The role of brand self-congruence, brand love, and brand attachment on brand advocacy: A serial mediation model

Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to examine the impact of brand self-congruence on brand advocacy. In addition, the roles of brand love and attachment are examined through a serial mediation model.

Methodology: A total of 324 valid and useable responses collected from an Australian consumer panel were analysed through IBM SPSS. Underpinned by social identity theory and self-expansion theory, a set of hypotheses was examined in a research model.

Findings: The findings show that consumers' brand self-congruence positively impacts brand love, attachment, and advocacy intention. Moreover, brand attachment and love mediate the relationship between brand self-congruence and advocacy.

Implications: The findings of this research suggest that brand managers should cultivate emotions to build a strong consumer-brand relationship.

Originality/value: This research advances the current understanding of brand advocacy literature concerning brand self-congruence, love, and attachment. The findings suggest that consumers' brand self-congruence, combined with brand love and attachment, will generate greater advocacy.

Keywords: brand self-congruence, brand love, brand attachment, brand advocacy.

1. Introduction

Brands in the hypercompetitive market are increasingly encouraging consumer-to-consumer recommendations that are considered authentic and effective in creating a strong consumer-brand relationship (Bateman, 2022; Coelho et al., 2019). In recent years, industry practitioners have emphasised that companies need to deliberately nurture a group of passionate customer advocates who recommend them to their family, friends, and acquaintances (Senyard, 2021). From an academic standpoint, marketing literature suggests that satisfied consumers often share their positive experiences with others and subsequently recommend the relevant products and brands (Konuk, 2019). Such voluntary recommendation, known as brand advocacy, has gained considerable scholarly attention over the past decade (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Shukla et al., 2016; Wilk et al., 2022).

A stream of research suggests that consumers' perceived satisfaction, trust and commitment toward the brand generate brand advocacy (Shukla et al., 2016; Bhati and Verma, 2020). Another stream suggests that consumers' perceived self-concept congruence with the brand (i.e., consumer-brand identification) is related to brand advocacy (e.g., Wilk et al., 2021; Leckie et al., 2022). The latter stream further refers to the consumers' psychological connection with the brand, whereby brand love and attachment are associated with brand self-congruence and brand advocacy. For instance, there is ample evidence that brand self-congruences create brand love (e.g., Wang et al., 2019; Wallace et al., 2017; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia, 2014). Like the context of interpersonal relationships, consumers develop an interest in their self-congruent counterparts (hence, brands) and so develop a love for the brands that reflects the consumers' self-image (Batra et al., 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). By the same token, studies show that perceived self-congruence results in brand attachment (e.g., Malär

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et al., 2011; Guèvremont, 2021). Consumers sense an affectionate tie with the self-congruent brand that helps validate the consumers' self-concept (Shimul and Phau, 2022). Despite the debate over conceptual similarities between brand love and attachment (Moussa, 2015), studies have found that a higher level of perceived brand self-congruence enhances consumers' brand love, attachment, and advocacy intentions (e.g., Wallace et al., 2017; Jillapalli and Wilcox, 2010).

While the current body of research has extensively examined brand love (Palusuk et al., 2019) and attachment (Shimul, 2022), only a handful of studies investigated the mediating roles that brand love and attachment play in consumer behaviour (e.g., Li et al., 2020; Huang, 2017). The majority of the past studies have established a positive link between brand self-congruence and brand advocacy, but the underlying mechanisms that explain this relationship remain unclear. Therefore, there is a need for further research that delves into the factors that mediate this relationship. In particular, the identity-related aspects of the brand make it a key factor in shaping consumer-brand relationships, as consumers often use brands to express their self-concept and identity. In addition, the desire for self-expansion motivates consumers to seek out brands that align with their self-concept and allow them to express their identities (Shimul and Phau, 2022). Besides, the complex nature of the consumer-brand relationship indicates that brand advocacy is not solely driven by the functional benefits of the product or service but also by emotional connections and attachment to the brand (Bhati and Verma, 2020). To the authors' best knowledge, until now, no study has examined the mechanism of identity fit (i.e., brand self-congruence) and brand advocacy intentions through consumers' love and attachment toward the brand. Hence, we reiterate Wilk et al.'s (2021) calls for additional research on the nexus between brand love,

attachment, and advocacy. Based on the preceding discussion, we proffer that brand love and attachment co-exist in consumer-brand relationships (Babić-Hodović et al., 2022) and examine the serial mediating effect of brand love and attachment on the relationship between brand self-congruence and brand advocacy.

In light of the above, our research aims to advance the current understanding of brand advocacy literature concerning brand self-congruence, love, and attachment. Specifically, we put forward that brand love and attachment are essential to enhance brand advocacy. In doing so, we examine, underpinned by social identity theory, the direct impact of brand self-congruence on brand advocacy. Next, building on the self-expansion theory, we propose that consumers' brand self-congruence, combined with brand love and attachment, will generate greater advocacy. By investigating these factors, this research will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying brand advocacy, which can have important implications for marketers seeking to build stronger relationships with their consumers. The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. First, the relevant theories and literature are reviewed for postulating the hypotheses. Next, the research methodology is outlined, and the results are discussed. Afterwards, the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings are provided. Finally, the limitations of the current research are acknowledged, and future research directions have been offered.

2. Theory, literature, and hypotheses

2.1. Social identity theory

Social identity is the "part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1974, p. 69). Social identity theory suggests that people consider themselves as fellows of social groups, whereby the in-group feelings shape and impact their communal behaviour (Tajfel, 1974; Hornsey, 2008). In particular, cognitive awareness and emotional significance have been emphasised in understanding people's intention to choose a group membership (Tajfel, 1974). Moreover, the members tend to be concerned about protecting and maintaining the image and identity of the group (e.g., Turner and Brown, 1978). Therefore, it is expected that the social identity theory will explain consumers' brand self-congruence and emotional connection with the brand, as well as inter-group communications relevant to the brand advocacy construct.

