

Emotional brand attachment and brand love: the emotional bridges in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty

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Abstract

Purpose – Satisfaction and loyalty as vital and strategic concepts in the marketing literature are highly important to companies and marketers. The review of the existing literature reveals a gap of the role of emotional constructs that can begin in a regular and rational sequence of satisfaction and ultimately lead to the formation of consumer loyalty. Hence, this study aims to answer the question of whether emotional constructs such as emotional attachment and love play a mediating role in the process of transitioning from satisfaction to loyalty in the correct sequence.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 300 valid questionnaires on smartphone and apparel brands were collected from respondents and analyzed using the partial least squares method.

Findings – The results showed that brand love is the strongest antecedent of brand loyalty and is the only variable that directly influences brand loyalty in comparison to satisfaction and emotional brand attachment. Moreover, the examination of indirect effects revealed that our assumption based on that the emotional structures such as emotional attachment and brand love play a mediating role in the process of transitioning from satisfaction to loyalty in a correct sequence is supported.

Research limitations/implications – Generalizability needs to be established with a wider range of consumer groups. The survey was conducted in Iran, and future research should assess the same product categories in other cultural settings as well as consider other product categories to assess the external validity of these results. The insights on consumers' brand relationships help brand managers devise effective brand management strategies.

Practical implications – The managerial implications can guide managers toward enhancing the consumers' loyalty to the brand through a better understanding of the consumer loyalty process to a brand as well as better relational marketing practices.

Originality/value – The study validates the mediating role of emotional brand attachment and brand love in the relationship between brand satisfaction and brand loyalty, is one of the first to develop a conceptual model that examines the role of emotional structures in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty, is



one of few studies to develop the role of emotional structures in the form of a relational chain of brands in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty.

Keywords Brand love, Brand loyalty, Emotional brand attachment, Brand satisfaction

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Satisfaction and loyalty as vital and strategic concepts in the marketing literature are highly important to companies and marketers. The importance of these concepts can be seen from two perspectives: first, the benefits that these concepts bring to firms, and second, in the different studies and efforts that have concentrated on the relationship between consumer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995; Bloemer and Lemmink, 1992; Bowen and Chen, 2001).

In the traditional perspective, researchers like Cardozo (1965) and Oliver (1999) maintained that satisfaction was an indicator of loyalty, and doubtlessly, loyalty was created after satisfaction with a product or service. The question is, however, “Does this perspective still hold true in an age that according to Roberts (2006), intense competition exists among brands and products and the brands and products might trigger a switching behavior by focusing merely on satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the consumer? Surely the answer to this question is negative as nowadays companies and marketers have come to realize that mere consumer satisfaction with a brand is not sufficient to establish a continuous relationship with a brand. Therefore, it is necessary to establish an emotional bond beyond satisfaction to provide consumer loyalty. To establish such emotional bonds, “zero separation” and undivided brand loyalty have to be provided (Unal and Aydin, 2013). It should, therefore, seek to create and build a new form of relationships between satisfaction and loyalty. The review of the existing literature reveals a gap of the role of emotional constructs that can begin in a regular and rational sequence of satisfaction and ultimately lead to the formation of consumer loyalty. For example, Oliver (1999) states that satisfaction and loyalty have an irregular relationship, although loyal customers are often satisfied, but satisfaction does not always result in loyalty. In one of the six scenarios examining the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty, he argues that satisfaction is the first step in a transition sequence that ultimately leads to loyalty (sixth scenario), where loyalty can be independent of satisfaction. In addition to Oliver (1999), other researchers have emphasized that consumer satisfaction by itself is not a good predictor of brand loyalty, so consumer emotional attachment should also be considered (Jones and Sasser, 1995; Kotler, 1997). If we consider satisfaction at the lowest level of the consumer–brand relationship chain, it can be realized in a one-time consumer–brand interaction (Aurier *et al.*, 2001; Guillard and Roux, 2014; Unal and Aydin, 2013). Emotional aspects such as emotional attachment and brand love can be sought at higher levels of satisfaction that are realized in consumers’ interaction with the brand for several times (Carrol and Ahuvia, 2006; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Certainly, the fact that higher levels of satisfaction can be a basis for the formation of strong emotions (such as emotional attachment and love) to the brand, and in turn lead to brand loyalty, has been proven by several researchers. For example, Kotler (1997) argues that high satisfaction not only creates rational preferences but also creates a kind of emotional attachment to a brand that results from this emotional bond, leading to a high level of consumer loyalty. In addition, Carrol and Ahuvia’s (2006) study empirically demonstrates that emotional and passionate love for a brand is a predictor of brand loyalty; therefore, emotional attachment and brand love (not merely satisfaction) are a drive to loyalty.

Although many studies have been conducted in the past on the relationship between satisfaction and brand loyalty (Dong *et al.*, 2011; Fuentes-Blasco *et al.*, 2014; Kuppelwieser and Sarstedt, 2014; HuyTuu *et al.*, 2011), but none of the studies has addressed the role that emotional structures can play in the relationship between satisfaction and brand loyalty. However, different research on consumer–brand relationships has shown that emotional constructs such as emotional brand attachment and brand love can play a mediating role in the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty (Correia Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2012; Drennan *et al.*, 2015; Roy *et al.*, 2013; Sarkar, 2011; Unal and Aydin, 2013), and they are an antecedent role for loyalty (Alnawas and Altarifi, 2016; Belaid and Behi, 2011; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014; Theng So *et al.*, 2013). Nevertheless, research has not specifically shown that what emotional variables can play a mediating role from consumer satisfaction with a brand to loyalty to that brand. Hence, based on the sixth scenario, we extend Oliver’s (1999) work – satisfaction is the beginning of a transitioning sequence that ultimately results in loyalty – by assuming that emotional structures play a mediating role in the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, we seek to answer the question of whether emotional constructs such as emotional attachment and love play a mediating role in the process of transitioning from satisfaction to loyalty in the correct sequence.

