compositions. Generally researching the link between ethnicity and consumer behaviour is a complex and tedious job due to the uncertainty of how each ethnicity group should be defined (Mokhlis 2009). The common assumptions used in consumer behaviour studies on ethnicity are that researchers assumed members of an ethnicity group are alike in their cultural orientation (Mokhlis 2009). Hence, in this maiden study on the influence of culture on consumers brand love stages of progression, the ethnicities is to be used as the proxies of a cultural orientation (individualism vs. collectivism) from the most widely adopted Hofstede's cultural dimension theory.

Consequently, in terms of operationalisation of the brand love concept, most scholars measured the consequences and outcomes such as how strong the correlation or path coefficient between brand love and loyalty, word of mouth,

willingness to pay premium price and forgiveness of brand failures (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Sarkar, 2011; Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi, 2012). However, only a handful of scholars investigated the consumption values of the brands or products (i.e. hedonism and utilitarian values) that may influence consumers and brands love relationship development. Unfortunately, it seems that the major discussions of their findings were only focusing on the correlation strength between hedonic values and brand love (see, Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Bauer, 2007; Sarkar, 2011). Clearly, there is lack of understanding in how the consumer and brand love relationships develops, such as how the developmental sequence progress from the hedonic and utilitarian perspectives of a brand and how the developmental sequence differ between these two consumption values.

Based on the limitations discussed above, the present study explored a new theoretical perspective between the consumer and brand love relationship. This study aims to develop a conceptual framework to represent the developmental stages of consumer brand love relationship. Besides exploring the theoretical perspective above, this study is also aims to expand the knowledge and understanding of consumer brand love relationships developmental process from the perspectives of its sequence of progressions. The reviews of literatures in human interpersonal relationships have suggested that the formation of love differ in different cultural perspectives, therefore it is invaluable to be able to understand the implications of cultural and consumption values that may influence the consumer brand love sequence of progression. This knowledge is expected to facilitate and enhance the marketers' strategic decisions in building brand love across different social cultural and consumptions contexts.

Besides the theoretical issues discussed above, the brand loyalty sustainability issues also reflect significantly in the industry level. Sondoh et. al. (2007) highlighted that there was a global effect of declining of consumer brand loyalty. He further highlighted the Malaysian government were concern on the declining of brand loyalty here and calls for companies to focus on brand differentiation in order to achieve sustainable brand loyalty.

A further review on Carter's (2015) consumer loyalty statistics 2015 edition, have confirmed that this trend is very apparent globally. Their studies have found that only 28% of consumers were loyal to their brand and 73% of consumers were driven by price and value to determine their loyalty towards a brand. These two separate studies have strongly indicated that declining of loyalty is an apparent issue in branding. Hence in the context of Malaysia where this study is based, there is a clear need to address this sustainable loyalty issue. In this maiden study, two key products from the automotive and consumer electronic industries were drawn to serve as the preliminary study in relation to the development of consumer brand love relationship stages of development. These two key industries have attracted more than RM 61 billions of investments from 2009 to 2014 to Malaysia economy (MITI 2016).

However, in the recent years these two industries have experienced declining sales. Frost and Sullivan Malaysia (2016) predicted that there will be a decline of vehicle sales by 1.44% year on year in 2016. In the same period, Mabkhot, Salleh and Shaari (2016) study on brand loyalty in Malaysia have indicated that there is a low level of loyalty among Malaysian consumers especially towards automotive brands, specifically local-made brands. Similarly, the consumer electronics sector have also sharing the same experience of declining sales. International Data Corporation Malaysia (2015) reported that there is noticeable slowdown in smart phones shipment in 2015.

According to the StarOnline (2015) sales of consumer electronics declined 45% in 2015. Coincidentally, Mabkhot, Salleh and Shaari (2016) study have also found that the popular smart phones brands such as Nokia and Blackberry have suffered huge decline in loyalty. In view of the above practical issues, the knowledge gained from this study is also expected to facilitate and enhance marketers' strategic decisions in building more sustainable brand loyalty strategies.

1.4 Research Questions (RQ)

The research questions that in line with the aims and objectives of this study are as follow,

- a. In general, how do consumers experience the stages of development and sequence of progression in their brand love relationships?
- b. Does the development and sequence of progression of consumer brand love relationship developmental stages differ among different cultural orientations?
- c. Do consumption values (i.e. utilitarian and hedonism) influence the development and sequence of progression of consumer brand love relationships?

