



How deep is your love? The brand love-loyalty matrix in consumer-brand relationships

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ABSTRACT

Brand love is an often ignored, yet important dimension in consumer-brand relationships. Especially consumer-brand relationships with masstige brands that are hedonic and symbolic in nature. Using an experimental design ($n = 465$), this study investigated the interplay between brand love and brand loyalty, and its impact on brand equity. Contrary to current literature, the findings indicate that consumers can develop brand love without being loyal to a brand and can exhibit high brand love without purchasing from the brand. Brand love had a greater impact on brand equity than brand loyalty, and both brand love and brand equity diminished when consumers experienced brand betrayal. The brand love-loyalty matrix shows the interplay between these constructs for masstige brand relationships and can be used to increase market share. Finally, a decision tree is provided to guide the growth decisions of luxury brands who want to embark on a masstige strategy.

1. Introduction

Consumer-brand relationships are complex, especially when love is involved. The intricacies of consumers professing their love for a brand have long been debated, with many stating that a little love goes a long way (Bagozzi et al., 2017). The virtues of brand love are plenty. It leads to brand loyalty (Fournier, 1998), positive word-of-mouth (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), and increases consumer willingness to pay a price premium (Batra et al., 2012; Granot et al., 2013). Rossmann and Wilke (2017) describe brand love as the degree of emotionality a consumer has with a brand, while Bagozzi et al. (2017) consider brand love to be the most emotionally intense consumer-brand relationship. The dynamic nature of brand love (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010) has led to its encompassing dimensions being a topic for debate (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen (2010) propose that brand love embodies positive emotions, loyalty and consumer attachment to a specific brand. Batra et al. (2012) assert that brand love is preceded by brand loyalty, while Bagozzi et al. (2017) argue it predicts brand loyalty. Despite the lack of consensus, there is agreement that brand love develops when consumers form bonds with self-expressive, hedonic and symbolic brands (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), like luxury brands.

Consumers purchase more luxury goods today than ever before, with reasons ranging from the desire to emulate the lifestyle of the rich (O’Cass & McEwen, 2004), to more hedonic grounds such as self-reward (Silverstein et al., 2008). Research examining consumer-brand relationships with luxury brands has been abundant over the past several years (see for example: Kim et al., 2012; Mandler et al., 2020; Nobre & Simões, 2019). As a consequence of the proliferation of luxury purchases, some argue that the luxury market is becoming a relative mass market (Truong et al., 2009), as luxury brands are increasingly consumed not only by the wealthy but also the less affluent (Nueno & Quelch, 1998). Marketing luxury brands to the mass market has the goal of creating mass prestige value for a brand (Paul, 2018), commonly referred to as ‘masstige’ (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003). Masstige has the purpose of elevating brand perception and brand equity among consumers through brand positioning (Paul, 2018).

While research pertaining to consumer-brand relationships in luxury markets is abundant, the application of these concepts within a masstige context remains inadequate (Nobre & Simões, 2019). Consumer-brand relationship theory considers the emotional connection that consumers establish with brands (Fournier, 1998; Fournier & Yao, 1997), and much research has conceptualized the role of brand love in building

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brand equity (Paul, 2015; Paul, 2018; Paul, 2019; Quach & Thaichon, 2017). However, disagreement exists between the nuanced interplay of brand love and brand loyalty and its resultant impact on the brand equity of mass brands with prestige appeal, with empirical research on the topic being in short supply (Das et al., 2022). Therefore, the first research question seeks to assess *how the interaction between brand love and brand loyalty affects the brand equity of a masstige brand*.

In consumer-brand relationships where strong emotions are involved, not all brand interactions are positive. Instances of brands misleading consumers by breaking promises or conveying half-truths are often reported (Reimann et al., 2018). These brand actions leave consumers feeling let down and may evoke strong emotions of anger in a loyal consumer (Trump, 2014). In consumer-brand relationships these emotions are analogous with a feeling of brand betrayal (Sameeni et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2021). Brand betrayal is “an emotional state that occurs when a brand, with which loyal consumers have established strong relationships and on which they have spent their resources, engages in moral violation” (Sameeni et al., 2022, p. 137).

Within the broader brand relationship discourse, there is disagreement as to how brand betrayal impacts the consumer-brand relationship dimensions of brand love and brand loyalty (Grégoire & Fisher, 2006). On the one hand, if the brand interaction is negative, it is argued that a “high-quality consumer-brand relationship could buffer the negative effects” (Zhang et al., 2021, p. 415), as a consumer with higher brand love would be more tolerant to a brand’s transgressions (Hess et al., 2013). Consumers therefore more easily forgive and forget, called the *love is blind* effect (Zhang et al., 2021). Others argue that the opposite happens: the hurt the consumer experiences because of the brand betrayal is greatly amplified because of the depth of their emotional attachment to the brand, called the *love becomes hate* effect (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). The magnitude of this effect has not been considered in a masstige context. Addressing this gap in the literature is important for several reasons. First, masstige brands carry symbolic (Kumar et al., 2021), aesthetic (Mundel et al., 2017) and prestige value (Paul, 2018). Consumers embrace these values as being self-expressive (Kumar et al., 2021) and are willing to pay and invest more in these brands - literally and emotionally. When the brand interactions are positive, consumers bask in the reflected glory of the brand (Cialdini et al., 1976). Little is however known of how a perceived brand betrayal would affect the relationship. Second, masstige brands leverage their brand equity to successfully build their brand (Paul, 2019). Brand betrayal might jeopardize consumer perceptions of brand equity, putting a masstige brand’s future at risk. As such, the second research question examines *the impact of a perceived masstige brand betrayal on the consumer-brand relationship*.

The contribution of this research is threefold. First, from a consumer-brand relationship perspective, we show that consumers of a masstige brand are more driven by brand love than brand loyalty, but both these consumer-brand relationship dimensions are needed to build brand equity. Using these relationship dimensions, we establish the brand love-loyalty matrix that profiles distinct masstige consumer segments based on their brand equity and mass prestige. Second, we expand the current understanding of the dynamics of brand love from a theoretical perspective, by showing that there can be high brand love even in the absence of brand loyalty, which translates to consumers holding brand love for a brand without having purchased the brand. Finally, the research delineates the importance of brand love as a critical component of masstige consumer-brand relationships by providing brand managers with a decision tree to guide their masstige brand extension decisions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Masstige marketing

The luxury aspirations of the growing middle class (Mundel et al., 2017) have created the market potential for luxury brands to position themselves as more accessible to mass markets (Kim et al., 2019). Recent

examples of luxury brands gaining mass appeal, such as Hugo Boss (Truong et al., 2009), Prada (Moore & Doyle, 2010), and Michael Kors (Kapferer, 2014), have led scholars to question the rarity principle of luxury goods (Granot et al., 2013; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Kumar et al., 2020). This has led to a reframing of traditional luxury to also make way for a new category of luxury, known as ‘masstige’ (Kumar et al., 2020). Defined as ‘prestige for the masses’ (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003), masstige marketing is a brand positioning strategy with the objective of increasing the market share and market penetration of a brand (Paul, 2018). Masstige brands signal prestige by being positioned at a higher price than mass-market products, following a selective distribution strategy to create the perception of moderate scarcity, and using premium packaging and below-the-line advertising (Kumar et al., 2020). In addition, masstige brands signal prestige by offering financially attainable symbolic and aesthetic value, whilst eliciting emotional arousal (Dion & Borraz, 2017).