2. A review of the literature and theoretical discussion

2.1 Brand satisfaction

Satisfaction has been defined as a type of cognition as well as the result of the experience of a purchase, or of a specific consumption. Additionally, it entails an evaluation process during which the consumer compares the performance expected with what was received (Johnson *et al.*, 1995; Mano and Oliver, 1993). In another definition, Bloemer and Kasper (1995) define brand satisfaction as the outcome of the subjective evaluation that the chosen alternative (the brand) meets or exceeds the expectations. This definition is in line with the many definitions of satisfaction based on the expectations–disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980) found in the literature. The notion that is prominent in every definition of satisfaction is, in fact, a comparison between expectations and (brand) performance. In addition, our understanding of satisfaction was enriched by the integration of the emotional dimension into the conceptualization of the term. Thomson *et al.* (2005) propound that satisfaction was the basis of emotional attachment, noting that: “A consumer that attached to a brand is generally satisfied with it.” In a theoretical exploration of the consumer’s relationship with the brand, satisfaction assumes a cumulative character that also relates to the consumer experience (Andrew, 2013). Therefore, the effect of satisfaction on loyalty in the long term is implicitly considered in developing attachment to the brand (Bahri-Ammari *et al.*, 2016). Looking through extant types of satisfaction, research has shared a core idea for satisfaction: a psychological notion about consumers’ emotional evaluation of or the pleasurable degree of the experience associated with specific products or services (Giebelhausen *et al.*, 2016; Mohammed and Rashid, 2018; Oliver, 1999; Saleem and Raja, 2014). In summary, in this study, satisfaction is regarded as the cumulative experience of the brand that has evolved over time and leads to consumers’ emotional evaluation of the brand.

2.2 Emotional brand attachment

The concept of emotional attachment was borrowed from the attachment theory proposed by Bowlby (1982). Emotional brand attachment is a critical construct in the marketing literature, as it describes the strength of the bond consumers have with the brand. This bond subsequently affects their behavior and in turn fosters firm profitability and customer

lifetime value (Theng So *et al.*, 2013; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Psychological attachment to a certain brand, as displayed in ownership and emotional significance, may be important determinants of consumer behaviors such as repeat purchases of the brand, and willingness to spend resources to obtain the brand (e.g. money and effort), and eventually leading to brand loyalty (Lee and Workman, 2015). In consumer behavior, researchers over the years have found evidence that consumers can develop emotional attachments to various marketable entities such as material possessions (Kleine and Baker, 2004), gifts (Mick and DeMoss, 1990), places (Williams *et al.*, 1992), celebrities (Thomson, 2006), social media (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2019) and brands (Percy *et al.*, 2004; Slater, 2000).

Among the various definitions of emotional brand attachment, Thomson *et al.* (2005) defined it as the positive emotional outcomes of a strong connection between a consumer and a brand. They were the first to develop emotional brand attachment measures by conceptualizing it as emotional bonding, the degree of affection, passion and the connection to measure attachment. Later research expounded that brand attachment captured both emotional and cognitive bonding, reflecting the brand and self-connection (Japutra *et al.*, 2014; Park *et al.*, 2010). The scale presented by Park *et al.* (2010) focuses more on the cognitive dimensions such as brand accessibility and integration with consumer identity. In other categories, the relationship between consumer and brand has been defined from the psychological dimension to the two dimensions of existential attachment and functional attachment (Heilbrunn, 2001), which only the existential attachment develops emotional and affective relationships. In defining the concept of existential attachment, Lacoeyllhe (2000, p. 55) defines it as: “A psychological variable explaining an affective relationship in the duration and in alterable (separation is painful) with the brand, and expressing a psychological proximity relationship with it” (Bahri-Ammari *et al.*, 2016). In this research, emotional attachment is “A relationship-based construct reflecting the emotional bond connecting an individual with a consumption entity (e.g. brand, person, place, or object)” (Park *et al.*, 2006, p. 17). This emotional bond results from the accumulated experiences created over time and the multiple interactions between the consumer and the brand.

2.3 Brand love

Brand love is perceived as a recent marketing concept in the research stream of consumer–brand relationships (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2016; Hegner *et al.*, 2017; Vernuccio *et al.*, 2015). The construct emerges as a crucial outcome for brand managers, playing a strategic role in building long-term sustainable consumer–brand relationships (Kohli *et al.*, 2014; Sabrina *et al.*, 2017; Vernuccio *et al.*, 2015).

In the marketing literature, love has been applied in two different perspectives. From the first perspective, researchers have discussed the consumer’s love for the product (Ball and Tasaki, 1992; Thomson *et al.*, 2005), which these researchers have assessed consumers’ emotional attachment to products. Moreover, in the second perspective, researchers have evaluated terms, including object–consumer or product–consumer relationships (Shimp and Madden, 1988; Whang *et al.*, 2004). All of these researchers were inspired by the corresponding love–object–consumer model of Sternberg’s (1986) triangular love theory. Finally, all the studies in the first perspective were based on the theory of interpersonal relationships. In addition, in the second perspective, researchers have examined the love of a brand or consumer–brand relationship (Albert *et al.*, 2013; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). These groups of researchers have observed that consumers often regard brands as relational patterns.

Brand love refers to a strong sentimental inclination toward a brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), the sum of cognitive behaviors that are driven by fondness for a brand (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010), and a set of “cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, which consumers organize in a mental prototype” (Batra *et al.*, 2012). Brand love has multiple dimensions (Thomson *et al.*, 2005; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Albert *et al.*, 2008; Batra *et al.*, 2012; Heinrich *et al.*, 2008; Albert and Valette-Florence, 2010), as the extant literature has led to divergent views on brand love, but researchers have tended to value Carroll and Ahuvia’s (2006) operationalization above those of others (Junaid *et al.*, 2019; Huang, 2017; Huber *et al.*, 2015; Vernuccio *et al.*, 2015). Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) perceive it as consumers’ emotional response to the brand, which has been formed over time and in multiple interactions. Therefore, in this study, we measure brand love based on the scale of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006).