1.5 Research Objectives (RO)

With the problem statement in mind, the specific objectives of this study are as follow,

- a. To conceptualise and develop a framework of consumer brand love relationship developmental stages.
- b. To investigate the sequence of developmental stages of consumer brand love relationships specifically,
 - i. To examine the influence of culture on the developmental sequence of consumer brand love relationships sequence of progression.
 - ii. To examine the influence of consumption value (utilitarian versus hedonism) on the sequence of consumer brand love relationships sequence of progression.

Table 1.1 Summaries of Research Questions and its Correspondence Research Objectives

RQ1	In general, how do consumers experience the stages of development and sequence of progression in their brand love relationships?	
	RO1	To conceptualise and develop a framework of consumer brand love relationship developmental stages.
RQ2	Does the development and sequence of progression of consumer brand love relationship developmental stages differ among different cultural orientations?	
	RO2	To examine the influence of culture on the developmental sequence of consumer brand love relationships sequence of progression.
RQ3	Do consumption values (i.e. utilitarian and hedonism) influence the development and sequence of progression of consumer brand love relationships?	
	RO3	To examine the influence of consumption value (utilitarian versus hedonism) on the sequence of consumer brand love relationships sequence of progression.

1.6 Scope of Study

Generally, scholars have investigated the importance of brand love development from various perspectives, and the review of the current literatures shows that the brand love research focuses on three broad perspectives i.e. the adaptation of interpersonal theory of love, conceptualisation of consumer declaration of love towards brands and developing the antecedents and measuring the consequences of brand love concept. There is not much information on the dynamic aspect of consumer brand love relationship. Therefore, this study confines its focuses on the developmental context of consumer brand love relationship development and progression and the contextual influences i.e. socio cultural context and consumption values (utilitarian and hedonism).

Besides, in the operationalisation aspect of this study, the researcher limits the research geographical coverage to Malaysia only. Basically, besides the key constraints of cost and duration of study, Malaysia offers a sufficiently good research platform with its diversity of cultural and ethnicities, and more importantly, it has good rate of literacy that could facilitates the conduct of the study. On the context of study, this research is only focusing on the automotives and electronics product categories. There are several reasons for this decision. First, due to the cost and duration of study, to include all product categories may not be rational in terms of completing this research.

Second, past studies of brand love research, have commonly utilised cars, computers, big bikes (Harley Davidson) and firearms as their context of studies (see Whang et al., 2004; Bauer, Heinrich and Martin, 2007; Pang, Keh and Peng, 2009; Lastovicka and Sirianni, 2010). In the case of Malaysia, it is rational and justified to select the automotive and computers (electronic) product categories as it is commonly available comparing to the other two product categories which are not common or unavailable in Malaysia. Third, past studies have always associate the feeling of love with automotive and electronic product categories (see Bauer, Heinrich and Martin, 2007; Pang, Keh and Peng, 2009; Lastovicka and Sirianni, 2010), therefore, it is justified to use these two product categories in this study.

In addition, with the aims and purpose of developing a new conceptual framework, the determinations of the population and the subjects of study are important. This study focuses on the three major ethnicities in Malaysia i.e. Malay, Chinese and Indian, and targeting at the car owners who send their vehicle for regular service maintenance and universities students who utilised electronic gadgets. All the targeted respondents are expected to have reasonable literacy capability in order to facilitate good interviewing and survey methods of data collection.

1.7 Significance of Study

The findings of this study will benefit both the academics and practitioners to better understand the conceptualisation of brand love theory and specifically the developmental aspect of consumer brand love relationships. From the academics theoretical perspectives, this study will contribute to the marketing literatures and specifically to the brand love subject in several perspectives. First, it will offer the first theoretical model of consumer brand love relationships development and progression. This theoretical model is expected to provide an inside of how consumer and brand love relationship form, develop and progress, and it is important to understand this developmental process because theoretically none of the present studies are able to provide an understanding of consumer brand love formation from the perspectives of their developmental stages.

Besides, this research will also offer an understanding of cultural influence in consumer brand love relationship development. This finding is especially important as it explored cultural aspect of the non western context which has been given very little attention in the marketing literatures. In addition the inclusion of consumption values findings will contribute to the body of knowledge in extending and bridging the theoretical context and practical context of brand love.

