Layers of love – exploring the interactive layers of brand love in the social media setting

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to add to the understanding of the interactive nature of brand love by using a multilayer perspective that incorporates individual, group and societal contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – The qualitative empirical study uses abductive reasoning. Its theories and conclusions are grounded in naturally occurring data from an online brand community. The approach revealed new interactive processes of brand love.

Findings – This study extends our understanding of the interactive nature of brand love by adopting a layered perspective incorporating micro- (individual), meso- (in-group), macro- (in-group vs out-group) and mega-layer (societal) social dynamics that complements the predominant focus on individual psychological processes. It challenges the linear, monodirectional trajectory approach to brand love, suggesting that brand love is in constant flux as individuals move across the layers in their identification with the brand.

Research limitations/implications – This study provides data from one destination brand in Finland. Future studies could consider other types of brands and contexts in other countries and cultures.

Practical implications – This study shows brand managers that brand lovers can be divided into subgroups with distinct drivers of their love to which brand managers should attend.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first attempt to describe the interactive nature of brand love through interactions between and within four layers of brand love. Furthermore, this study enhances our understanding of the contradictory aspects of brand love.

Keywords Brand love, Brand relationships, Interactions, Destination brand, Destination brand love, Social media, WOM

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Brands that elicit strong emotional responses have been identified as either loved (Bagozzi *et al.*, 2017; Batra *et al.*, 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006) or hated (Fetscherin, 2019; Hu *et al.*, 2018; Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016). Brand love can be regarded as a strong emotional, cognitive and behavioral relationship between a consumer and a brand, which includes self–brand

integration, passion-driven behaviors, positive emotional connections and attitude valence (Batra *et al.*, 2012). As brand love confers several benefits on the brand, such as loyalty (Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014), positive word-of-mouth (WOM) (Filieri *et al.*, 2021) and resistance to negative information (Wallace *et al.*, 2014), understanding the interactive processes of brand love is a benefit to both academics and marketing practitioners. The current literature generally portrays brand love as a wholly positive and stable phenomenon (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), giving the impression that brand love is always identical for every party. Consequently, the possibility that brand love is rather more paradoxical, inconsistent and contested has largely been overlooked.

To explore these more dynamic and interactive processes of brand love, we focus on adding to the understanding of its interactive nature by using a multi-layer perspective incorporating individual, group and societal contexts. Whereas the majority of extant brand-love studies have focused on its individual, psychological aspects (Ahuvia *et al.*, 2009; Batra *et al.*, 2012) or identified its antecedents and consequences (Amaro *et al.*, 2020; Albert and Merunka, 2013; Bairrada *et al.*, 2018; Rahman *et al.*, 2021), examinations of the group and societal contexts remain scarce. In addition, there have been few examinations of the interactions between these three contexts. Consequently, the contribution of this article is to offer a more qualitative view of brand love by addressing the following research question:

How do expressions of brand love reflect the interaction between and within an individual psychological context and group-oriented and societal-oriented social contexts?

This study uses abductive reasoning (Kovács and Spens, 2005) and broadly follows a grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theoretical knowledge and empirical data are closely intertwined as we build on and report them in parallel, and the analysis can be described as emergent rather than linear (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). We draw on the theory of brand love (Ahuvia *et al.*, 2009; Bairrada *et al.*, 2018; Batra *et al.*, 2012) and adopt the idea of in-groups and out-groups from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974). Social identity theory addresses a situation where "people strive for positive self-esteem and try to accomplish this by enhancing their group membership" (Homburg *et al.*, 2009, p. 48) and "[. . .] strive to raise the status of the group to which they belong" (Homburg *et al.*, 2009, p. 43). Empirically, we focus on an online community for a popular Finnish outdoor destination brand, representing an example of a brand community. Destination brands are under-studied brand contexts for love (Aro *et al.*, 2018; Bairrada *et al.*, 2018) encouraged extending brand love studies to novel contexts.

Social media is an important channel for self-expression and a place to create and maintain social relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic has made internet-based interactions more relevant to research than ever. On social media, brands can be tools to communicate the self to others (Wallace *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, WOM offers a way for people to express their personality and positive WOM, whether expressed online or offline, is strongly connected with brand love (Amaro *et al.*, 2020; Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016; Kudeshia *et al.*, 2016; Strandberg and Ek Styvén, 2020). Brand love may even include a declaration of love (Batra *et al.*, 2012). We consider that electronic WOM (eWOM) expressed in a brand's online community offers an opportunity to observe naturally occurring data representing how individuals interact with each other and the brand. Accordingly, in our study, eWOM is the mechanism that helps understand the interactions. Participant observation assists our interpretation of eWOM and provides insider insights into the studied phenomenon.

The contribution of this paper lies in its description of brand love as a layered brand relationship that involves group identifications, intergroup competition and perceptions of self in relation to the brand, in-groups, out-groups and the societal context. The results show that what initially seems paradoxical, inconsistent and contested can be explained through understanding expressions of brand love in relation to their social context on four layers:

micro, meso, macro and mega. At the practical level, this could help brand managers build strong relationships with their customers. The paper is structured as follows. First, the theoretical elaboration on brand love and its individual and group interactions is discussed in Section 2. Next, we describe the study's methodology, context and data analysis in Section 3. Subsequently, the findings are reported and discussed in Section 4. Finally, the theoretical conclusions and managerial implications are presented in Section 5, together with the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical elaboration

2.1 Interaction between individual and brand

Brand love is a strong and positive relationship/bond between an individual and a brand (Aro *et al.*, 2018). The literature conceptualizes brand love as a multidimensional construct comprising self–brand integration (identification with the brand), a positive emotional connection, attitude valence, anticipated separation distress and passion-driven behaviors (Bagozzi *et al.*, 2017; Batra *et al.*, 2012). There is a feeling of intimacy and closeness with the loved brand (Bairraida *et al.*, 2018). These emotions are reported to be mainly positive, such as a positive emotional connection (Batra *et al.*, 2012), passion for the brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), positive emotions in response to the brand (like joy) and an attraction to the brand (Albert *et al.*, 2008).