2.4 Brand loyalty

Loyalty is an important concept, particularly when incidents occur that may lead to a rupture in the relationship between the two role-players (Guillard and Roux, 2014; Kwang-Ho and Kim, 2011). In the marketing literature, these two role-players can be defined as consumers and brands (Bahri-Ammari *et al.*, 2016). Oliver (1999) defines loyalty to a brand as a deeply held commitment to re-patronize or repurchase that brand consistently in the future, despite the potential of situational influences and marketing efforts to induce switching (Lam and Shankar, 2014). Indeed, Oliver (1999) proposes that an individual’s loyalty to any consumption object is developed through a phase by the phase process. According to Oliver (1999), four phases of object loyalty development, namely, cognitive, affective, conative and action, are developed in the given sequence (Sarkar, 2014). In a more general classification, it is divided into two aspects of attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, which attitudinal dimension consists of three aspects of cognitive, affective and conative. Thus, throughout the literature, two different aspects of brand loyalty, namely, attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, are emphasized (Aaker, 1991; Oliver, 1999). Specifically, attitudinal loyalty is defined as the degree to which an individual commits to the brand, and behavioral loyalty refers to the willingness to repurchase the same brand (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). Aaker (1991) describes a consumer’s relationship with a brand on five levels, brand loyalty being the last and the strongest (Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014). In this study, brand loyalty is considered the highest level of consumer–brand relationship, and a mixed approach incorporating behavioral and attitudinal loyalty is used to measure brand loyalty.

2.5 The distinction between emotional brand attachment and brand love

In this research, based on the available evidence in the literature, we hypothesized that in the path of the loyalty of a consumer, the lowest intensity of a relationship between a consumer and its brands was brand satisfaction, which resulted from the consumer’s positive experiences with the brand (Busacca and Castaldo, 2003; Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014; Ha and Perks, 2005). As the intensity of the relationship continues over time, satisfied consumers develop not only a rational preference but also an emotional attachment, leading to formation of a strong emotional relationship with the brand (Albert *et al.*, 2008; Batra *et al.*, 2012; Kotler, 1997). These emotional attachments are so strong that consumers feel passionate about them, find them irreplaceable and experience anxiety upon withdrawal (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Sarkar, 2014). As the relationship continues and its intensity increases, passionate affection that an attached consumer has for a particular brand becomes love (Loureiro *et al.*, 2012). As Fetscherin and Heinrich (2014) in the brand feeling matrix showed, brand love evolved from a strong positive feeling about the brand and a strong relationship

with the brand over time. Finally, it can be stated that a consumer who loves a brand forms the last level of a relationship with the brand, namely, loyalty, and becomes a loyal consumer. As Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) stated, passionate emotional love for a brand is a predictor of brand loyalty.

The point discussed in this study is the coexistence of two variables of brand emotional attachment and brand love as mediator variables on the path of being satisfied with the brand to being loyal to it, as there is no consensus in the literature about the similarity or differentiation of these two constructs. A number of researchers have emphasized that emotional brand attachment and brand love are similar concepts (Albert *et al.*, 2009; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Moussa, 2015; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). For example, Albert *et al.* (2009) contend that the proposed scale by Thomson *et al.* (2005) deals more with the love construct than the attachment construct. In particular, the conceptualization of “attachment” integrates here the dimension of “passion,” and only the type of word used is different. However, there are researchers (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Chang and Chieng, 2006; Park *et al.*, 2010; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012) suggesting a clear distinction. They state that emotional attachment compared to brand love requires less intensity of an emotional response to an object (Schlobohm *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, there are researchers (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Chang and Chieng, 2006; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Loureiro *et al.*, 2012; Shimul *et al.*, 2019; Park *et al.*, 2010) suggesting a clear distinction. They state that emotional attachment compared to brand love requires less intensity of an emotional response to an object (Schlobohm *et al.*, 2016). Batra *et al.* (2012) in the higher-order model of brand love have shown that emotional attachment is one of the three components of positive emotional connection that, together with passion-driven behaviors and self-brand integration, constitute brand love. In fact, emotional attachment is a factor leading to brand love. In addition, Chang and Chieng (2006), in their study of the quality of consumer-brand relationships, show that love and attachment are two separate dimensions. Furthermore, Park *et al.* (2010) stated that love was the emotion that one may develop pursuant to a strong attraction, while some attachments based on attraction may not develop into love. Thus, brand love would indicate the presence of attraction (Patwardhan and Balasubramanian, 2011). Another study indicated that emotional brand attachment and brand love were similar constructs that essentially differ mainly in their intensity. In this regard, brand love necessitates the intensity of emotional responses to an object, while emotional attachment does not necessarily require such intensity (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). Finally, Shimul *et al.* (2019), based on previous studies, maintain that love and attachment are distinguished for three reasons. First, the conceptualization for brand attachment lies within the psychological theories of human attachment (Bowlby, 1979), while brand love is conceptualized with the theories of interpersonal love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006) and romantic love (Sarkar *et al.*, 2012). Second, consumer satisfaction as a post-consumption phenomenon is considered a prerequisite for brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Roy *et al.*, 2013). On the contrary, brand attachment does not hinge on the consumption or satisfaction, as consumers may build a psychological connection and emotional proximity with brands (Sreejesh *et al.*, 2016). Third, brand attachment is largely built on consumers’ emotional bond with the brands, whereas brand love encompasses both the cognitive (idealization) and emotional (affective proximity) components of consumers (Albert *et al.*, 2008). According to the above discussions, love and attachment are common concepts showing consumer positive feelings about the brand. However, they vary in their intensity and differ in their occurrence as well as in their experienced length. Therefore, according to these views, in our study, these two dimensions (love and attachment) are considered two separate variables.

3. Research model and hypothesis development

To investigate the role of emotional structures such as emotional brand attachment and brand love in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty, the present research considers the maximum relationships between the constructs of brand satisfaction, emotional brand attachment, brand love and brand loyalty based on the existing theoretical background in the literature.