Masstige brands can either start as such, e.g., Starbucks (Kumar et al., 2020), or can form part of a luxury brand’s product or brand portfolio aimed at targeting a broader market while not diluting brand prestige, e.g., Mercedes’ masstige market-oriented C230 sports coupé (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003). Following Silverstein and Fiske’s (2003) seminal article on the masstige concept, several studies have focused on the potential benefits of a masstige strategy (Kapferer, 2014). Benefits include creating strong brand value through brand extensions (Kim & Ko, 2010), trading up (Silverstein et al., 2008), and elevating consumer trust, satisfaction and repurchase intentions (Hong et al., 2010). Although the masstige concept evolved from luxury literature it is quite different from traditional luxury (Kumar et al., 2020). It should also not be treated the same as mass-market brands either (Kim et al., 2019), as brands that pursue a masstige strategy do so to maximize sales without discounts or lower prices (Paul, 2018). Instead, masstige is built on the premise that the competitiveness of a brand is not only determined by the effectiveness of the marketing mix and the absolute value of a brand, but also by the relative value of a brand in comparison to its competitors (Kumar et al., 2020). As a brand positioning strategy, it allows a brand to combine prestige positioning with broad appeal without the risk of brand dilution (Truong et al., 2009).

Situated at the “intersection of exclusivity and mass consumption” (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012, p. 1399), masstige consumption heralds a paradigm shift in luxury consumption. As traditional approaches to communicate luxury symbols become less effective (Kim & Ko, 2012), masstige requires new approaches to manage and establish meaningful relationships with consumers (Nobre & Simões, 2019). Brand relationships are built on experiences and connections between consumers and the brand over time (Hamzah et al., 2014), with research suggesting that these experiences lead to the development of emotional bonds between consumers and brands (Brakus et al., 2009). From a theoretical perspective, these consumer-brand relationships are related to the umbrella of theories in the inter-personal relationship literature stream (Nobre & Simões, 2019), where, similar to interpersonal relationships, consumers put effort into maintaining, developing and cultivating the emotional bonds that they form with brands (Fournier, 1998).

Unlike luxury brands, masstige brands are not necessarily rare or limited in volume. Instead, they “acquire the luxury label due to design, additional services or the aura created by the brand” (Brun & Castelli, 2013, p. 832). A clearer understanding of the strong emotional connection between a consumer and a masstige brand is thus necessary, where consumer justification of a premium price tag would override simple brand preference. Rather, we argue that the consumer-brand relationship is built on what Fournier (1998) calls a rich, deep, and long-lasting feeling of brand love.

2.2. Brand love and consumer-brand relationships

Brand love is a term that was coined by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006, p. 81) to describe “the degree of passionate emotional attachment a

satisfied consumer has” for a brand. As a multi-faceted construct, brand love includes a range of emotions, behaviors and cognitions that consumers organize into a “mental prototype” (Batra et al., 2012, p. 2). Grounded in theories from the field of psychology, including the triangular theory of interpersonal love (Sternberg, 1986), Fournier (1998) identified brand love as one of several relationship types that develop when consumers hold love-like feelings for brands (Gumparthi & Patra, 2020). To consumers, brand love represents intimate consumer-brand experiences in positive affective terms (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017).

Brand love has been both conceptual reviewed (Albert, Merunka & Valette-Florence, 2008), and empirically shown to be associated with consumer willingness to pay a premium (Thomson et al., 2005), positive word-of-mouth (Albert & Merunka, 2013), and brand loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Fournier, 1998). Brand love has also been found to be impacted by brand betrayal (Thakur et al., 2018). From the brand’s perspective, brand love entails more than the promise of quality and durability. It requires a holistic brand effort to evoke positive feelings towards a brand. Brand promotion, consumption experiences and consumer-brand relationship improvements contribute to the building of brand love, with its pay-off being higher-order emotions like loyalty, positive word-of-mouth and willingness to pay a premium (Joshi & Garg, 2021).

As a construct, the conceptualization of brand love is still evolving (Hegner et al., 2017; Huber et al., 2015). Extant research has, however, identified positive brand emotions, positive brand evaluations, brand passion, and love declarations towards a brand as psychological dimensions of brand love (Albert et al., 2008; Batra et al., 2012). Ahuvia et al. (2008) conceptualize brand love as comprised of three aspects: 1) cognitive brand love, i.e., beliefs related to the brand; 2) affective brand love, i.e., feelings related to the brand and 3) conative brand love, i.e., willingness to spend resources on the brand and a desire to use the brand. Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014) further classified brand love as a higher-order construct that contributes to positive and strong consumer-brand relationships.

Consumer-brand relationships are akin to psychological contracts between consumers and a brand (Ma, 2020). At its core, consumer-brand relationships form the backbone of current marketing thought as consumers choose brands that satisfy their deepest needs (Gómez-Suárez et al., 2017). Depending on how the brand fulfills consumers’ needs, consumers can establish identifying relationships with a brand (Johnson et al., 2011). Identifying relationships develop when a brand fulfills a psychological need and contributes to the development of the self-concept of an individual (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). The origins of this identifying relationship are rooted in social identity theory (Turner & Oakes, 1986), which defines this relationship as “the perceptions of oneness with or belongingness” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21) to an organization or brand. Through this process of identification, the consumer attaches emotional significance and value to their belongingness, often leading to brand love.

The love relationship between a consumer and a brand is complex and particularly important to hedonic brands that offer symbolic benefits (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), such as masstige brands. Most studies investigating consumer-brand relationships focus on measuring brand loyalty only (Joshi & Garg, 2021). Brand loyalty is, however, considered a key consequence of brand love (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

2.3. Brand love, brand loyalty and brand equity of masstige brands

Brand love “adopts brand-loyal customers and turn them into advocates or influencers for your brand” (Schreane, 2020, para. 2). Brand loyalty includes behavioral loyalty, i.e., a consumer repeatedly purchasing a brand, as well as attitudinal loyalty, i.e., brand preference reflecting an emotional connection between a consumer and a brand (Oliver, 1999). Brand love has shown to influence both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Le, 2021), with research

positing that brand loyalty increases when a consumer falls in love with a particular brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). The love that a consumer feels for a particular brand also impacts their brand commitment (Albert & Merunka, 2013). As such, brand love is argued to inspire loyalty beyond reason (Pawle & Cooper, 2006), as satisfied consumers are believed to become loyal consumers (Anderson et al., 1994).

Unique, memorable, reinforcing experiences build brand loyalty and create a strong emotional bond with a brand (Tuominen, 1999). Initially, it was proposed that brand loyalty is a consequence of brand love and that brand love is better at predicting brand loyalty measures than conventional attitude models (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Batra et al., 2012). More recently it has been argued that brand love acts as an antecedent of brand loyalty and is a strong predictor of brand equity (Hegner et al., 2017; Nawaz et al., 2020). Brand equity, or the “incremental utility or value added to a product by the brand” (Yoo & Donthu, 2001, p. 1) is often used as a proxy for relationship success. In the masstige literature, the marketing success or failure of a masstige brand is conceptually rooted in its ability to develop brand prestige, brand love, as well as brand equity (Kumar et al., 2020; Paul, 2019). Barring the work by Kumar and Paul (2018), there is a scarcity of research examining the brand equity of masstige brands, with increased calls for more inquiry (Kumar et al., 2020; Paul, 2018).