Identification may be the most meaningful part of brand love (Ahuvia *et al.*, 2009). People who identify with a particular brand feel that it is a suitable match for them; this can be referred to as the self–brand connection (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Identification with a brand may stem from a connection with an individual's inner self and/or social self (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Brands connecting with the inner self are more likely to be passionately loved and the fit with the inner self to strengthen over time (Huber *et al.*, 2015). Further, this self–brand integration may occur through an individual's current or desired self-identity (Batra *et al.*, 2012). Current self-identity, referring to who the particular person is, and the desired self-identity, referring to who they would like to be, has been described as a categorization process (Turner, 1985). In the case of extreme brand love, it is noted that "There is no separation of current and desired future identity for the intensely loving fan, over time their identification with the team has become complete; they are one" (Daniels *et al.*, 2020, p. 2211). A person who loves a brand will feel it fits with every facet of their identity.

In addition, brand love is connected with more extrovert needs for self-expression, in that an individual can express themselves through the brand (Batra *et al.*, 2012). Further, brand love is connected to self-extension in that brands can be seen as physical extensions of the body or brain (Ahuvia *et al.*, 2009; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014). In addition to a loved brand being part of an individual's self-identity, a loving individual may see themselves as a meaningful part of the brand and its success (Daniels *et al.*, 2020).

While the current literature perhaps offers an overly positive picture of brand love, some negativity can be identified. From a consumer's perspective, brand love can engender negative feelings from anticipated separation distress (Batra *et al.*, 2012) and even brand jealousy when others use the brand (Sarkar and Sreejesh, 2014). In addition, some negativity has also been identified in that lovers of a brand can harm the brand's image (Daniels *et al.*, 2020; Story, 2020). That might be the case if a brand user acts inappropriately; for example, if a brand lover of a sports team is violent at a football game, or a driver of a certain car brand is inconsiderate of other road users. Further, brand love can play a paradoxical role in brand failure. Brand love is connected to resistance to negative brand experiences (Aro *et al.*, 2018); however, some research indicates that if brand failure is severe and consumers cease to associate the brand with fairness and goodwill, they can feel betrayed and love can then

turn to hate (Zhang *et al.*, 2020, see also, Grégoire *et al.*, 2009; Hegner *et al.*, 2017). Other research suggests that a consumer with a strong relationship with the brand will forgive failures if the brand owners apologize and admit the mistake (Grégoire *et al.*, 2009).

Interactions between an individual and a brand, and fluctuations in the contextual environment, change consumer–brand relationships (Alvarez *et al.*, 2021; Fournier, 1998): "relationships between consumers and brands just as between individuals inevitably change over time" (Huber *et al.*, 2015, p. 574). However, existing literature has predominantly approached brand love as a static phenomenon, investigating how individuals explain why they feel strong emotions and have certain cognitions about the focal brand (antecedents of brand love) and how that influences their behavior (the consequences of brand love).

The prior literature acknowledging the dynamic nature of brand love tends to focus on changes over long periods and in terms of linear, mono-directional *trajectories*. Further, such trajectories describe dynamics from an individual perspective. Langner *et al.* (2016, p. 19) suggested five trajectories of brand love on a continuum from *love all the way* to a *bumpy road*. Palusuk *et al.* (2019) presented a dynamic view with three trajectories of brand love (inspired by Langner *et al.*, 2016), while Huber *et al.* (2015) and Schmid and Huber (2019) suggested that the sub-dimensions of brand love – such as passion or utilitarian value – evolve. Moreover, Aro *et al.* (2018) noted that brand-love relationships might change over time. Nevertheless, the descriptions of brand love lack interactions and neglect to describe ongoing changes (i.e. dynamicity) that are apparent in the interactions between the individual and the loved brand.

2.2 Interactions between and within groups

Communal elements of brand love have been discussed in terms of supplementing the dyadic approach to brand love that highlights the development of self in interaction with the loved brand. Identification with the brand users (Albert and Merunka, 2013) and a sense of community with other consumers (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010) constitute mechanisms of brand love. However, love for a brand is probably a more important factor in a brand acquiring positive WOM, loyalty and advocacy on social media than a commitment to the community (Coelho *et al.*, 2019). Further, brand love includes a willingness to identify as a member of an in-group or a supporter of a loved brand (Osuna Ramírez *et al.*, 2019). Social identification has a positive connection with brand love. Online brand communities encourage the formation of social identity by offering a meaningful social media context that encourages participation and interaction (Vernuccio *et al.*, 2015). However, the construction of brand love in interaction with other consumers has been largely overlooked (Schmid and Huber, 2019; Rodrigues *et al.*, 2020).

Social identity is the "individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1974, p. 185; Vernuccio *et al.*, 2015, p. 708). It is connected to three types of components: cognitive, emotional and evaluative (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Dholakia *et al.*, 2004). Cognitive social identity refers to the self-awareness of being a member of a group and seeing similarities with an in-group and dissimilarities with members of an out-group. Emotional social identity comprises two aspects: emotional attachment to the brand/in-group (love) and positive feelings stirred by being a member of that in-group (joy). Evaluative social identity is about an individual's evaluation of their self-worth based on belonging to the group. When self-esteem is threatened by group failure, people tend to respond in ways that help maintain their positive identity and self-worth by cutting off reflected failure (Branscombe *et al.*, 1993; Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000).

A consumer's social identity is a combination of internal and external conversations (Sirgy, 1982). The inner conversation is a private, continuous process based on memories, values, family relationships, brand experiences and life experiences. The external conversation comprises public communication with individuals, groups, brands and other stakeholders, which helps the consumer build a social identity, that is, to express themselves. The inner conversation guides the consumer's identification with either the in-group or out-group, whereas the external conversation allows them to express that identification (Maheshwari, 1974 in Sirgy and Danes, 1982; Stets and Burke, 2000).

The concept of social identity can be seen as a way to develop strong customer–brand bonds (Homburg *et al.*, 2009). Online network-based communities permit people to address their *need to belong* (Gangadharbatla, 2008), while group norms influence social identity (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004). Vernuccio *et al.* (2015) asserted that in the context of social media, a beloved brand could be seen as a tool for self-construction with other relevant people (Sprott *et al.*, 2009) and as a facilitator of meaningful interpersonal interactions with other brand fans (Batra *et al.*, 2012). People join online brand networks to connect with the brand itself and with other brand users (Wallace *et al.*, 2014; Palazon *et al.*, 2019). Further, identification with other users of the same brand, not just with the brand itself, is part of brand love (Aro *et al.*, 2018). Individuals' descriptions of themselves and how they connect with other people in networks create their self-identity on Facebook (Schau and Gilly, 2003). Consequently, for example, on Facebook, people *like* brands to build their online self-expression (Lipsman *et al.*, 2012), and there is a strong bond between brand love and people posting a brand photo on their Facebook pages (Kaiser *et al.*, 2020).