3.1 Brand satisfaction and brand loyalty

Brand satisfaction is regarded as the cumulative experience of the brand, which has been shaped over time, and leads to consumers' emotional evaluation of the brand (Song *et al.*, 2019). Prior studies demonstrated that satisfaction was a powerful antecedent of brand loyalty (Belaid and Behi, 2011; Drennana *et al.*, 2015; Song *et al.*, 2019). For example, Song *et al.* (2019) found in a survey of customers of name-brand coffee shops like Starbucks that satisfaction had the greatest impact on brand loyalty, and love marks components have no significant moderating effect on the relationship between satisfaction and brand loyalty. It implied that the significant causal relationship between satisfaction and loyalty tends to be stably maintained as separate from whether or not the brand is perceived as a love marks brand by consumers. Bolton (1998) claims that satisfaction is the prerequisite for achieving brand loyalty, as increased satisfaction usually leads to increased loyalty (Jones and Suh, 2000). Similarly, Keller's (2009) claim that loyalty is expanded through consumer satisfaction is consistent with the views of Lombart and Louis (2012) who demonstrated that the consequence of satisfaction was consumer loyalty. Therefore, the resulting hypothesis is as follows:

H1. Brand satisfaction has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

3.2 Brand satisfaction and emotional brand attachment

As a key managerial variable, satisfaction is a subjective evaluation, cognitive judgment or an emotional response to consumption. Consumer satisfaction with a brand could evolve into attachment to the brand (Oliver, 1999). Additionally, Thomson *et al.* (2005) declared that satisfaction might provide a basis for emotional attachment. Nevertheless, satisfaction and attachment are not synonymous, and there are some differences between them. For example, satisfaction can occur immediately and in one-time interaction with the brand, while emotional attachments tend to develop over time with multiple interactions and/or satisfaction is an evaluative judgment and hence different from the emotionally laden attachment construct (Thomson *et al.*, 2005).

The relationship between emotional attachment and satisfaction has been inconclusive. Three major branches of thought have been identified in brand attachment research. The first branch perceives brand attachment as a predictor of consumers' satisfaction (Belaid and Behi, 2011; levy and Hino, 2016), while the second views it as the consequence of satisfaction (Bahri-Ammari *et al.*, 2016; Japutra *et al.*, 2014; Lam and Shankar, 2014). The third branch considers the mediating role of brand attachment between satisfaction and other outcomes, including loyalty. Bahri-Ammari *et al.* (2016), for instance, found that satisfied consumers became emotionally attached to the restaurant brand, and later developed a sense of loyalty to it. Although emotional brand attachment has been studied both as the antecedent to and outcome of satisfaction, this study regards the emotional brand attachment, an emotional bond generated from the accumulated experience, as an outcome of satisfaction, being consistent with the second branch of study.

Previous research has shown that satisfaction is a strong antecedent to brand attachment (Bahri-Ammari *et al.*, 2016; Lam and Shankar, 2014). Bahri-Ammari *et al.* (2016) have demonstrated that customer satisfaction with luxury restaurants leads to their attachment with restaurant brand. Similarly, Lam and Shankar (2014) believed that consumers who used their mobile devices frequently have had developed attachments to their brands. Therefore, we expect brand satisfaction to have a positive effect on emotional brand attachment. Hence:

H2. Brand satisfaction has a positive impact on emotional brand attachment.

3.3 Brand satisfaction and brand love

Satisfaction is one of the cores of marketing theories, and it has been considered the key objective of the marketing strategy for more than 60 years (Al-Haddad, 2019; Hsu and Chen, 2018). As we stated, satisfaction developed owing to the accumulation of consumer experiences with the brand over time (Drennan *et al.*, 2015). Satisfaction has been considered one of the most important constructs and one of the main goals in marketing. As the main outcome of marketing activities, satisfaction transforms the accumulated experiences long-term relational behaviors such as emotional brand attachment (Thomson *et al.*, 2005), brand love (Drennan *et al.*, 2015; Correia Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2012) and brand loyalty (Belaid and Behi, 2011; Song *et al.*, 2019). However, previous findings suggested that purely satisfying consumers might not be enough to maintain success in the competitive marketplace nowadays (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Research has shown that brand love predicts consumer behavior better than traditional models related to satisfaction (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Brand love is a relatively new marketing construct helping to explain and predict variation in long-term relational behaviors among satisfied consumers (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Carroll and Ahuvia (2006, p. 81) defined brand love as “the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name.”

As Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) discussed, brand love differs from the satisfaction construct. Consistent with the idea of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), we conceptualized brand love as consumers’ emotional response to the brand, which has been formed over time and in multiple interactions. Brand love is different from the satisfaction construct in several parts. First, satisfaction is a cognitive judgment, while brand love has a much stronger affective focus. Second, satisfaction is perceived as a transaction-specific outcome, but brand love is the consequence of a consumer’s long-term relationship with the brand. Third, satisfaction is often related to the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm, but brand love requires neither expectancy nor disconfirmation (e.g. the consumer experiences this emotional response to the brand in the absence of cognition; the consumer knows what to expect from the brand, so little, if any, disconfirmation occurs). Finally, brand love contains a willingness to express love (e.g. “I love this brand!”) and involves the integration of the brand into the consumer’s identity, neither of which is requisite in satisfaction (Hsu and Chen, 2018).

As we review the literature, we find that satisfaction is considered a prerequisite for brand love (Al-Haddad, 2019; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Drennan *et al.*, 2015; Correia Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2012; Roy *et al.*, 2013). Although, not all satisfied consumers feel brand love, and only a percentage of satisfied customers tend to love a brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Roy *et al.*, 2013). Hence, we propose that a kind of satisfaction leads to brand love that is the result of satisfying accumulated experiences and can generate positive emotional responses from the consumer, over a period of time and multiple interactions. Previous studies (Albert *et al.*, 2013; Al-Haddad, 2019; Aro *et al.*, 2018; Correia Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2012; Drennan *et al.*, 2015; Roy *et al.*, 2013) showed that consumer satisfaction

had a positive effect on brand love. As such, consumers are expected to increase their brand love when the extent of their satisfaction is higher. Based on this literature review, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. Brand satisfaction has a positive impact on brand love.

3.4 Emotional brand attachment and brand love

To love a brand, consumers need to be attached to it, that feels that the brand is irreplaceable and miss it when they do not have the brand (Loureiro *et al.*, 2012). Although attachment is a widely accepted element of brand love among researchers (Thomson *et al.*, 2005; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Albert *et al.*, 2008; Batra *et al.*, 2012; Loureiro *et al.*, 2012), little research has been conducted to show that emotional brand attachment is an antecedent to brand love. For example, Kaufmann *et al.* (2016) propose that brand attachment promotes brand love. At the same time, based on the model proposed by Loureiro *et al.* (2012), brand attachment is an antecedent of brand love. Therefore, it can be stated that consumers who are satisfied with the brand, this satisfaction, if continued, will cause emotional attachment to the brand and, after becoming attached to the brand, they will develop a deeper emotional bond with the brand in the path of brand loyalty that is brand love. Hence, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H4. Emotional brand attachment has a positive impact on brand love.