With brand equity being a key determinant of the success of a masstige strategy, it is important to better understand (1) what consumer-brand relationship dimensions act as drivers of brand equity, and (2) what the relationship between these dimensions is (Kumar & Paul, 2018). To understand the interplay between brand love and brand loyalty as building blocks of brand equity for masstige brands, the first hypothesis examines whether brand equity differs for high/low brand loyalty and high/low brand love masstige consumers.

H₁: There is a difference in the brand equity of a masstige brand between high/low brand loyalty and high/low brand love consumers.

For a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between brand love and brand loyalty and its impact on the brand equity of a masstige brand, we further examine how these constructs fare when the relationship is put under pressure. Brand love is a multi-faceted construct that encompasses many sides of a brand relationship (Gumparthi & Patra, 2020). Little is however known about how a perceived negative brand encounter would impact the consumer-masstige brand relationship. Opposing viewpoints regarding the potential impact of brand betrayal on brand love exist. On the one hand, some propose that brand love, as the result of a strong relationship, creates a buffer that would make consumers more tolerant and forgiving (Palusuk et al., 2019), therefore following the *love is blind* relationship effect (Zhang et al., 2021). Conversely, loyal consumers with a higher degree of brand love would experience stronger negative emotions (Dawes, 2009; Grégoire et al., 2009), giving way to the *love becomes hate* effect (Grégoire & Fisher, 2006). To assess how this would play out in the context of masstige brands, the second hypothesis seeks to examine the impact of a perceived masstige brand betrayal on the consumer-brand relationship.

As masstige brands are associated with strong emotional and self-expressive consumer-brand attachments (Nobre & Simões, 2019), we hypothesize that perceived brand betrayal would negatively impact the consumer-brand relationship.

H₂: A masstige brand betrayal negatively impacts the consumer-brand relationship.

To assess the second hypothesis holistically, each respective dimension of the consumer-brand relationship is examined individually. The following three sub-hypotheses are thus proposed:

H_{2A}: There is a difference in brand loyalty following a brand betrayal.

H_{2B}: There is a difference in brand equity following a brand betrayal.

H_{2C}: There is a difference in brand love following a brand betrayal.

3. Methodology

This research sought to address the following research questions: (1) *How does the interaction between brand love and brand loyalty affect the brand equity of a masstige brand?* and (2) *What is the impact of a perceived masstige brand betrayal on the consumer-brand relationship?* To address these two research questions, the research is guided by two objectives. The first objective seeks to examine the consumer-brand relationship dynamics of a masstige brand by examining the interplay between consumers' brand love and brand loyalty, and the associated brand equity of the brand. The second objective seeks to determine the impact of a masstige brand betrayal on the consumer-brand relationship, where again, the three consumer-brand relationship dimensions of brand love, brand loyalty and brand equity are considered.

To address these research objectives, primary data was collected using an experimental research design that presented a single masstige brand as the selected context for the research. Apple was selected as the masstige brand under consideration for several reasons: first, Apple has been identified on several occasions as a masstige brand in the literature (Paul, 2015, 2018; Kumar & Paul, 2018; Kumar et al., 2020). Second, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) suggest that studies concerning brand love should make use of heavily branded products. Not only are Apple products visibly branded, but the Apple brand obtained a market capitalization of \$2 trillion in 2020, with expectations to surpass \$3 trillion in 2022 (Choudhury, 2021), indicating the well-established nature of the brand. Apple's global branding strategy is also consistent, thereby ensuring brand recognition across the markets in which it operates (Shofner, 2021). Third, Apple is a highly polarizing brand where people are either avid supporters or naysayers, and the design was aimed at maximizing variance in the brand love and brand loyalty dimensions. Fourth, given that the research sought to identify groups of respondents that were both loyal as well as those that were not loyal, Apple was selected due to the intense loyalty shown by consumers often depicted as a 'cult like' following (Wu, 2019) with a strong brand community (Palusuk et al., 2019). Finally, Apple presents a good demonstration of brand love, as it has been able to establish a strong community base of infatuated brand consumers who display intensive brand commitment (Palusuk et al., 2019). Previous research has also identified Apple's battery-gate as an example of a perceived brand betrayal (Sameeni et al., 2022). Further details on the research design and method as well as the target population and measurement instrument are presented next.

3.1. Research design and method

The research makes use of a true experimental design, namely the posttest-only control group research design. The experimental design allows the researchers to manipulate a variable to determine whether the manipulation is able to cause any resultant changes in other variables (Creswell, 2009; Malhotra, 2010). This research design made use of two groups of respondents, an experimental group and a control group, whereby the experimental group received a treatment and thereafter data was collected on a particular outcome measure across both groups (Frey, 2018). The use of a control group was selected over the use of the pretest–posttest design to minimize any testing bias that could skew the data. In addition, this design decreased issues related to internal validity by controlling for maturation, decreased testing effects, instrumentation, statistical regression, mortality, the diffusion of treatment information, as well as rivalry between treatment conditions (Salkind, 2010).

The data was collected through an anonymous online survey posted on the Qualtrics platform. Experimental designs require the use of randomization, where respondents are randomly allocated to groups (Creswell, 2009). Qualtrics allows for the random allocation of individuals to either the experimental or control group through an inbuilt randomizer function (Qualtrics, 2021). The randomizer function ensures that the two groups remain relatively equal in size and wholly eliminates

the role of the researcher in assigning respondents to groups.

3.2. Target population

To be considered for inclusion in the research, respondents had to be over 18 years of age to adhere to ethical requirements. Respondents were required to indicate that they had knowledge of the Apple brand, despite there being no requirement for ownership or use of an Apple product. In line with the observation of ethical principles, all respondents were made aware of the purpose of the research, together with their rights as a respondent as it pertains to their voluntary participation (Vanclay et al., 2013), the anonymity of their responses (Kaiser, 2009) and their right to withdraw from the research (Schaefer & Wertheimer, 2010). Respondents were required to acknowledge on the first page of the online survey that they consent to take part in the research.

3.3. Measurement instrument and treatment

The surveys presented to both the experimental and control groups included the same introduction that outlined the purpose of the research, highlighted their rights as a respondent and requested their consent for participation. Thereafter, two filter questions ensured that respondents met the minimum age requirement and were aware of the chosen brand. The experimental group was presented with an excerpt of a news article published in 2020 (BBC News, 2020) that outlined Apple's admission of intentionally slowing down the battery life of a particular iPhone model to speed up its obsolescence. This particular article was selected as the treatment (an example of a brand betrayal) as it offered an objective perspective on the facts from an established, global news platform. No changes were made to the article, thereby presenting an existing and factual account of a masstige brand's real-world brand conduct together with an admission of guilt from the company and the resulting implications for the company.