Shuv-Ami *et al.* (2020) drew on social identity theory and mixed emotions theory to propose that the mixed emotions of love for a sports team (in-group) and hate for a competing team (out-group) have a significant impact on sports fans' behavior. Escalas and Bettman (2005, p. 378) noted that "[. . .] brands with images consistent with an in-group enhance self–brand connections for all consumers, whereas brands with images that are consistent with an out-group have a stronger negative effect on independent versus interdependent consumers." Accordingly, "consumers reject the social meaning of brands that arise from out-group brand usage" (Escalas and Bettman, 2005, p. 388). Furthermore, although the criteria for membership of an in-group are relatively loose (e.g. age, gender and nationality), members may favor the in-group and discriminate against the out-group without experiencing any conflict with group interests (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; see also Lin and Bruning, 2020; Bagozzi *et al.*, 2017).

As noted above, the influence of in-groups and out-groups on consumers' construction and projection of self in their relationship with brands is well-researched (Escales and Bettman, 2005; Bearden and Etzel, 1982). Members of an in-group (in this case, brand lovers) are likely to exhibit supportive behavior toward other in-group members (e.g. in the form of social evaluations, rewards and help). Furthermore, such behaviors are equally likely to focus on distancing strategies deployed against the perceived out-group, which can, in extreme cases, be expressed as hate.

We view brand love as becoming visible when consumers engage in social interaction through eWOM. Therefore, eWOM is not just a consequence of brand love; in the social media context, it is the key mechanism that sustains the momentum of loving. This study focuses on the interactive processes of brand love in the social media setting. Accordingly, the next section leans on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) to examine how these processes become visible in one form of self-expression, namely, WOM. We suggest that understanding these interactive processes requires comprehending the interactions between and within the contexts of brand love, namely, the individual, group and societal contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Philosophical assumptions

This study stems from the ontological position of constructivism, which "asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors. It implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision" (Bryman, 2001, pp. 16–18 in Grix, 2002). Further, we adopt the epistemological position of interpretivism, which "requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action" (Bryman, 2001, pp. 12–13 in Grix, 2002). The study uses abductive reasoning (Kovács and Spens, 2005) that involves the research process looping back and forth between theory and empirical data in iteration (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). We conducted a qualitative empirical investigation to facilitate studying a contemporary, complex social phenomenon within its real-life context (Grix, 2002).

The study broadly applies a grounded theory methodology in accordance with its aim of advancing the current understanding of the interactive nature of brand love.

Grounded theory uses an inductive approach to developing theory from data, according to which theory development is grounded in the data instead of predefined hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Because we use naturally occurring data *in vivo* (Silverman, 2000), this approach allows us to form categories and work toward identifying processes of brand love based on our data. Nevertheless, the extant theorization in the area of brand love was not neglected but pursued to assimilate a variety of perspectives into the methodology. We have attempted to combine distinct theories of brand love into the research design (Dolbec *et al.*, 2021). Instead of applying the completely open techniques suggested in grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), we were guided by broad topics discovered in the existing literature.

Therefore, the emergent conclusions and theories were grounded in, but not strictly restricted to, the data (Backman and Kyngäs, 1999). The aim was to attain theoretical triangulation (Patton, 2015).

3.2 Data gathering and roles of different data sets

Our data were gathered from a Finnish destination brand, Ylläs, described in the next sub-section (Giannopoulos *et al.*, 2020; Govers and Go, 2009). Data and method triangulation were performed (Patton, 2015), as two types of primary data were collected: the brand's postings and consumers' responses from the online community, that is, the destination brand's Facebook page; and participant observation from the destination brand. Triangulation was used to validate the qualitative analysis (Patton, 2015). Further, the first author interviewed the then CEO of Visit Ylläs by telephone to fact-check procedures on the destination brand's use of Facebook and how Ylläs moderates discussions. The CEO confirmed that the brand's administration had deleted only one or two negative comments. Accordingly, the Facebook data represents the natural reactions of members of the Ylläs online community.

The Facebook data guided the analysis and were central to answering the research question, whereas participant observation served as a complementary source. Facebook was selected for this study because during the data-gathering period it was both the dominant global social media platform (Machado *et al.*, 2019) and Finland's most widely-used public social media discussion platform (Meltwater, 2019; Stat, 2020).

We followed eWOM in this online brand community (Kozinets, 2009), which acts as an online forum for brand supporters and other users' interaction, through which it was possible to explore the interactive nature of brand love. All the Facebook materials

harvested between January 2020 and March 2020 were included in the data underpinning this study. The effects of the first outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic were visible in our data.

The first author gathered all the posts, comments and reactions from Facebook, resulting in 125 posts, 103,997 reactions, 2,676 comments and 2,688 shares.

The Facebook material was complemented by observation (Dewalt and Dewalt, 2011). The first author followed the destination's Facebook page for several years before initiating the study and continued for two-and-a-half years after the data collection ended. She also sometimes reacts and comments on the brand's postings. Furthermore, she had visited Ylläs for more than 30 years, interacting with visitors to and residents of the destination. She therefore had first-hand experience of the places and services mentioned in postings and comments. This familiarity with the conversational contexts improved our understanding of the data, the tone of voice in comments and the implicit meanings conveyed (Kozinets, 2009). Active participation in the brand-related discussion offered the authors insights into the underlying mechanisms involved in expressing yourself through a brand.

3.3 Study example

People more often love places and landscapes than other objects (Ahuvia, 1993). We see destination brands as entities comprising the destination itself and marketing activities to create a tempting tourist destination. The destination is a key element of the brand, and its landscape, history, weather, geography, culture, language and people are a meaningful part of the brand's DNA. These are more or less immutable and offer a naturally unique frame for the brand. Marketing activities include branding, services and improving infrastructure, which all affect the tourism experience (Govers and Go, 2009). The ownership of a destination brand is usually unclear because several service providers, the host municipality, its inhabitants and landowners may all have a claim, leading to possible challenges in the distribution of responsibilities (Fan, 2006). Further, in the destination context, visitors are a meaningful part of the brand, not just its users, as their presence is part of how other visitors experience the destination.

In the context of destination brands, brand love is a strong form of emotional place bond, where attachment to a place or destination is a relevant part, sometimes an antecedent, of brand love (Aro *et al.*, 2018). Further, positive eWOM on social media plays a prominent role in loving a destination brand (Amaro *et al.*, 2020; Aro *et al.*, 2018; Filieri *et al.*, 2021; Strandberg and Ek styvén, 2020), thus allowing us to study brand love in the social media settings of a destination brand.