3.5 Emotional brand attachment and brand loyalty

Thomson *et al.* (2005) argue that a higher level of emotional attachment is likely to increase a consumer's emotional dependency on the brand. As consumers become more connected to a brand, they are likely to maintain close proximity with the brand, as the presence of the attachment object offers feelings of comfort, happiness and security (Park *et al.*, 2010; Theng So *et al.*, 2013; Thomson *et al.*, 2005). Thus, it is assumed that a consumer who has a higher level of emotional attachment to the brand is willing to commit being in a long-term relationship with the brand (Theng So *et al.*, 2013). Accordingly, this research proposes that emotional attachment is likely to enhance consumers' loyalty to the brand. Earlier studies on emotional attachment have shown that consumers with strong emotional bonds to a brand report greater brand loyalty (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Theng So *et al.*, 2013), which promotes long-term-oriented consumer-brand relationships. Owing to the aforementioned reasons, the following hypothesis is proposed between emotional brand attachment and brand loyalty:

H5. Emotional brand attachment has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

3.6 Brand love and brand loyalty

Satisfied consumers' brand love is expected to increase both understanding and prediction of their post-consumption behavior (Hsu and Chen, 2018). More specifically, this research hypothesizes the positive direct effect of brand love on brand loyalty in a population of satisfied and attached consumers. Some studies (Aro *et al.*, 2018; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Correia Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2012; Drennan *et al.*, 2015; Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012) have demonstrated that satisfied consumers have a tendency to be more loyal to a brand. In line with previous research, we

expect that brand love can also play an antecedent role in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty in addition to mediation role. Therefore (Figure 1):

H6. Brand love has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

4. Methodology

4.1 Instrument

A research questionnaire was developed with two sections. The first section includes the four constructs (brand satisfaction, emotional brand attachment, brand love and brand loyalty) in this research. The second section contains the respondents' demographics (gender, education and age). The developed questionnaire was pre-tested on 40 respondents, and the result showed that the instructions and questions were well understood.

A 23-item scale measurement was adopted from previous studies and modified to suit the context of this research. All English items were translated into Persian, and then back-translated by a second bilingual person to ensure consistency of meaning. Respondents rated all measures on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The five-point Likert scale was chosen because most studies conducted on research variables had used this format (Correia Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2012; Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014; Loureiro *et al.*, 2012). To aid respondents in understanding how to complete the questionnaire, the purpose of the research, the structure of the questions and how to answer each question based on the Likert scale were explained to them.

Brand satisfaction was measured by a six-item scale adopted Lam and Shankar (2014) and Lau and Lee (1999). Emotional brand attachment was measured by a five-item scale adopted from Thomson *et al.* (2005) and Malär *et al.* (2011). Brand love was measured with an eight-item scale adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Finally, brand loyalty was measured with a four-item scale adapted from Fetscherin *et al.* (2014).

4.2 Sample and product selection

The study population most of the research that has been done in the field of emotional bonds with brands has been universities (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Correia Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2012; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Lee and Workman, 2015). Selection criteria in these populations are also continuous use of the brand and non-switching over a long period of time (considering that the consumer has the ability to switching the brand) or the consumers' emotional declarations about the brand, and in some studies, access to

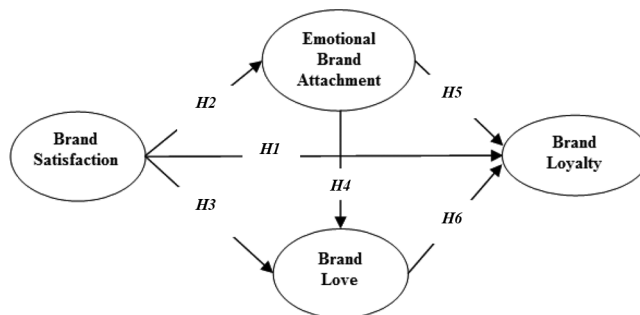


Figure 1.
The proposed research model

individuals has been the criterion of choice. Therefore, the same approach was used in this study to select the target population, and the students were selected as the target population. Using convenience sampling, 300 post-graduate students of North Tehran Branch of Islamic Azad University who had not switched their preferred brand for a long time despite the ability to switch were selected. The descriptive characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

This study chose smartphone and apparel as two product categories based on interviews of experts and studies of Hwang and Kandampully (2012) and Fetscherin *et al.* (2014) because past research has shown that these products intensify the bonds and emotional responses to brands (emotional brand attachment and brand love).

5. Data analysis

Data analysis consisted of two steps. Firstly, the measurement tool was validated through confirmatory factor analysis. Secondly, the structural model was estimated. During both steps, we used partial least squares (PLS), the SmartPLS 3 software.

5.1 Measurement model validation

To evaluate reflective measurement models, we examined the outer loadings, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE = convergent validity) and discriminant validity. First, the measurement model was tested for convergent validity, which was assessed through factor loadings, CR and AVE (Hair *et al.*, 2013). Table 2 shows that all item loadings exceeded the recommended value of 0.6 (Chin *et al.*, 2008). CR and Cronbach's α values, which depict the degree to which the construct indicators indicate the latent construct, exceeded the recommended value of 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2013), while AVE, which reflects the overall variance in the indicators accounted for by the latent construct, exceeded the recommended value of 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2013).

Discriminant validity refers to the extent to which the measures are not a reflection of some other variables, and it is indicated by low correlations between the measure of interest and the measures of other constructs. Table 3 shows that the square root of the AVE (diagonal values) of each construct is larger than its corresponding correlation coefficients, pointing toward adequate discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The measurement model showed adequate convergent and discriminant validity.