Existing validated scales were used to measure all key constructs as they were defined in the literature review. This further reduced threats concerning internal validity (Malhotra, 2010). The measures for overall brand equity (four items) and brand loyalty (three items) were adopted from the research of Yoo and Donthu (2006), while the masstige index scale (ten items) developed by Paul (2015, 2019) was used to evaluate the masstige appeal of the Apple brand. The masstige index scale is made up of three sub-dimensions: brand knowledge and prestige (five items), perceived quality (two items), excitement and status (three items). Lastly, brand love was assessed using Carroll and Ahuvia's (2006) ten-item scale. All items for brand equity, brand loyalty and brand love were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), while the masstige index scale used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (least applicable to you) to 7 (highly applicable). To eliminate order bias, the questions measuring specific constructs were presented in a randomized order to respondents. Following the assessment of key constructs, respondents were required to provide demographic information including their age, highest level of education, as well as whether they had ever purchased an Apple product. No formal debriefing was undertaken given that existing, factual information was provided to the experimental group in the form of a readily available news article. However, respondents were provided with the contact details of the researchers to address any further questions.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

The researchers made use of a purchased, large commercial database of individuals to obtain a sufficient sample size. Data was collected over a three-week period in May 2021. The survey explained the purpose of the study and assured the anonymity of the respondents. $N = 479$ completed surveys were obtained, with 233 in the experimental group

and 246 in the control group. Nonresponse bias was controlled for by assessing the differences between early and late respondents' responses. All *t*-test comparisons showed non-significant differences.

Higher-order terms are susceptible to outliers (Gefen & Pavlou, 2012). Using both box plots and Mahalanobis Distance for detecting influential and high-leverage outliers (De Maesschalck et al., 2000), fourteen cases (approximately 3%) that exceeded both criteria were excluded, resulting in a final sample size of *n* = 465. Eliminating these outliers did not significantly impact the results, aligned with the research of Bollen and Jackman (1985, p. 511) who state that with large samples it is “unlikely that a few cases are responsible for the observed pattern”. After providing the descriptive statistics, ANOVA was used to assess hypothesis one, and independent samples *t*-tests were used to assess hypothesis two where equality of variance was controlled for using Levene’s test. Where the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated, the appropriate non-parametric test was used.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics and reliability analysis

Table 1 provides an overview of descriptive statistics pertaining to the sample composition. Most respondents from both the control and experimental groups had previously purchased an Apple product. The experimental group presents a slightly older sample with an average age of 48.08 years in contrast to the average of 44.51 in the control group. In both groups, the majority of respondents hold at least a college diploma or certificate program qualification. The *masstige* summated index ranges from 10 to 70 depending on the perceptions of *masstige* of the brand. The higher the index the more successful the brand has been in developing its brand using *masstige* marketing (Paul, 2015). The indices of 41.53 (experimental), 43.84 (control) and 42.71 (complete sample), fall between the 40–50 bracket on the *masstige* mean score index. This indicates that for this particular sample, Apple has not yet succeeded in fully developing their brand based on *masstige* marketing, however, this can occur in the long run (Paul, 2015).

All constructs measured using multi-item scales (brand loyalty: $\alpha = 0.90$; perceived quality: $\alpha = 0.79$; brand equity: $\alpha = 0.94$; brand love: $\alpha = 0.93$) met the internal consistency reliability benchmark (Cronbach’s $\alpha > 0.70$) (Malhotra, 2010). Next, composite scores were created for all constructs (Table 2).

4.2. Brand equity amongst high/low brand love and high/low brand loyal *masstige* consumers

The first hypothesis sought to examine the interplay between brand love and brand loyalty and the resultant impact on *masstige* brand

Table 1
Sample descriptive statistics.

	Experimental Group (<i>n</i> = 229)	Control Group (<i>n</i> = 246)	Overall Sample (<i>n</i> = 465)
<i>Apple customer</i>			
Yes	71.6%	72.0%	71.8%
No	29.2%	28.0%	28.2%
<i>Highest education level</i>			
No formal training	2.6%	5.5%	4.1%
High school diploma	29.3%	33.9%	31.6%
Vocational training	7.9%	6.4%	7.1%
College diploma/certificate	14.0%	14.4%	14.2%
Bachelor’s degree	27.9%	19.9%	23.9%
Master’s degree	14.0%	16.1%	15.1%
Doctoral degree	4.3%	3.8%	4.1%
Age	48.08 years (SD = 17.76)	44.51 years (SD = 18.32)	46.27 years (SD = 18.12)

Table 2
Scale descriptive statistics and reliabilities.

Construct	M	SD	α
Brand equity*	3.06	1.19	0.94
Brand loyalty*	3.03	1.27	0.90
Brand love*	3.95	0.98	0.93
<i>Masstige</i> **	4.27	1.63	0.95
Brand knowledge and prestige	4.14	1.79	0.92
Perceived quality	5.08	1.67	0.87
Excitement and status	3.96	1.69	0.80

* 5-point Likert scale was used.

** 7-point Likert scale was used.

equity. Median splits were used for both the brand love and brand loyalty constructs establishing four distinct groups, with the median and means for both constructs being within 0.01 of one another. The four groups were (1) low brand loyalty and low brand love, (2) low brand loyalty and high brand love, (3) high brand loyalty and low brand love and (4) high brand loyalty and high brand love. Next, we determined how brand equity and the key sub-dimensions of the *masstige* index differed between these different consumer cohorts. Because of the unequal sample sizes across these four groups, we first conducted a homogeneity of variances test (Field, 2013). Indeed, homoscedasticity was present in the data (Levene statistic = 3.19, *p* = 0.02), and we instead used the Brown-Forsythe statistic as a robust test of equality of means (Field, 2013). The four quadrants differed with regards to their level of brand equity ($F_{(3, 142)} = 285.92$; *p* = 0.00), brand knowledge ($F_{(3, 196)} = 258.38$; *p* = 0.00), perceived quality ($F_{(3, 170)} = 85.19$; *p* = 0.00), and excitement and status ($F_{(3, 187)} = 185.19$; *p* = 0.00). Similarly low *p*-values (all smaller than 0.00, across all four dependent variables) were found when the Welch test was used. Pairwise differences between these four groups were also established. The means of each of these constructs across the four groups are summarized in Table 3. Fig. 1 illustrates the distribution between the four groups when comparing the groups on brand equity, brand knowledge, perceived quality and excitement and status.

Table 3
Group sizes and means.

Quadrant	<i>n</i>	%	Brand equity*	Brand knowledge and prestige**	Perceived quality**	Excitement and status**
1. Low brand love - low brand loyalty	205	44.1	2.04	2.67	4.06	2.70
2. Low brand love - high brand loyalty	29	6.2	3.07	3.99	4.57	3.49
3. High brand love - low brand loyalty	41	8.8	3.24	4.52	5.70	4.23
4. High brand love - high brand loyalty	190	40.9	4.12	5.66	6.11	5.33
Total	465	100	3.06	4.14	5.08	3.96

* 5-point Likert scale was used.