Participant observation revealed that comments and reactions concerning our study example are, in normal circumstances, largely positive. However, due to the conditions caused by COVID-19, travel is connected with the threat of spreading the virus, and more negative emotions, cognitions and behaviors may be expressed toward destination brands than under normal circumstances. The destination brand was purposely chosen because its Facebook page offers an example of a brand community. The community can thus be considered an informative and relevant group for the research question (Kozinets, 2002).

The destination brand in question, Ylläs, is located in Finnish Lapland and specializes in offering year-round outdoor activities, such as skiing and mountain biking, on the edge of the Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park. Ylläs was one of the Lapland destination brands that had to cease operations during the spring 2020 high season owing to COVID-19 restrictions. The area of Ylläs has created a regional tourism organization, *Visit Ylläs*, which gathers services and activities under the same figurative roof. *Visit Ylläs* takes the lead in creating and marketing the Ylläs brand.

3.4 Data analysis

This section explains how we broadly used grounded theory methodology in our analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, it is important to bear in mind that, as is common with abduction, the steps were flexible and included switching between empirical observations and theory (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Further, as is typical of a qualitative study, the data collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting were, to some degree, performed in parallel (Iacano *et al.*, 2009).

We started the analysis with the first author following and open coding the raw data on Ylläs's Facebook page (Saldana, 2021), concentrating on in-vivo codes, that is, the words and emojis used by Facebook users. It was considered useful to start with open coding, as there is a paucity of understanding of the interactive nature of brand love (Flick, 2018). This approach allowed us to explore fresh insights and preclude the potential constraints of prior studies. The first author noted that the discussion was either positive, negative or neutral. Positive WOM, manifesting as warm and supportive words, as well as emoticons and emojis, such as ❤️ and 💕😘, were considered to signify brand love (Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016). Negative WOM appeared in the form of hate-fueled and humiliating words and emoticons and emojis, such as 🤮 and 🤢 (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2016). In addition to loving and hate-fueled comments, there were neutral comments, such as questions on weather conditions and the ski lifts' opening hours. We also transferred the data in a condensed form to Excel sheets to prepare and organize them for the next analysis step (Creswell, 2013). In this phase, the first author also identified text excerpts that seemed important (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

Next, we searched for latent codes, that is, hidden meanings in the data (Flick, 2018). The first author's participant observation assisted in finding these hidden meanings. For example, some emoticons were somewhat ambiguous, while the meaning of others was clearer. Further, the text context and cultural environment/demographic characteristics may change the meaning of an emoticon (Brito *et al.*, 2019). In this analysis phase, distinct characteristics and meanings were discovered from the data (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). We could see that some of the characteristics related to interactions in the individual context, whereas others related to interactions in the group and societal contexts. This coding informed our findings.

We then proceeded and made sense of the emerging themes in relation to the extant literature. The authors discussed the data and the emerging themes. Member checks were used to minimize bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This phase included continuous switching between theory and empirical data (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Kovács and Spens, 2005). We went back to assess the initial categories and themes in the data in a circular process that combined the data with the existing theories. We undertook this circular abduction several times as our understanding of the data grew, which enabled us to identify relevant theories and fine-tune our research question. This process led to our identifying social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel and Turner, 2004) as a relevant framework for understanding what we were observing.

Next, applying social identity theory provided a contrasting perspective to the dominant focus on the individual context of brand love, which tends to be on interactions between the brand lover and the focal brand. However, when we compared our findings with the micro-, meso- and macro-layer (3M) perspective currently used in social identity theory to describe layers of identity (Jaspal *et al.*, 2016; Stets and Burke, 2000), we realized our findings needed a broader frame to describe the interactive layers of brand love. Accordingly, we examined other fields of science to see how they layered complicated structures, which led to the discovery of the use of four layers: micro, meso, macro and mega (4M) (Cipriani, 2013; Goli *et al.*, 2020; Kensington-Miller *et al.*, 2022). The individual-context interactions alerted

us to the interactive micro layer of brand love, which considers the individual psychological processes of influence from dyadic interactions between the brand and the individual. The group-context interactions of brand love can be divided into meso and macro layers. The meso layer considers group-oriented processes and relations within a like-minded in-group of brand lovers. In contrast, the macro layer considers group-oriented processes and relations between opposite-minded sub-groups within the same brand. Finally, the societal-context interactions of brand love directed our attention toward the mega layer, which considers broader social movements and the societal context.

In the next section, we present our findings, which include emoticons because Facebook users add emoticons and emojis to their posts to convey meaning and emotion (Brito *et al.*, 2019). The use of emojis may even enhance a consumer's brand attachment (Arya *et al.*, 2018). While we considered it important to bring emoticons/emojis into our data, we excluded those that are difficult to interpret. Further, authentic extracts illustrate the findings (Eldh *et al.*, 2020). Posts written in Finnish were translated into English by two of the authors and later reviewed by a native-English-speaking copy editor, as was the remainder of the study. We anonymized the authors of the quoted extracts and removed the dates of the comments.

4. Findings
This section presents the key findings derived after applying a social identity perspective to the data. Our presentation first highlights the individual-context interactions of brand love, which show brand love is an individual psychological process. Second, the group-context interactions illustrate that brand love is a group-oriented social process. Finally, we discuss the societal-context interactions of brand love.

4.1 Individual-context interactions of brand love
As anticipated, the data revealed that a brand's fit with the inner self is a meaningful part of brand love and drives positive reactions and comments among the brand's online communities. We interpret this fit with the inner self, that is, identification, as relating to the individual-context interactions of brand love. This is illustrated by the two examples below:

> Every spring and autumn, dear Ylläs, I've come to you 💛 You always fill my spiritual basket. Then I can manage until the next time I meet you. Thank you for existing ❤️ [+ photographs of autumn at Ylläs] (Anette)

> In April 2012, I was alone at Ylläs. I'd been widowed for less than two months, and I was so tired and sad. Every year I come to meet you at the fells, I go to our common trails, I only see traces of willow grouse on snow [. . .] the nature and trails of Ylläs, as well as people in Äkäslompolo, helped me through one hard phase ❤️ [+ photographs of Lapland old tree at Ylläs] (Susanna)

We interpret both of these comments to demonstrate a long, active and close relationship with the brand; one that almost resembles that of soulmates. The latter comment indicates that brand love includes changes to how the consumer has interacted emotionally with the brand during different phases of their life; the loved brand has different meanings during times of joy and of deep sorrow. Accordingly, we suggest that the individual-context interactions of brand love include an inner-self-led identification and a long-term, warm, close and changing relationship with the loved brand.