5.2 Assessment of structural model

The structural model was assessed by the following criteria with SmartPLS 3.0 (Chin, 1998; Hair *et al.*, 2017) (Figure 2). PLS is a suitable analytical method for maximizing the explanatory power of endogenous variables, namely, maximizing variance explanatory power or minimizing structural errors (Chin, 1998). First, the predictive power of the model was assessed using the variance explained (R^2) in endogenous constructs. As shown in Table 4, the R^2 of the dependent variables ranged from 0.399–0.686 (moderate). Chin (1998) explains R^2 values of 0.67, 0.33 and 0.19 as substantial, moderate and weak, respectively; thus, ours are above moderate. Also, Falk and Miller (1992)

Table 1.
Demographic profile
of respondents

Gender	(%)	Age	(%)	Education	(%)
Male	54	25–30	65.3	MA	62.3
Female	46	31–35	30	PhD	37.7
		>35	4.7		

Construct name	Items	Loading	AVE	α	CR	Emotional brand attachment
<i>Brand satisfaction</i> <i>M = 4/22</i> <i>SD = 0/61</i>	BS1	0.84	0.68	0.90	0.92	27
	BS2	0.81				
	BS3	0.77				
	BS4	0.87				
	BS5	0.80				
	BS6	0.84				
<i>Emotional brand attachment</i> <i>M = 3/18</i> <i>SD = 0/94</i>	EBA1	0.90	0.75	0.91	0.94	
	EBA2	0.90				
	EBA3	0.89				
	EBA4	0.86				
	EBA5	0.75				
<i>Brand love</i> <i>M = 3/71</i> <i>SD = 0/73</i>	BL1	0.76	0.62	0.92	0.93	
	BL2	0.79				
	BL3	0.80				
	BL4	0.67				
	BL5	0.78				
	BL6	0.83				
	BL7	0.79				
	BL8	0.82				
<i>Brand loyalty</i> <i>M = 3/73</i> <i>SD = 0/90</i>	BLo1	0.89	0.79	0.91	0.94	
	BLo2	0.91				
	BLo3	0.88				
	BLo4	0.87				

Table 2. Validity and reliability of constructs, mean and standard deviation (SD)

	1	2	3	4
1. <i>Brand satisfaction</i>	0.82			
2. <i>Emotional brand attachment</i>	0.63	0.86		
3. <i>Brand love</i>	0.66	0.77	0.78	
4. <i>Brand loyalty</i>	0.60	0.66	0.75	0.88

Table 3. Discriminant validity results based on Fornell-Larcker criterion

Notes: Italic diagonal elements are the square root of AVE for each construct. Off-diagonal elements are the correlations between constructs

suggest R^2 values should be above 0.10 (10 %). Second, besides the size of R^2 , the researchers used the predictive sample reuse technique (Q^2) as a criterion for predictive relevance (Chin *et al.*, 2008). Based on the blindfolding procedure, Q^2 shows how well the collected data can be reconstructed empirically with the help of the model and the PLS parameters. For this research, the researchers obtained Q^2 using cross-validated redundancy procedures, as suggested by Chin *et al.* (2008). A Q^2 greater than 0 means the model has predictive relevance, whereas Q^2 less than 0 means the model lacks predictive relevance. As shown in Table 4, Q^2 for emotional brand attachment, brand love and brand loyalty are 0.282, 0.396 and 0.512, respectively, indicating acceptable predictive relevance. Finally, the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) was used to assess the overall model fit. The value of SRMR is 0.053, which is considered a good fit. Hu and Bentler (1998) recommend that a value of less than 0.10 or 0.08 is considered acceptable levels.

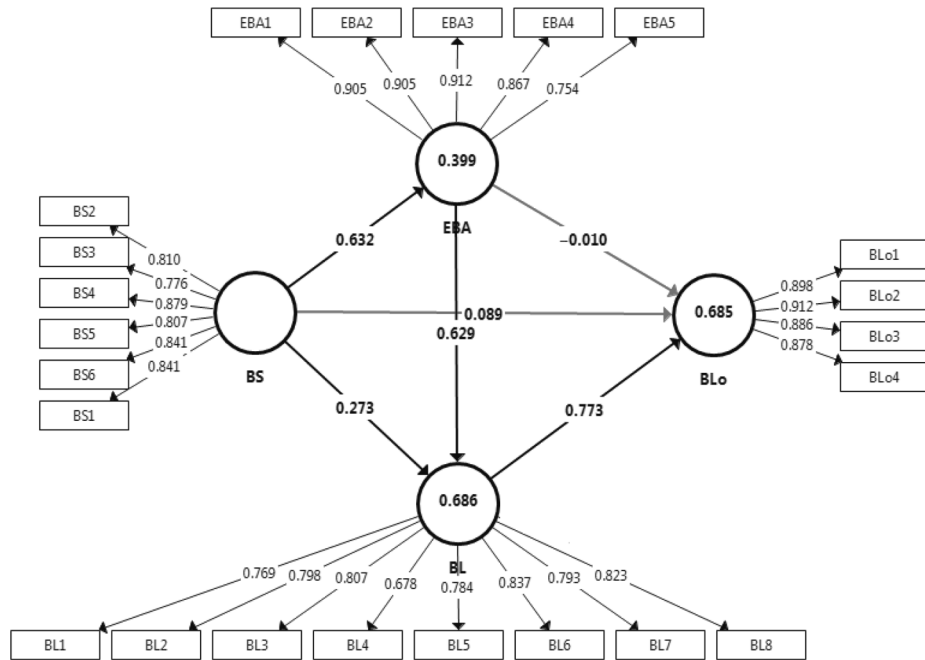


Figure 2.
Structural model
results

Sources: Solid line: significant paths. Redline: not significant (*n.s*) paths

Table 4.
Results of R² and Q²
values

Endogenous latent constructs	R ²	Q ²
<i>Emotional brand attachment</i>	0.686	0.282
<i>Brand love</i>	0.399	0.396
<i>Brand loyalty</i>	0.685	0.512

5.3 Hypotheses testing

The six hypotheses presented in this research were tested using the PLS approach. The path significance of each hypothesized association in the research model was examined. In this research, a two-tailed *t*-test was used because the independent variables may either show a positive or negative effect on the dependent variables (Helm *et al.*, 2010). According to the two-tailed *t*-test (*df* = 300), the 0.05 significance level, or *p* < 0.05, requires a *t*-value > 1.96, and the 0.01 significance level, or *p* < 0.01, requires a *t*-value > 2.63. The 0.001 significance level, or *p* < 0.001, requires the corresponding *t*-value > 3.40.