** 7-point Likert scale was used.

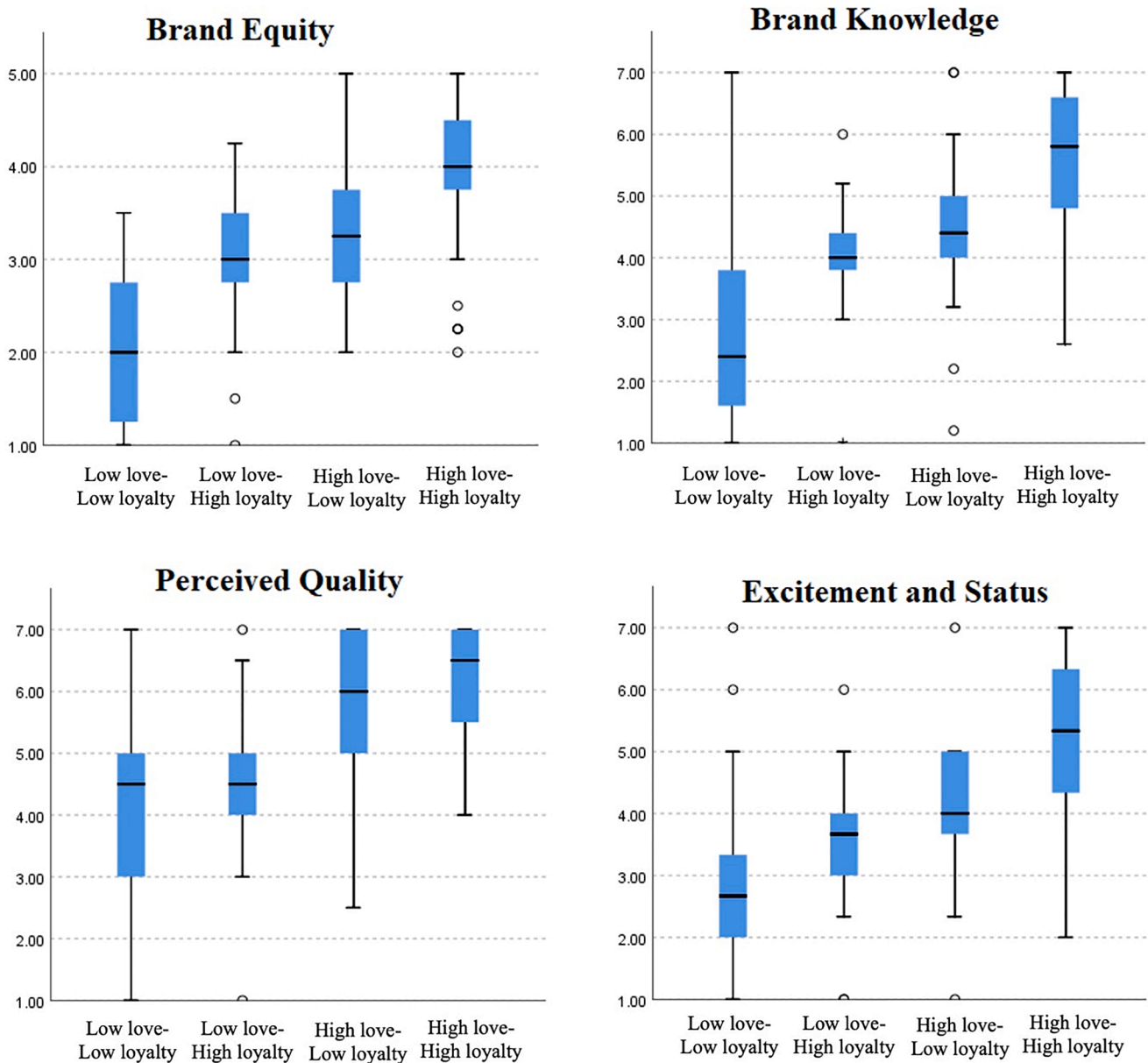


Fig. 1. Brand equity and masstige brand dimensions across the brand love-loyalty matrix.

Figure 1 provides a graphical overview of the distribution of each group with regards to brand equity and the masstige brand dimensions (brand knowledge, perceived quality, excitement and status). Low love-low loyalty consumers performed worst on all four dimensions. Conversely, high love-high loyalty consumers scored the highest on these dimensions. When considering consumers with either high love and low loyalty (or vice versa) it appears that high brand love consumers fared better on both brand equity and the masstige brand dimensions: high love-low loyalty consumers had a higher mean than low love-high loyalty consumers on all four relationship dimensions. It suggests that regardless of the level of brand loyalty, if a consumer has a low level of brand love, they will also likely present a low level of brand equity. The same holds for consumers with a high level of brand love, who will likely present a high level of brand equity. Therefore, brand love as opposed to brand loyalty, in this instance, was key to building brand equity and masstige brand dimensions.

When applying the Games-Howell post-hoc test to the above comparison of means, it was established that the high brand love-high brand loyalty consumers had higher average brand equity than the other three

quadrants (see Table 4). Similar results were found for the brand knowledge and prestige, perceived quality, and excitement and status

Table 4
Post-hoc multiple comparisons.

Multiple comparisons (Games-Howell): 4. High brand love, high brand loyalty				
	Brand equity	Brand knowledge and prestige**	Perceived quality**	Excitement and status**
1. Low brand love, low brand loyalty	2.08*	2.99*	2.05*	2.63*
2. Low brand love, high brand loyalty	1.05*	1.67*	1.54*	1.83*
3. High brand love, low brand loyalty	0.88*	1.15*	0.42	1.10*

* Significant at a 1% level of significance.

** Dimensions of masstige brand (Paul, 2019).

measures. Interestingly, high brand love-high brand loyalty consumers did not differ from high brand love-low brand loyalty consumers with regards to their perceived brand quality. This was the only dimension across all four constructs where high brand love-high brand loyalty was not significantly higher than the group it was compared with. This could suggest that the perceived quality of the brand is important to high brand love consumers.

Interestingly, 41 percent of the high brand love-low brand loyalty segment had not purchased an Apple product before. Therefore, respondents did not need to own or be loyal to a brand in order to have brand love towards the brand.

4.3. The impact of perceived masstige brand betrayal on the consumer-brand relationship

The second hypothesis examined the impact of a masstige brand betrayal on the consumer-brand relationship. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted between the experimental and control groups for each of the key constructs (brand love, brand loyalty and brand equity), to first understand the overall impact of the brand betrayal (Table 5).

As Table 5 indicates, while mean values were lower in the experimental group for all three constructs (brand loyalty (*H_{2A}*), brand equity (*H_{2B}*) and brand love (*H_{2C}*)), only brand love differed significantly at a 5% level of significance while brand equity differed significantly at a 10% level of significance. This implies that while brand loyalty was not immediately impacted by the brand betrayal, the consumer-brand relationship was negatively impacted which also had a managerially significant impact on brand equity.

5. Discussion

This research sought to examine the interaction between brand love and brand loyalty as consumer-brand relationship dimensions, and its impact on the brand equity of a masstige brand; as well as the subsequent impact of a brand betrayal on the consumer-brand relationship. Findings from the first research question established four clear consumer segments based on brand love and brand loyalty. The findings indicate that the four quadrants of high/low brand love and high/low brand loyalty not only differ regarding the brand equity of the masstige brand, but also with regards to the three sub-dimensions of the masstige index: brand knowledge and prestige, perceived quality, and excitement and status. In addition, consumers did not need to have previously purchased the brand to belong to either of the high brand love quadrants. The brand love-loyalty matrix (Fig. 2) was developed and is discussed next to offer further insight into these differing group segments of masstige brand consumers.