We found an interesting contradiction: Individuals can be angry toward one part of a loved brand while caring about another part. The finding demonstrates that people can distance certain parts of the loved brand from their self-conception, indicating that brand lovers do not necessarily identify with the whole brand. That distancing was shown, for

example, in a comment that first expressed deep dissatisfaction and a conflict of values with the brand welcoming new visitors but then also concern about how such visitors may affect local people, who can be regarded as a part of the destination brand. Therefore, we suggest that the individual-context interactions of brand love include the possibility that individuals may want to distance themselves from certain acts of the loved brand:

> How many "vain" infections might have been spread during this period just because people had to go downhill skiing? The fell [Nordic Mountain] will be there, and you can go skiing in future [. . .]. You should have protected the local people, who have a long way to go if they need effective hospital treatment. (Saara)

This comment quickly accumulated 56 likes (thumbs up) and supportive responses such as "It should have been closed a long time ago" (Margit), showing that others echoed the thought and that it did not reflect the opinion of a single commentator. The response indicates how consumers may simultaneously have both positive and negative, and thus contradictory, cognitions about the loved brand.

We found that negative emotions may be temporally integral to the individual-context interactions of brand love. For example, a customer unable to consume the loved brand and who has a deep longing for it would experience sadness or frustration/disappointment:

> What a dream [refers to the beautiful landscape in the posting]! I'm super sad that I can't visit you this week as planned due to the horrible coronavirus outbreak in Germany 😢 Stay healthy and keep the faith; I'll visit you another time. (Angela)

> This is a frustrating decision. I understand why ski lifts are closed but not why ski tracks are. [the person would have liked to ski at Ylläs] (Samuel)

> This is an unnecessary decision about ski tracks. Finnish cross-country skiers are made to suffer because some downhill skiers partied recklessly in Austria and spread the virus. (Niko)

The excerpts indicate that brand love may be characterized by controversial dynamicity, in how loving consumers (who have mostly positive feelings about the loved brand) may react negatively to surprising or unexpected situations. These situations are not necessarily triggered by the brand, as in this instance. The trigger can be whatever inhibits brand lovers from interacting with the brand in the manner they desire. Accordingly, we suggest that negative emotions such as sadness and frustration can be a natural part of the individual-context interactions of brand love, just as they are in interpersonal love relationships.

Although some negativity was directed at the destination brand, our data confirm that individual-context interactions of brand love are largely connected to positive feelings and evaluations. The majority of the comments were purely positive, showing a deep and long-term connection with the brand:

> I started (visiting there) in 1965, then I fell in love with Ylläs, and it's still number one 😊 (Hanna).

> It just feels like our own; we've been to Ylläsjärvi so many times! It's the number one! 😍 (Leila).

We noted that the brand acting according to the values of an individual elicited expressions of support for the loved brand. The following excerpts exemplify that alignment of values. The comments were written in response to a post where Ylläs stated that the ski lifts would be closed to restrict the transmission of COVID-19:

> Very responsible decision, thank you ❤️ (Jasmin).

Hopefully and probably we'll see you in the summer and next winter season 😊 Wishing strength to all entrepreneurs ❤️ People will not forget you, we'll be back when we have permission to travel! (Oliver).

We suggest that individual-context interactions of brand love include empathetic expressions, such as the last excerpt supporting the brand by demonstrating a positive attitude to it in difficult times, despite the brand's decision prohibiting an individual from taking a holiday and using the brand as planned.

4.2 Group-context interactions of brand love

As expected, positive attitudes to users of the same brand were evident. For example, positive attitudes and support manifested in threads where a user comment prompted other similar comments and positive reactions. In the following example, positive group attitudes stem from a posting with an image of a sunset view from the top of the fells in the Ylläs region:

Here you can feel close to heaven 🙏 (literally speaking). I try to go there during every trip [to Ylläs]. (Emma)

Same with me, it's a job to climb there, but the view is surely worth it 🥰 (Regina answers to Emma).

Really that view 😎 💙 and some "heavenly" peace just radiates there ☁️ . . .nice that someone else thinks alike. (Elisa answers to Emma and Regina)

We suggest that this "we-spirit" and support between the brand lovers should be placed alongside the group-context interactions of brand love.

Surprisingly, we noted that not all identification within the group of lovers was positive and without paradox. Our data reveal that brand love sometimes also encompasses negative attitudes to users of the same brand. One example arose when the Ylläs management posted about winter electric biking (e-biking) opportunities. While most commenters expressed their interest in trying e-biking in winter or talked about their winter e-biking experiences, one person commented that he did not understand why anyone would e-bike, as it is not a real sport:

Cross-country skiing is natural exercise and an enjoyable experience, where the whole body is involved in the work! Why do people always try to cut corners? (Matias)

Further, we noted that brand lovers might use the same loved brand to build a distinctive self-identity. For example, while one individual uses a brand to express their adventurous nature (e.g. eagerly trying new sports), another uses the same brand to express old-school values (e.g. sticking with cross-country skiing, a traditional sport in Finland). Accordingly, we suggest that the group-context interactions of brand love also include self-identity-based confrontation within the group of brand lovers.

We noted that sometimes the in-group (here, brand lovers) fragments into sub-groups that form new in- and out-groups within the group of brand lovers. The data indicate that a conflict of values or interests can trigger a negative and even hate-fueled outburst directed at consumers perceived to be behaving incorrectly, threatening the prestige of the loved brand or the security of the brand and its users. This finding is interesting because the consumers behaving inappropriately would be users of the same brand. Therefore, the data show that brand love may trigger negative attitudes toward another sub-group of the same brand. Accordingly, a negative resonance between the inner self of a brand lover and a sub-group that holds different values or passions may trigger expressions of brand love.

Remarkably, the data demonstrate that negative feelings and attitudes directed at other consumers using the same brand, but seen as members of an out-group, can spark expressions of love. In these cases, brand love can be expressed in a distinctly hate-fueled tone. For example:

> It seems the capital city area needs to be isolated as quickly as possible, so we get the last blockheads to stay away from the North [Ylläs is in the north of Finland]. (Petteri)

> This might piss off hippies from Helsinki as they have to drive back home 😂😂😂😂😂😂 (Janne)

These comments indicate that sub-groups position themselves in relation to each other to define and protect their core values. The data revealed articulations of social identity related to, for example, being from a different geographical area, a feeling of belonging to a different socioeconomic group and even playing a different outdoor sport. Therefore, we suggest that the group-context interactions of brand love also include contradictory interactions. The situation leads to divisions into sub-groups within the group of brand lovers due to incompatible social identities.