In terms of practical or managerial implications, the findings of this study will benefit marketers especially for those who are involved in brand management (i.e. brand advertising, brand communications, brand image building, brand equity management and others branding related specialist). This study should provide a deeper understanding of the formation, development and progression of consumer brand love relationship through the identification of the notion of consumer brand love relationships progression from the sequence of relatively distinct stages and this visibility provide crucial understandings of how the love towards brands form and develops. It also plays a crucial role in enhancing the accuracy of advertising and communication strategies that targeting towards different level of intensity of consumer of relationship with the brand. Godson (2009) have suggests that the

ability to identify the relationship stages of development will enable businesses to direct their marketing resources effectively.

Furthermore, this study will probe further into consumers' cultural orientations to understand the sequence of progression in their brand love relationship formation. This will enable marketers to understand the pattern of how each cultural orientation develops and progress in their brand love relationship formations. This knowledge will not only provide a better marketing resources allocation planning to businesses but also will hugely assist marketers to plan and customised their marketing resources and activities to different kind of consumers based on their backgrounds and cultural orientations.

Therefore, the implications of this study are not only contributing to the theory of branding but also providing the platform to a better sustainability of branding strategies.

1.8 Definitions of Terms

The following are the conceptual and operational definition used in this study,

- **Metaphor**

According to Cambridge dictionary, metaphor is an expression often found in literature that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to that person or object. In this study the word metaphor is used as an expression that describe humans' interpersonal relationship that have similar characteristics to consumers' brand love relationship.

- **Relationship**

Refer to two people whose behaviour is interdependent in that a change in behaviour in one is likely to produce a change in behaviour of the other (Gross, 2009). In this

study the concept of relationship is referred as the pattern of intermittent interaction between two people involving interchanges over an extended period of time.

- **Interdependence**

According to Regan (2003) interdependence is about two people involved in a relationship who are interdependent with respect to the outcomes of their behaviour, that is, the thoughts, feelings, and actions of one partner influence his or her own outcomes as well as those of his or her partner. Generally, interdependence is the idea that everything in nature is connected to and depends on every other thing. In this study the concept of interdependence is referred to the idea that person's actions influence others.

- **Temporality**

Derived from the word temporary which means not lasting. Temporality means the condition of being temporal or bounded in time. In this study the concept of temporality is referred to the view of a relationship as ongoing, dynamic process and not always in a steady state.

- **Reciprocity**

Ciccarelli and Meyer (2006) describe reciprocity as people have a very strong tendency to like people who like them. In this study the concept of reciprocity is referred to as an action in a relationship that the perception of one likes of another person that will have the other person liking in return.

- **Dynamics**

According to Werner and Baxter (1994) dynamics is an array of psychological process and communicative behaviour that people do separately or together that are related to relationship functioning. In this study the concept of dynamics is referred to as how the relationships form, grow, change and deteriorate.

- **Stage Model**

According to Knapp and Vangelisti (2005) relationships are not static; they change and shift slightly or greatly over the years. Penrod (1983) explain studies have proposed that relationships develop through a series of stages. In this study the concept of stage model is referred to as the synthesised of series of incremental and sequential steps leading towards a future oriented goal.

- **Awareness stage (Brand Awareness)**

According Aaker (1991) brand awareness refers to the strength of a brand's presence in the consumers; mind. In a wider context it can be described as the extent of which potential consumers could recognise and correctly associate with the brand. In this study the awareness stage is referred to as the initial feeling of attractions between the consumers and their brands.

- **Liking stage (Brand Liking)**

Derived from the interpersonal relationship framework (DeVito, 2002; Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992; Levinger, 1980) liking stage is characterised as the process of attraction and contact that consist of the feeling of fondness, interest and pleasure between two strangers. In this study the liking stage is referred to as the extent of which potential consumers feeling of fondness towards the brand.

- **Experimenting stage (Brand Experimenting)**

Derived from the interpersonal relationship framework (Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992; Levinger, 1980) experimenting is part of the process of building a relationship. In this stage both partners experimenting, matching and fitting with each others. In this study the experimenting stage is referred to as the extent of which consumers establish the experience with the brand before they are certain about their love towards the brand.