The first quadrant presents *Detached* consumers who exhibit both low brand love and brand loyalty. They are either brand agnostic, have a damaged relationship with the brand, or prefer a competitor brand for which they may have a strong affinity. Irrespective of their motivation, these consumers are least likely to purchase the masstige brand. Significant investment would be required to develop the brand love and/or brand loyalty of these consumers, however, there is no guarantee that this investment would yield a return. *Going Steady* consumers exhibit

high brand loyalty and low levels of brand love. These consumers continue to purchase from the brand, not necessarily because they have a strong emotional connection to the brand, but perhaps due to circumstantial factors and convenience. They may be satisfied with the brand utility but have no emotive bond with the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), or they may be dissatisfied but the perceived risk or effort associated with switching brands may be too high. These consumers may not have the time or inclination to acquaint themselves with new technological functionalities (for example switching from an Apple to a Samsung operating system), they may not have access to the brand of their choice (for example limited distribution of one fashion brand over another), or they are contractually bound to their purchase for a certain period of time. These consumers present a high-risk consumer category for masstige brands, as they may be unhappy with the brand or have no emotional attachment to the brand. *Yearning* consumers are those that have high brand love while presenting low levels of brand loyalty. These individuals may be longing to become loyal to the brand but are unable to because of current circumstances or constraints, which if removed, will likely result in increased attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. Whether these consumers have purchased the brand before or not, they currently do not purchase it but may aspire to do so in future. In our sample, 40 percent of consumers had not yet purchased the brand, but still declared their love for the brand. These consumers present the greatest untapped market, because when luxury brands become accessible to these consumers as part of a masstige strategy, they would be the most likely consumer group to start purchasing the brand. *Devoted* consumers are those that love the brand and remain loyal. These faithful consumers are likely to remain loyal to the brand and will most likely not be tempted to switch to competitors.

The second research question focused on how consumer-brand relationship dimensions are impacted when consumers are confronted with a masstige brand betrayal. Our findings suggest that stronger brand relationships do not shield masstige brands against perceived brand betrayals. While there was no significant decrease in brand loyalty, both brand love and brand equity decreased in the event of a masstige brand betrayal, suggesting that the fortifying effect that authors suggest luxury brands enjoy (Zhang et al., 2021), does not necessarily extend to masstige brands.

6. Implications for theory

Many consumer-brand relationship studies posit that brand loyalty is the apex of these relationships and consequently use brand loyalty as the most salient measure of success - at the repudiation of others. As consumers become aware of a brand, they move through various stages of emotional commitment to ultimately become loyal to the brand (Kaufman et al., 2019). Aligning with the recent work of Nawaz et al. (2020), we propose that brand love may be even more important than brand loyalty in establishing a positive consumer-brand relationship. In particular, our results suggest that brand love is a bigger driver than brand loyalty when building brand equity for a brand that offers consumers high hedonic, prestige and symbolic value, such as masstige brands. We show that consumers who exhibit low brand love towards a masstige brand will also regard that brand as having a lower level of brand equity, regardless of their expressed level of brand loyalty towards that brand.

Using both brand love and brand loyalty as consumer-brand relationship dimensions, however, provides additional nuanced insights regarding how masstige brands can build relationships with various consumer segments. Four consumer segments that manifest on the brand love-loyalty matrix are identified: consumers with high brand love and brand loyalty (*Devoted*), high brand love and low brand loyalty (*Yearning*), low brand love and high brand loyalty (*Going steady*), and low brand love and low brand loyalty (*Detached*). This study, therefore, suggests that research focusing solely on brand loyalty as a key outcome of the consumer-brand relationship would fail to recognize that loyal

Table 5
Control and experimental group descriptive and inferential statistics.

	N	Brand loyalty		Brand equity		Brand love	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Control group	236	3.08	1.25	3.15	1.20	3.23	1.00
Experimental group	229	2.97	1.29	2.96	1.17	3.04	0.95
<i>t</i> -statistic and <i>p</i> -value		<i>t</i> = -0.93 (<i>p</i> = 0.35)		<i>t</i> = -1.75 (<i>p</i> = 0.08)*		<i>t</i> = -2.04 (<i>p</i> = 0.04)**	

* Significant at a 10% level of significance.

** Significant at a 5% level of significance.

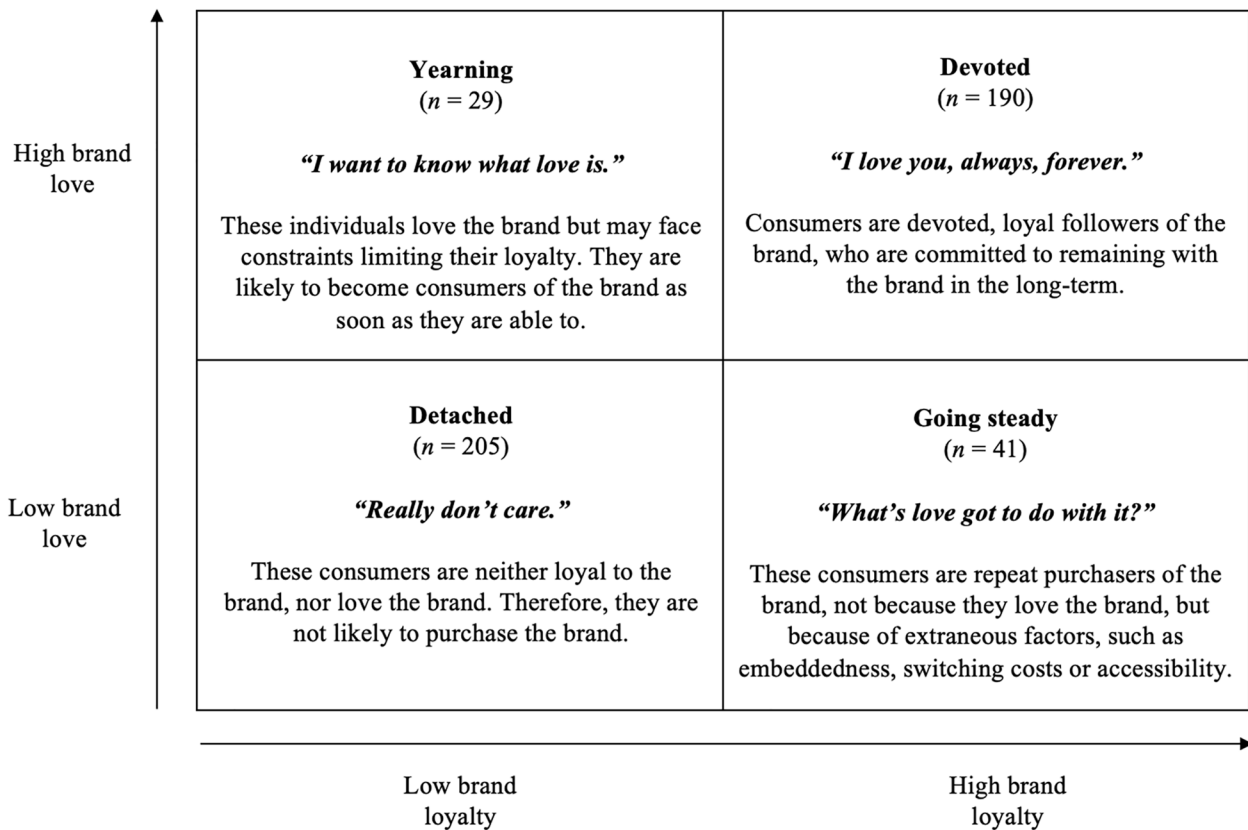


Fig. 2. The brand love-loyalty matrix.

brand consumers do not love the brand. Or that there may be consumers who love the brand but are not yet loyal to it.