4.3 Societal-context interactions of brand love

The data indicate that the intensity of expressions of brand love is not static. In other words, brand love is dynamic; for example, the clusters of expressions of love can temporarily change. These clusters involve group interactions, and we call these comment clusters *love pulses*. For example, Ylläs received more comments on its postings during one corona-affected week than was usual for any other week (pre-corona); four postings attracted 198–427 comments each, a figure that had always been less than 100 per post, and typically under 50. It was also the only time Ylläs received several angry 😠 and sad 😢 reactions in addition to like 👍, love ❤️ and wow 😮 reactions. These responses to the brand's postings formed an interactive cluster of consumers' comments and reactions strongly supporting or refuting positive and negative thoughts. Overall, it appears that reactions feed each other due to social resonance and amplification. A posting often attracts similar comments, which could be a consequence of the bandwagon effect, but there are also fluctuations between positive and negative comments in the discussion. People might direct their comments to the brand, to another commentator or even to people who have not been party to the conversation (e.g. by tagging their friends in the comment or criticizing a certain group). Accordingly, we suggest that the societal–context interactions of brand love can encompass temporal pulses of expressions of love that relate strongly to major events and changes in society.

Furthermore, we noted a short-term temporal shift in the overall atmosphere surrounding the usually loved brand. The finding indicates that a loved brand can quickly turn into a paradoxical brand in rare circumstances. The phenomenon manifested when the COVID-19 situation in Finland prompted travel bans, and many people began working remotely. Ylläs announced it would run its ski lifts until the end of the week regulations were mooted and welcome new visitors. This individual posting opened the floodgates to articulations of hate, fear and frustration. It received 69 comments, most of them negative. Even though Ylläs attracted negative reactions for only a short period, negative emotions were running high during that time, as shown in this hate-fueled expression:

> Shut the ******* [expletive] company down you ******* [expletive] money-grabbing shitheads. (Marko)

The rapid appearance and disappearance of extreme comments exemplified how sensitive the brand-loving atmosphere can be when the trigger (here, a pandemic) is strong enough, and the brand's reaction to the situation is considered inappropriate. We suggest that the societal-context interactions of brand love encompass individuals expressing strongly held emotions spurred by changes in the societal environment and the brand's reactions to those changes. As we noted, those strongly held emotions might be hard ones, such as fear, which are not always pleasant.

Further, we observed how consumers were not the only people interacting on social media and influencing articulations of brand love. People connected with the brand (here, for example, locals, entrepreneurs and employees) have a powerful role in how the brand's interactions are presented on social media platforms. Our data indicate that although Ylläs has lovers among local people and tourists alike, at the outset of the pandemic, some locals began to turn against tourists and view them as an out-group. There was a shift in how people of the brand (one sub-group of lovers) interacted with the brand's consumers (another sub-group). Extraordinary times lead people to express themselves in extraordinary ways. Although local people rarely comment on postings from the Ylläs brand, the COVID-19 situation made locals raise their voices in support of Ylläs and their community. A local newspaper published a piece by a local entrepreneur using fairly strong language to express how much she hated tourists who intruded on "her land" and jeopardized local health-care resources. Personal comments, such as the newspaper story and the following quote from a local resident, may be associated with the brand, and thus, personal hostility can swiftly be interpreted as hostility from the brand itself:

> Grandmas and grandpas getting drunk in Lapland right now have not even seen a downhill skier. These risk-group members first visit the ski tracks and then go to the bar, and because they decided to come to Lapland, regardless of the travel ban, the ski tracks can no longer stay open. (Johannes, a local)

We suggest that the societal-context interactions of brand love encompass interactions with a larger sphere of people than just consumers of the brand, including people of the brand.

Accordingly, we noted that brand lovers (here consumers) might regard people of the brand (here locals and local entrepreneurs) as members of the same in-group. Brand lovers can care deeply for members of the in-group to which they belong. Our data show that perceived threats to the well-being of people viewed as belonging to the same in-group as the consumer can trigger loving and supportive comments. This interest in well-being and the willingness to show support may appear only temporarily (during hard times) and resonate with emotional attachment and empathy, as the following two excerpts exemplify:

> Hopefully and probably, we'll see each other [at Ylläs] in the summer and next winter season 🙂 Strength to all entrepreneurs 😎 💙 People won't forget you, we'll come back when permission to travel is given! (Julia)

> Best wishes and good luck to you all. Stay safe. (Daniel)

> I'm worried about your livelihood [. . .] Stay strong! (Anna)

Hard times may reveal to consumers how much they care about the well-being of their brand and the people of it. The following sections discuss the findings of the study and present its contributions.

5. Discussion
This study seeks to extend the understanding of the interactive nature of brand love. We posed the research question: How do expressions of brand love reflect the interaction within

and between individual psychological contexts and group-oriented and societal-oriented social contexts? While the extant literature has provided insights into brand love as an individual psychological process, it has largely ignored the influence and significance of related social processes.

5.1 Theoretical implications

Our first contribution is to show that rather than occurring only in the individual context, that is, between a brand lover and the focal brand, brand love is more complex and interactive: It involves group identifications, intergroup competition and perceptions of self in relation to the brand, in-groups, out-groups and the societal context. This contribution derives from using social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) as a lens through which to explore the data. Current brand love literature mainly focuses on describing the relationship between a brand lover and a loved brand (Langner *et al.*, 2016; Schmid and Huber, 2019) or identification with the brand (Ahuvia *et al.*, 2009). Some studies acknowledge that other users of the loved brand play some role in the brand-love relationship (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Wallace *et al.*, 2014). However, the interactive nature of brand love has not been widely studied, and neither has the role of opposite-minded consumers or society. Accordingly, this study broadens the theoretical understanding of brand love to encompass a more social and layered depiction by incorporating the interactions between brand lovers, other consumers and society.