H1 addresses the belief that brand satisfaction has a direct and significant effect on brand loyalty. As shown in Table 5, brand satisfaction ($\beta = 0.089$, *t* = 1.76, *n.s*) does not have a direct and significant effect on brand loyalty. *H2–H3* state that brand satisfaction will have a positive effect on emotional brand attachment and brand love. The result shows that brand satisfaction has a positive effect on emotional brand attachment ($\beta = 0.632$, *t* = 14.50, *p* < 0.001) and brand love ($\beta = 0.273$, *t* = 5.37, *p* < 0.001). The result shows that

emotional brand attachment ($\beta = 0.629, t = 16.08, p < 0.001$) has a positive impact on brand love, supporting *H4*. While emotional brand attachment ($\beta = -0.010, t = 0.18, n.s$) did not have significant effect on brand loyalty (*H5*). Finally, *H6* addresses that brand love will have a positive impact on brand loyalty. As expected, brand love ($\beta = 0.773, t = 14.41, p < 0.001$) has positive impact on brand loyalty. Therefore, *H6* is supported.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The present study was conducted to present an empirical model based on the sixth scenario of Oliver (1999) – satisfaction is the beginning of a transitioning sequence that ultimately results in loyalty – and by assuming that emotional constructs such as emotional attachment and brand love play a mediating role in the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. Specifically, we sought to answer the question of whether emotional structures such as emotional attachment and love play a mediating role in the process of transitioning from satisfaction to loyalty in the correct sequence.

The result of *H1* shows that consumer satisfaction with the brand does not have a positive effect on brand loyalty. This result is consistent with the result of the study by Belaid and Behi's (2011) and, at the same time, inconsistent with studies arguing that satisfaction is the main predictor of brand loyalty (Drennan *et al.*, 2015; Song *et al.*, 2019). The result of this hypothesis can demonstrate the importance of the mediating role of constructs of emotional attachment and brand love in the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. Hence, it can be argued that products such as apparel and smartphones, which play the role of self-expression and identification for the consumer, need to achieve emotional and relational constructs beyond satisfaction, such as emotional attachment and brand love, to lead the consumer to loyalty through the path.

The result of *H2* indicated that brand satisfaction led to formation of emotional brand attachment. This result suggests that satisfaction is an explanatory variable for emotional brand attachment and develops a kind of emotional brand attachment if the consumer's satisfaction with a brand continues. This issue is also considered by Thomson *et al.* (2005), noting that satisfaction is the basis of emotional brand attachment. This result also concurs with the analysis of Smaoui (2008), acknowledging that a satisfied consumer is more likely to be emotionally attached to a brand, contrary to an unsatisfied consumer who will have difficulty sticking to a brand. In their "relational chain" of brands, Aurier *et al.* (2001) as well as Guillard and Roux (2014) consider that "Satisfaction is a direct antecedent of the attachment."

The result of *H3* and *H4* of the study indicated that consumer satisfaction with the brand directly and indirectly through emotional attachment had a positive effect on brand love. Post-consumption satisfaction with the brand if continued will most likely result in a strong emotional attachment to that brand. Thus, considering that one of the most important fields

Hypotheses	Path	Path coefficient	<i>t</i> -statistics	Decision
<i>H1</i>	BS → BLo	0.089	1.76	Rejected
<i>H2</i>	BS → EBA	0.632	14.50*	Supported
<i>H3</i>	BS → BL	0.273	5.37*	Supported
<i>H4</i>	EBA → BL	0.629	16.08*	Supported
<i>H5</i>	EBA → BLo	-0.010	0.18	Rejected
<i>H6</i>	BL → BLo	0.773	14.41*	Supported

Note: * $p < 0.001$

Table 5.
Hypothesis testing

of creating brand love is a strong emotional attachment to the brand, brand satisfaction can play a determining role in brand love directly and indirectly through emotional attachment. In addition, the results obtained from *H3* and *H4* are supported by Al-Haddad (2019) and Correia Loureiro and Kaufmann (2012).

The result of *H5* shows that emotional attachment does not have a positive and direct effect on brand loyalty. This result is contrary to previous research, including Theng So *et al.* (2013), and in particular Hwang and Kandampully (2012) who found that emotional brand attachment was the strongest antecedent of brand loyalty. The lack of confirmation of the above hypothesis is not a reason for the lack of correlation between these two variables. Rather, it can strongly support our claim that on the path to loyalty to a particular brand, a satisfied consumer is emotionally attached to the brand and forms a romantic relationship with the brand. In fact, emotional brand attachment not directly, but indirectly and through brand love affects brand loyalty.

The result of *H6* shows that brand love is the strongest antecedent of brand loyalty and is the only variable directly influencing brand loyalty compared to satisfaction and emotional brand attachment. This result in a way proves that consumers' love for a brand in their relational chain with brands plays the most important role in shaping consumers' loyalty. In other words, if consumers fall in love with a brand, they will develop a strong, passionate emotional relationship with that brand. This type of relationship creates very strong emotional responses to the brand, which guarantees the repurchase of that brand and poses a major obstacle to competing brands. Therefore, the consumer who loves a brand will tend to have become loyal to it (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). The result of this hypothesis is supported by the research conducted by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and Hwang and Kandampully (2012).

7. Theoretical implications

Theoretically, the current study is one of the first ones to develop a conceptual model investigating the role of emotional structures in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty. To the best of our knowledge, this research is the first one to develop the role of emotional structures in the form of a relational chain of brands in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty (Aurier *et al.*, 2001). Indeed, emotional structures in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty can be considered a "form of insurance" to maintain the relationship with brands.