Because brand love offers symbolic benefits to consumers (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), logic dictates that this would extend to the aspirational nature of masstige brands, and there may well be consumers who love a brand but are not yet able to purchase the brand due to financial or other constraints. In the consumer-brand relationship literature, our current understanding of the brand love construct excludes consumers who have not yet purchased a product from the brand. In fact, a key dimension of brand love is continued satisfaction with the brand over time, where long-term satisfaction emerges from repeated transactions with the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). In this study there were, however, several high brand love consumers who were not loyal to the brand, of those, 40 percent had never purchased from the brand. There was no difference between the *Yearners*’ (high brand love and low brand loyalty) and *Devotees*’ (high brand love and high brand loyalty) perceived quality of the brand, yet the *Yearners* had little to no interaction with the brand.

Therefore, this study extends our current understanding of the dynamics of the brand love construct to include consumers who’ve had limited, direct interaction with the brand (i.e., love at first sight) and those who have had no direct interaction with the brand, but have formed a strong positive emotional connection with the brand nonetheless. This could be due to its presence in their lives through different brand interactions, e.g., through advertising and the media, or word-of-mouth from colleagues or friends. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that a potentially improved definition of brand love is simply the level of impassioned emotional connection that a consumer attaches to a brand, while excluding the requirement of having to be a “satisfied customer” as prescribed by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006, p. 81).

Contributing to the discourse regarding the impact of brand betrayal on the consumer-brand relationship of a beloved masstige brand, our study suggests that the betrayal negatively impacts both consumers’

brand love and brand equity. While perceived brand betrayals may not immediately result in a decrease in brand loyalty or sales, masstige brands should heed against developing brand blind spots. Brand misdeeds clearly have an impact on the consumer-brand relationship norms and seem to chip away at a consumer’s brand love. The relational consequences of diminishing brand love may have detrimental long-term implications on the consumer-brand relationship and lead to the “long good-bye” (Coulter & Ligas, 2000, p. 669) and subsequent dissolution of the relationship.

From the brand’s perspective, rekindling brand love after consumers experienced a feeling of brand betrayal may prove to be financially costly if the consumers were brand loyal and purchased from the brand (*Devotees*). In the case of low brand loyalty (*Yearners*), picking up the pieces may be easier, as these consumers may have been emotionally invested in the brand but not yet economically invested. Here, the subtleties involved in brand love and betrayal would arguably also need to be considered. For example, also looking at additional dimensions of the consumer-brand relationship, such as devotion (Hemetsberger et al., 2009) and disappointment (Tan et al., 2021). Understanding how deep the level of impassioned emotional connection is that a consumer attaches to one’s brand, could reveal more about the relational dynamics and impact of the transgression. Yet, considering that masstige brands are positioned to provide self-expressive prestige, but financially attainable benefits, it stands to argue that the long-term impact of brand betrayal may be less severe when a consumer is not yet brand loyal and the economic effects of the betrayal on them have been limited.

7. Implications for practice

Brand love is critically important to both existing masstige brands and luxury brands considering entering the masstige market through brand or product extensions. If luxury brands can make their brand more accessible, while maintaining the customer experience to such an extent

that brand love will be maintained, they are more likely to successfully launch a masstige product or brand extension. These masstige lines can be either brand or product extensions. Luxury brands thus need to ascertain if consumers' current brand love stems from intimate high-touch experiences, and whether these can be duplicated at scale. The decision tree in Fig. 3 illustrates the key questions luxury brands should ask themselves before embarking on a masstige brand strategy, considering the amount of brand love that exists for the brand.

First, luxury brands need to ascertain whether they have a large number of consumers in the high brand love and low brand loyalty segment (i.e., *Yearners*), and try to understand what is inhibiting these consumers from first time or repeat purchases. These consumers either have not bought the brand before, or they do so infrequently, which offers the brand an opportunity to increase their market share if they do extend to a masstige product line. If the number of consumers in this segment justifies embarking on a masstige brand strategy, the luxury brand needs to ascertain whether they will be able to maintain their current level of brand love among consumers if they make their brand more accessible to a larger market segment. In other words, how important is the exclusivity of the brand to consumers' overall brand love? In addition, some luxury brands build their consumer-brand relationships through highly personalized brand interactions, which may not be extendable to a mass market through a masstige brand strategy.

If, however, a luxury brand can maintain consumers' current levels of brand love while making certain products within the product portfolio available to a larger audience (for example, making Hermes clutch bags at a fraction of the price of Birkin and Kelly bags, or Hermes scarves), then a *product extension* masstige strategy is most suited to the brand. A product extension is a strategy of placing an established product's brand name on a new product in the same product category. If, however, consumers' brand love is highly dependent on the current

branding and distribution strategy (and most likely its associated exclusivity), then a *brand extension* masstige strategy may be better suited to the luxury brand. Brand extensions entail the use of a brand in new product categories, and their success in the luxury brand context has received much attention in the literature (Albrecht et al., 2013; Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2009). Luxury brand extensions aimed at reaching a broader target market can span from the hospitality industry (for example the 1921 Gucci restaurant in Shanghai) to non-fungible tokens or NFTs (for example Gucci releasing digital shoes with the virtual sneaker application Wanna).

The brand love-loyalty matrix also reveals a hidden risk for masstige brands: consumers who are brand loyal but do not love the brand. Whether these consumers are dissatisfied with the brand or simply have no emotional attachment to the brand, consumer-brand relationships that have some emotional dimension to them are stronger than those who do not. There are many utilitarian brands that consumers do not need to have an emotional connection with. However, the price premium that masstige brands warrant requires a stronger relationship with the consumer. When the cost and barriers of switching brands reduce, these consumers are more likely to switch. In addition, they may be easily disrupted by new entrants in the market. Therefore, (re)building brand love becomes critical.