Our second contribution is to conceptualize the interactive micro, meso, macro and mega (4M) layers of brand love (see Figure 1). The contributions of each of the 4M layers are described below under their own sub-headings. As we studied these interactions on a social media platform, even the micro-layer interactions became social: When reacting or commenting in public, a brand lover shares their individual processes with the social media community. This study thus shows the layers of the social processes of brand love through interactions. Figure 1 illustrates the interactive layers of brand love and shows that the micro layer, consisting of the individual and the loved brand, is always at the core of other interactive layers. Without any resonance between individuals' inner and/or social identity
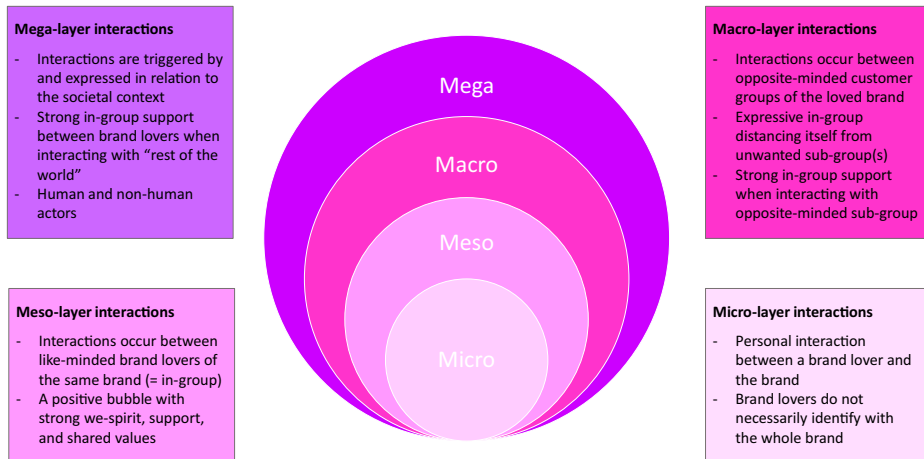

Mega-layer interactions
- Interactions are triggered by and expressed in relation to the societal context
- Strong in-group support between brand lovers when interacting with "rest of the world"
- Human and non-human actors

Macro-layer interactions
- Interactions occur between opposite-minded customer groups of the loved brand
- Expressive in-group distancing itself from unwanted sub-group(s)
- Strong in-group support when interacting with opposite-minded sub-group

Meso-layer interactions
- Interactions occur between like-minded brand lovers of the same brand (= in-group)
- A positive bubble with strong we-spirit, support, and shared values

Micro-layer interactions
- Personal interaction between a brand lover and the brand
- Brand lovers do not necessarily identify with the whole brand

Mega
Macro
Meso
Micro

Figure 1.
Interactive layers of brand love

Source: Authors' own work

and the brand, the other interactive layers and a brand love relationship cannot be formed. It is important to remember that although the four layers have their own characteristics, they are neither separate nor isolated but intertwined with each other.

5.1.1 Micro-layer interactions of brand love In this sub-section, we conceptualize the micro-layer interactions of brand love. The interactions between the brand lover and the focal brand based on individual processes create the micro-layer interactions of brand love. We show how, in addition to identifying with the brand, brand lovers can also distance themselves from aspects of the brand they consider incongruous with their identity or that do not fit with their inner self. We observed how brand lovers might divide the brand into portions and be angry about one part while caring about another. In the extant literature, brand love is strongly connected with identification with a whole brand (Ahuvia *et al.*, 2009). The current research offers new insight by showing that brand love can encompass identity distancing between a brand lover and the loved brand.

In addition, whereas the extant literature has focused on describing positive aspects (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), we show that expressing negative emotions and cognitions may include brand love. While brand lovers are mainly satisfied with the brand (Aro *et al.*, 2018), love has room for occasional negative cognitions and emotions. Our results show that an angry or dissatisfied brand lover will sometimes direct negative behaviors, such as negative WOM, toward the focal brand; however, that anger does not entail terminating the relationship with the brand but is instead likely to prompt the brand lover to express what they feel is going wrong. Expressions of emotion are linked to brand lovers' perceptions of self and desired images of the loved brand. We view negative expressions as distancing techniques individuals use when perceived similarities between the focal brand and self become distorted or challenged. In addition, we see clear expressions of solidarity with the brand being linked to articulations of self-perception in the micro-layer interactions: utterances about what the brand means to brand lovers, how it relates to their personal memories and how emotionally tied they are to the brand. This is unsurprising given that brand lovers hold strongly positive attitudes toward the loved brand (Batra *et al.*, 2012).

5.1.2 Meso-layer interactions of brand love In this sub-section, we conceptualize the meso-layer interactions of brand love. Interactions between a brand lover and like-minded brand lovers of the same brand are based on group processes and thus create the meso-layer interactions of brand love. The meso layer thus consists of in-group interactions and a *we-spirit*. This point is an important aspect of social identity theory (Homburg *et al.*, 2009). It demonstrates the ways in which individuals seek confirmation of their identity choices through expressions of support, similarity and amplification/stereotyping as a process of self-enhancement. We also show that lovers support and care for each other when they belong to the same group, whether the members are all lovers of the same brand or are part of a niche sub-group. This fosters the view that brand lovers connect with other users of the same brand (Wallace *et al.*, 2014), identify with other users of the same brand (Albert and Merunka, 2013) and have a sense of community with those users (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010). In addition, the study unveils strong emotional responses related to preserving or supporting the brand when it is perceived to be under threat, whether that threat comes from an out-group member (which in our context can include an opposing sub-group) or a brand's own unacceptable behavior. When a brand's actions are inconsistent with the core values of in-group members, the in-group reacts and expresses concern over the unwanted outcomes for the brand.

5.1.3 Macro-layer interactions of brand love In this sub-section, we conceptualize the macro-layer interactions of brand love. Interactions between a brand lover and opposite-

minded customers are based on group processes and create the macro-layer interactions of brand love. These opposite-minded customers can be brand lovers of the same brand belonging to another sub-group of brand lovers. These opposite-minded customers can also be brand haters or random customers; although they have some link to the focal brand, the brand lover does not identify with them. Accordingly, the macro-layer interactions of brand love comprise interactions between an in-group and an out-group or groups.

Significantly, our study reveals the dynamic tensions between sub-groups aligned with the same loved brand. While all articulate brand love, not all lovers of the same brand are like-minded or identify with each other. This finding advances the understanding the social processes of brand love. To date, a group of brand lovers has been seen as a unanimous in-group, where members identify with each other and create a sense of community (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010). However, all brand-loving sub-groups of the focal brand belong to the overarching group of lovers of the same brand, seen as unanimous from outside that group. Accordingly, our study advances the understanding of social processes by identifying sub-groups within the group of lovers (see also Veldman *et al.*, 2021). Brand-love literature has virtually neglected the negative resonance between users of the same brand (Wallace *et al.*, 2014) and, to date, has not included interactions between in- and out-groups as part of brand love. Consistent with the social identity theory and the closely associated self-categorization theory (Turner, 1985), we show that brand lovers seek to maintain and protect their own identity through its categorization in relation to the focal brand (the micro layer) and communities within the brand (the meso and macro layers). This adds to our understanding by supplementing the linear, mono-directional trajectory approach to brand love and demonstrates how layers are intertwined because there cannot be macro-layer interactions in the absence of pre-existing micro- and meso-layer interactions.