- **Passion stage (Brand Passion)**

Derived from the interpersonal relationship framework (Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992; Levinger, 1980; Wood, 2004) passion is the stage couple becomes very close to each other, spent time together and passionate about each other. In this study the passion stage is referred to as the extent of which consumers establish the feeling of intense desire to be associated and united with the brand.

- **Brand Love stage**

Derived from the interpersonal relationship framework (Knapp and Vangelisti, 1992; Levinger, 1980; Wood, 2004; Scanzoni 1979) love is the stage where couple committed, consolidated, or bonded to each other. In this study the brand love stage is referred to as a deeply held emotional commitment of consumers' feeling of love towards their brands.

- **Monotonic Progression**

According to Freeman (1986) monotonic is a kind of mathematical function. There were two broad classes of monotonic functions, i.e. strong and weak. Among the strong monotonic functions, one is called increasing and one decreasing. Correspondingly among the weak monotonic functions is called non-decreasing and non-increasing. In this study the monotonic function is referred to as a function that characterised as increasing fashion that describe the various kinds of ordered relationship.

- **Culture**

According to Hofstede (2001), culture is the collective programming of the mind and its manifest itself not only in values, but in the symbols, heroes, rituals and this distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others. In this study culture is referred as the cultural context that the study is conducted.

- **Culture Dimensions**

In broad terms, cultural dimensions is the terminology and concept used to describe culture that enable us to understand, measure, aware and knowledgeable about values and practices found in a human culture and also to know about the similarities and differences among human cultures. In this study the Hofstede's cultural dimensions model was referred as to understand the influence of culture in brand love stages of development and progression. The five Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, i.e. **Power Distance**: This dimension reflects the less powerful members of organisation and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. **Uncertainty Avoidance**: This dimension reflects the society tolerance for ambiguity. It indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations. **Individualism-Collectivism**: This dimension reflects the degree to which people in a society are integrated into group. On the individualist, the individual in the society is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. The collectivist, people in the society are expected to integrate into strong and cohesive in groups. **Masculinity**: This dimension reflects the distribution of values between the genders. The assertive pole is referring to as masculine and the modest and caring pole is referring to as feminine. **Time Orientation**: This dimension reflects the long term and short orientation. The long term orientation reflects the values of perseverance, thrift, ordering relationship by status and having a sense of shame. The short term orientation reflect reciprocating social obligations, respect for tradition, protecting one's face and personal steadiness. In this study only one cultural dimension was referred to i.e. Individualism-Collectivism cultural dimension.

- **Consumption Values**

Derived from the rationale of consumer choice in acquiring or not acquiring a specific product (Sheth, Newman and Gross, 1991), consumption values influence consumer choice behaviour. Theoretically, it is assumed that choice behaviour is influenced by multiple, independent consumption values with each value contributing differently in different choice situations.

- **Hedonic Values**

The perceived utility acquired from an alternative's capacity to arouse feeling or affective state, i.e. romance aroused from by a candlelight dinner (Sheth, Newman and Gross, 1991). Hedonic values increased arousal, heighten involvement, perceived freedom, enjoyment, fun and fantasy fulfilment (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). In this study the hedonic consumption values is referred to as the consumption that is driven by sensual pleasure, fantasy, fun and sensory experience of aesthetic.

- **Utilitarian Values**

The perceived utility acquired from an alternative's capacity for functional, utilitarian or physical performance (Sheth, Newman and Gross, 1991). In this study the utilitarian consumption values is referred to as the consumption that is cognitive driven, instrumental, goal oriented and accomplishes a functional or practical task.

1.9 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters. Each chapter is dedicated to the major discussion of this research. Chapter one illustrates the motivation of study and the background, followed by establishing the research problems and gaps, research questions and objectives and concludes at research scope and the significant of the study. Chapter two reviews the relevant literatures on past studies in brand love and the underpinning theories of interpersonal love relationship. A new conceptual framework and it relevant hypotheses were developed from the reviews. Chapter three discusses the mix-methods research design and methodology used to examine the conceptual framework and its relevant hypotheses. The research methodology includes, quantitative and qualitative sampling plan, data collections methods and data analysis techniques. Chapter four discusses on the quantitative data collection process and analysis techniques and the research findings. Chapter five discusses on the qualitative data collection process and analysis techniques and research findings. Chapter six, the final chapter, discusses on the implications of findings, limitation of study and the directions of future study.

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