8. Conclusion

The findings from this study present masstige brands with both an opportunity and a challenge. Following Silverstein and Fiske's (2003) seminal article on masstige, the majority of research has focused on the potential benefits that luxury brands would enjoy following a masstige strategy. However, before employing a masstige brand positioning strategy, brands need to consider how the high love-high loyalty

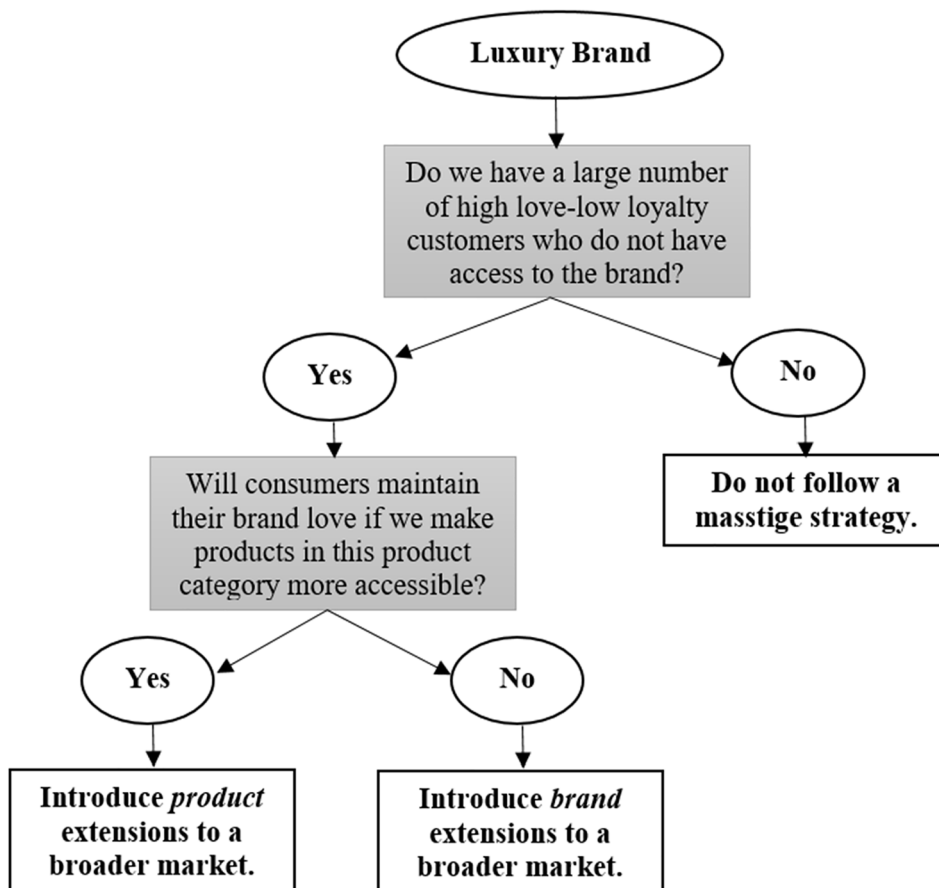


Fig. 3. The masstige product vs. brand extension decision tree.

consumer-brand relationship that consumers enjoy with traditional luxury brands would extend to *masstige* brands. Therefore, the challenge lies in maintaining the intimate consumer-brand relationship that traditional luxury brands usually offer. It is difficult, if not impossible, to use the same consumer-brand relationship strategies that have been used for a niche or mass market brand. Our findings suggest that entering *masstige* markets require brands to not only adapt their brand positioning strategy, but also their consumer-brand relationship strategy.

This paper provides one such strategy through the use of the brand love-loyalty matrix. The four segments presented in Fig 2 provide *masstige* brands with a framework with which to approach their consumer-brand relationships: The only converted consumers (i.e., those currently purchasing the brand) are *Devoted* and *Going Steady* consumers. However, thinking that all these consumers will maintain their loyalty in the future creates a false sense of complacency amongst brands, and distinction should be made between these two segments. While *Devoted* consumer-brand relationships can simply be maintained, *masstige* brands should actively endeavor to increase the brand love of *Going Steady* consumers. Focusing on simply increasing or maintaining brand loyalty, we believe, is short-sighted. *Masstige* brands should also focus on building brand love to generate long term brand equity.

On the other hand, an opportunity exists to tap into the market presented by the *Yearning* segment. Most brands grow their market share by spending money trying to convert consumers. A *masstige* brand strategy, in particular, focuses on expanding market share. However, the group of consumers who are not currently loyal to the brand is represented through both the *Yearning* and *Detached* segments. Based on their higher level of brand love, *masstige* brands will have greater success in converting these consumers by understanding the obstacles in their way and rekindling their brand love when a perceived brand betrayal occurs. Innovative business strategies such as those employed by Rent the Runway and XaaS (anything as a service) are ideal ways in which to target this market as they already love the brand but may not have access to it at the moment.

9. Limitations and recommendations for future researchers

Many of the limitations of this research are related to methodological decisions that may limit the scope of the research. First, the selection of a factual brand betrayal could have impacted consumer response and the use of a fictional brand betrayal, could have influenced the results of this research. However, the potential for knowledge advancement may be negated by the potential for damaging brand reputation when using a depiction of a fictitious brand betrayal. Second, the selection of the Apple brand as the focus brand in this research again may impact the results on brand equity and brand love, given the often-termed 'cult like' following (Wu, 2019) of the brand. This intense loyalty may not be apparent when considering other *masstige* brands and as such may experience a greater consumer backlash following a brand betrayal.

Another limitation was incurred when the sample was split into four groups by applying the brand love-loyalty matrix. When we grouped the sample into high/low brand love and high/low brand loyalty, it reduced the statistical power of the study. These groupings were created post-hoc and resulted in an unequal spread of consumers across the four quadrants, violating certain assumptions of parametric group comparison tests (e.g., ANOVA). Replication studies should thus focus on increasing the sample sizes of the less represented groups (i.e., low love-high loyalty and high love-low loyalty) and attempt to attain a relatively equal sample size across all four groups. However, because consumer-brand relationships are emotion-driven, we expect the majority of consumers to polarize on either side of the spectrum as either high love-high loyalty or low love-low loyalty consumers. Better understanding what would cause consumer-brand relationships to deviate from this assumption would be an important future research topic.

Research concerning *masstige* brands, and in particular brand love of

these brands, is in its infancy and there are numerous areas for future research. While most of the research on brand love was done in the early 2000 s, with some more recent research coming to the fore, the construct has not received the attention it rightly deserves. This may be due to fuzzy definitions and unclear boundaries of its relevance. The brand love construct and its application to different brand, marketing and business contexts need to be further explored. Potential areas to explore include an examination of the interplay between brand love and brand loyalty in differing hedonic versus utilitarian product contexts and how this would impact these products' brand equity. In addition, we argue that it is time to revisit the consumer-brand relationship model to 1) establish where brand love belongs in the consumer-brand relationship spectrum, and 2) to determine if these consumer-brand relationships are different for traditional luxury vs. *masstige* brands.

Future research should endeavor to both confirm and expand the brand love-loyalty matrix and assess its application to other hedonic and traditional luxury brands. More importantly, a clearer understanding is needed of what inhibits high brand love-low brand loyalty consumers from purchasing their loved brand, and which factors are precluding low brand love-high brand loyalty consumers from leaving.

The area of brand betrayal also deserves further exploration. The source of the brand betrayal could further serve as an additional comparison. For example, contrasting a *masstige* brand betrayal identified by consumers (for example, consumer outrage over reports of bullying and harassment at Victoria's Secret in 2020), with brand betrayal identified and brought forward by the brand (for example, the safety recall of certain Toyota Lexus vehicles in 2020, due to faulty fuel pumps). Future research should further investigate why brand loyalty was differently impacted by brand betrayal than brand love. In particular, examining why the brand betrayal did not affect loyalty to the same extent, and which external variables impact this relationship (for example relational embeddedness and demographics such as age). Finally, the process of rekindling brand love after a brand discrepancy or betrayal has occurred is an area that also warrants further research.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Jeandri Robertson: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization.
Elsamari Botha: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.
Caitlin Ferreira: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.
Leyland Pitt: Conceptualization, Project administration, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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