5.1.4 Mega-layer interactions of brand love Finally, in this sub-section, we conceptualize the mega-layer interactions of brand love, which are interactions around societal issues. Changes in the societal context – in our case, worldwide changes – required brand lovers to adapt their communicative strategies to fit the new situation. When COVID-19 led to ski lifts closing, we witnessed a mix of (brand) defensive strategies from some respondents and distancing techniques from the whole or parts of the brand that impinge on their perception of self. Our study revealed several contradictions and tensions that can be triggered by the societal context and also people associated with the brand. In contrast to the micro, meso and macro layers, the mega layer includes human and non-human actors and interactions, not all of which are focused on the brand. We show that these mega-layer interactions are a powerful aid to understanding the interactions of brand love, as interactions across the layers mutually influence each other. What could be seen as a paradox (e.g. sudden expressions of hate) on one layer could be explained by reference to other layers (e.g. the reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic). Further, we show how the mega layer includes interactive love pulses. Those are quick and collective outbursts of brand love, sometimes expressed in surprising ways, such as rage against external threats. This adds to our understanding of the changes in brand love, given that earlier literature has suggested that brand love mainly changes over a relatively long period (Alvarez *et al.*, 2021; Langner *et al.*, 2016; Schmid and Huber, 2019). Finally, our study shows that even though negative temporal shifts in the atmosphere can occur among even the most-loved brands, if a brand acts according to its own values and those of its lovers, an overwhelmingly positive atmosphere can quickly be restored. This corresponds to the extant literature, which reports that brand love protects the brand even in the midst of a crisis (Langner *et al.*, 2016; see also Zhang *et al.*, 2020).

5.2 Managerial implications

The results indicate that brands should be aware that their group of brand lovers can be divided into sub-groups with somewhat different drivers of their love. There may be conflicts of interest between the loving sub-groups that the brand managers' actions should account for. For example, when a brand starts to renew itself, perhaps by developing its offerings in new directions or pursuing new customer groups, it risks making existing brand lovers feel neglected and betrayed. This can happen if the brand suddenly stops taking their preferences into account and/or stops communicating about them. At the same time, new customer groups may start to feel like an enemy or out-group of the original brand-lover group. Therefore, if a brand wishes to maintain all its brand-lover groups, it is important to invest effort into noticing them all in a way that makes the groups feel appreciated. For example, in the case of a destination brand such as Ylläs, that would involve taking equally good care of outdoor tracks for all sports and recognizing old-school skiers alongside winter cyclists in marketing communications and the communicated identity. However, as all users love the same brand, there is probably an integrative element that appeals to all lovers of that brand. For an outdoor destination such as Ylläs that element could be nature and silent space combined with a warm-hearted and lively village atmosphere, or for an outdoor clothing brand such as Patagonia, it might be sustainability combined with attractive yet functional design. Once a brand has identified that element, it can become key to creating loving relationships with consumers.

This study suggests that negative comments from consumers may unexpectedly benefit a brand. For example, a brand can seize the opportunity to clarify and justify its values and strengths by publicly addressing such comments. In addition, the brand may encourage its lovers to interact with it, as they can also defend the brand against out-groups. Our results indicate the meaningful role people of the brand play in creating brand relationships, given their essentially bilateral role as both representatives and possible brand lovers. Bearing that in mind, a brand could focus on creating loving relationships with its stakeholders, who have many opportunities to spread brand love. In addition, if many people are suddenly expressing negative emotions about the brand, that brand must react to the criticism because there is a strong possibility that the brand would benefit from improving its actions or communication.

A brand could offer consumers a channel and encourage expressions of love to enhance their brand-related self-expression. This self-expressive channel, which might be an active social media platform, could then be a driver of brand love. Further, brand love seems to protect a brand during a crisis. This finding indicates that cultivating brand love during a non-crisis period helps the brand through difficult times. However, consumers' brand love should never be taken for granted, as a neglected brand lover could become a brand hater. For example, brand lovers need real-time information during a crisis. If a brand is willing to engage with its customers, from the crisis management perspective, brand love is something to aim for. Finally, although having customers who are brand lovers helps protect a brand in crisis, if the brand obviously and/or continuously contravenes its brand lovers' core values, again, brand lovers could turn into brand haters. That transformation could occur, for example, if a brand insisted on prioritizing business goals ahead of customer health and well-being and its own people. Destination brands must be careful not to neglect the health of the residents and the location's environment.

5.3 Limitations and future studies

The results of this study cannot be generalized to all types of contexts and brands. The current study provided rich data on a single brand from one country. Therefore, future studies, both qualitative and quantitative, could cover other types of brands and contexts in other countries

and cultures, as more studies examining the social perspective of brand relationships would be beneficial. This research is a non-positivistic study using qualitative analysis and active coding, and consequently, the issue of researchers having affected the analysis cannot be completely discounted (Grodal *et al.*, 2021). However, the authors followed the criteria for excellent qualitative research (Tracy, 2010), and the authors engaged in self-reflection focusing on their subjective backgrounds. In addition, the transparency of the methods and theories, allow the reader to assess the analysis with those factors in mind.

Apart from this study, extant literature only scratches the surface of studying brand love (Daniels *et al.*, 2020; Farmaki *et al.*, 2021; Robertson *et al.*, 2022) and other brand relationships Alvarez *et al.*, 2021; Connors *et al.*, 2021) from the perspective of social identity (McGowan *et al.*, 2020; Lin and Bruning, 2020; Tajfel, 1974). While our study focused on the interactive layers of brand love using the 4M perspective, those interactive layers of other brand relationships, including brand hate (Aziz and Rahman, 2022; Brandão and Popoli, 2022), are yet to be addressed. In addition, the role of the people of the brand (Freire, 2009; Hurrell and Scholarios, 2014) merits more study in the context of brand love (and other brand relationships), as their meaningful role has now been acknowledged, albeit not studied in depth.

In relation to interactions, we noted traces of the phenomenon of co-loving a brand, where consumers interact with other consumers and comment on the brand's posts. This co-loving (and co-hating) perspective related to brand co-creation (Payne *et al.*, 2009; Siano *et al.*, 2022) warrants further attention, including in contexts other than social media.

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