In addition, the study of indirect effects also offers interesting theoretical applications. In general, in this study, we defined three sequences from satisfaction to loyalty in the concept of the consumer-brand relational chain based on the conceptual model that included: satisfaction → emotional attachment → loyalty; satisfaction → love → loyalty and ultimately satisfaction → emotional attachment → love → loyalty. Meanwhile, two sequences of satisfaction → love → loyalty and satisfaction → emotional attachment → love → loyalty were significant. The indirect influence of these two sequences shows that the influence of the sequence of satisfaction → emotional attachment → love → loyalty ($\beta = 0.39$) is significantly stronger than the sequence of satisfaction → love → loyalty ($\beta = 0.21$). These results show that our assumption, based on that the emotional structures such as emotional attachment and brand love play a mediating role in the process of transitioning from satisfaction to loyalty in a correct sequence, is supported. Therefore, it can be claimed that in the path of the loyalty of a consumer, the lowest intensity of a relationship between a consumer and brand is brand satisfaction resulting from the consumer's positive experiences with the brand (Busacca and Castaldo, 2003; Fetscherin *et al.*, 2014; Ha and Perks, 2005). As the intensity of the relationship continues, over time, satisfied consumers

develop not only a rational preference but also an emotional attachment, leading to formation of a strong emotional relationship with the brand (Albert *et al.*, 2008; Batra *et al.*, 2012; Kotler, 1997). These emotional attachments are so strong that consumers feel passionate about them, find them irreplaceable and experience anxiety upon withdrawal (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Sarkar, 2014). As the relationship continues and its intensity increases, passionate affection that an attached consumer has for a particular brand becomes love (Loureiro *et al.*, 2012). Figure 3 shows the final model of the research after analyzing and deleting relationships that were not significant.

8. Practical implications

In terms of managerial implications, the results demonstrate that satisfaction plays an important role in explaining how consumers are attached to brands. It is, therefore, important for managers to become aware of the strategic role of satisfaction variable and to set up expansions and improvement plans aiming at attracting consumers' satisfaction. It is also important to know how to better manage relationship marketing by using technological tools like customer relationship management (CRM). Consumers are certainly attached to brands and they become loyal (Guillard and Roux, 2014).

Given the positive impact of satisfaction on brand love, it is recommended that products be offered at reasonable prices, good quality and attractive packaging, thereby providing a pleasant experience for consumers. Additionally, brand managers need to pay special attention to generating persuasive content on social media in particular. It is important to make sure that the content of ads is in line with the long-term goals and strategies of the firm.

Additionally, consumers' emotional attachment to the brand leads to their love for the brand. Therefore, brand managers need to keep in mind that when a consumer buys a brand, they relate their personality to the brand. Thus, the product should be promoted in such a way that it can distinguish its consumers from those of other brands. It is also recommended that marketers identify the factors that can help to form such relationships (emotional attachment and love). For example, it is suggested more efforts be made at unique product design, attractive packaging and product quality improvement.

Finally, the results show that brand love is the most important antecedent of consumer brand loyalty. Given this finding, brand managers can strengthen the consumer-brand relationship by designing appropriate loyalty communications and programs as well as paying attention to consumer preferences, thereby preventing consumer brand switching.

9. Limitations and future research

Like all studies, this study has some limitations, the first of which concerns generalization, as its unit of analysis is smartphone and apparel consumers, and data were collected using a convenience sampling method. Future research should study the proposed model using

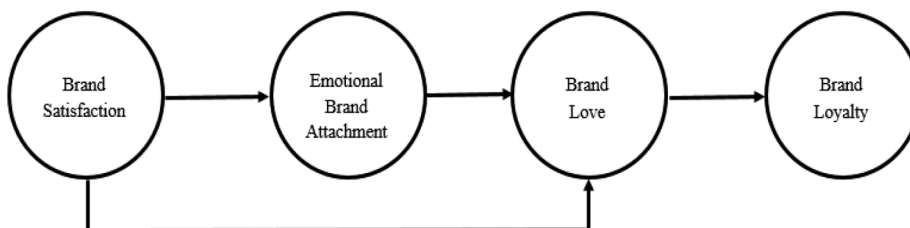


Figure 3.
Research final model

other product categories and various users and use other sampling techniques. Another limitation of this study has to do with how emotional structures (emotional attachment and love) are measured. This study was deductive in nature, and it used a structured questionnaire to measure emotional structures. However, emotional structures are subjective in nature; therefore, our quantitative approach has limitations in terms of its measurement. In-depth interviews or other qualitative tools might be used to overcome this limitation. Finally, in the present study, the role of emotional structures in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty in terms of relationship intensity was examined. Nevertheless, in a relationship, only the intensity of the relationship is not sufficient to provide the correct sequence from satisfaction to loyalty, and it should also focus on the quality of the relationship. Therefore, future research can use the variables of brand trust and commitment as relationship quality to extend the model. Accordingly, trust and commitment can play a mediating role in the relationship between satisfaction–emotional attachment (Aurier *et al.*, 2001; Guillard and Roux, 2014; Horppu *et al.*, 2008) and love–loyalty (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Iglesias *et al.*, 2011), respectively.

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Appendix

Brand satisfaction (BS) (adapted from Lam and Shankar (2014) and Lau and Lee (1999))

- BS1: I am satisfied with my decision to buy this brand.
- BS2: I have truly enjoyed this brand.
- BS3: Using this brand has been a good experience.
- BS4: I am sure it was the right thing to buy this brand.
- BS5: This brand meets my expectations.
- BS6: Overall, I am satisfied with this brand.

Emotional brand attachment (EBA) (adapted from Thomson et al. (2005) and Malär et al. (2011))

- EBA1: I have a unique relationship with this brand.
- EBA2: I identify with what this brand stands for.
- EBA3: I feel a sense of belonging in regard to this brand.
- EBA4: I am proud to be a consumer of this brand.
- EBA5: This brand fits my personality.

Brand love (BL) (adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006))

- BL1: This is a wonderful brand.
- BL2: This brand makes me feel good.
- BL3: This brand is totally awesome.
- BL4: This brand makes me very happy.
- BL5: I love this brand.

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BL6: This brand is a pure delight.
BL7: I am passionate about this brand.
BL8: I am very attached to this brand.

Brand loyalty (BLo) (Adapted from Fetscherin et al. (2014))

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BLo1: I am committed to this brand.
BLo2: I pay more attention to this brand than to other brands.
BLo3: I am more interested in this particular brand than in other brands.
BLo4: It is very important for me to buy this brand rather than another brand.

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