2.2. Self-expansion theory

The basis of self-expansion is explained through the notion of mutual dependence, interconnection and reciprocal behaviour reflecting interpersonal intimacy (Kelley et al., 1983). To put self-expansion into context, Aron et al. (2001) refer to the collective aspect of self. They argue that the sense of self is overlapped in a close relationship whereby the overlapping nature is recognised through the cognitive tendency of including one's self. Consequently, when people continue a friendship for a long time, they ignore the downside of the friend (Aron and Fraley, 1999). They also feel relationship partners' success as their achievement and take ownership of the accomplishment. Self-expansion also reflects the mutual trust and confidence between the partners and strengthens the sense of relational

proximity (Aron et al., 2001). Marketing studies often argue that consumers' self-expansion to the brands is represented through the matching between the consumer and brand image (e.g., Malär et al., 2011; Sirgy, 1985). The higher the congruence, the stronger the relationship is built between the consumer and the brand (Malär et al., 2011). Therefore, within the context of this research, we proffer that self-expansion theory explains the mechanism of the relationship between brand personality fit (i.e., brand self-congruence) and brand advocacy through brand love and attachment.

2.3. Brand self-congruence and brand advocacy

Brand advocacy refers to consumers' voluntary recommendation of a brand to others (Fullerton, 2011; Bhati and Verma, 2020). Such advocacy behaviour includes spreading positive word-of-mouth as well as defending the brand against criticism (Wilk et al., 2018). Brand advocacy may result from a satisfactory consumer-brand relationship, whereby consumers are willing to support the brand through their words and action (Bhati and Verma, 2020). Another stream of research posits brand advocacy as a strong indicator of consumer-brand identification, driven by brand-self similarity (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). The brand-self similarity, widely researched as consumers' brand self-congruence, refers to the matching between the personality of the consumer and the brand (Sirgy, 1985).

Built on the self-congruity theory, past studies have argued that consumers' choices and related purchase decisions are influenced by perceived brand self-congruence (Sirgy et al., 2016; Kumar, 2022). A greater brand self-congruence results in a higher level of consumer satisfaction, trust, and commitment to the brand (Sirgy et al., 2016; Li and Peng, 2021, Wang et al., 2019). Furthermore, brand self-congruence reduces the attractiveness of alternative

brands (Yim et al., 2007). Referring to the conceptualisation of social identity theory, we recapitulate that people in a particular group interact with other members based on their subjective beliefs about the relationship rather than the materialistic reliance or benefits (e.g., Bourhis et al., 1997).

Social identity theory suggests that people seek to maintain a positive social identity by favourably comparing their group to others (Tajfel, 1974). In line with this, we argue that consumers who identify with a particular brand consider the brand a part of their social groups. As social identification generates a sense of community, consumers develop feelings for other consumers of the brand (Keller, 2003). Consequently, they develop an affinity toward the self-congruent brand and enjoy recommending the brand to others (Leckie et al., 2022). They further perceive the brand as representing their values and beliefs, and they may feel that advocating for the brand is a way of demonstrating their commitment to those values and beliefs (Turner and Brown, 1978). Therefore, when a brand is perceived as being self-congruent, it reinforces the consumer's self-concept and strengthens their identification with the brand (Sirgy et al., 2016). This, in turn, leads to increased brand advocacy, as the consumer feels that advocating for the brand is a way of demonstrating their commitment to their own identity. Accordingly, consumers not only repurchase the self-congruent brand but also advocate the brand (Šegota et al., 2022).

Taken together, within the context of the consumer-brand relationship, consumers extend their self-concept toward the congruent brand and build intimacy and connection, which is further strengthened by advocating the brand to others (Fournier, 1998). Therefore, the following is hypothesised:

H_1. Brand self-congruence is positively related to brand advocacy.

2.4. The mediating role of brand love

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) define brand love as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (p. 81). Regarded as one of the six dimensions of the consumer-brand relationship (Fournier, 1998), brand love has widely been researched as an outcome of consumer-brand identification (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Roy et al., 2012; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010). From a theoretical standpoint, consumer-brand identification results from the image congruence between consumer and brand (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010). That is, through the process of self-expansion, consumers develop a strong feeling and love toward self-congruent brands (Roy et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2014).

Self-expansion theory posits that individuals are motivated to expand their self-concept and incorporate new aspects of themselves into their identity (Aron et al., 1992). Within the context of this research, we put forward that when consumers perceive that a brand aligns with their self-concept and reflects who they are, they experience a sense of self-validation and expansion. This feeling of self-validation and expansion generates positive emotions (e.g., love) towards the brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Because of such self-expansion, brand love results in positive consumer behavioural outcomes. For instance, consumers repurchase their beloved brand, even at a premium price (Bairrada et al., 2018; Wallace et al., 2022). Moreover, aligning with the premise of social identity theory, consumers feel more engaged with the brand and spread positive word-of-mouth (Roy et al., 2012). They further support the brand in the online/offline community and forgive its wrongdoings (Batra et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2022; Joshi and Garg, 2021). Accordingly, a large body of research has provided empirical evidence of a strong relationship between brand love and brand

advocacy (Coelho et al., 2019; Wu and Chang, 2019; Amaro et al., 2020). Hence, we reiterate that strong personification of the brand (i.e., building brand love through brand self-congruence) is essential to utilise the explanatory power of self-expansion theory in the consumer-brand relationship (e.g., Huang and Mitchell, 2014). In view of the foregoing discussion, we postulate that consumers' brand self-congruence, in combination with brand love, generates a greater level of brand advocacy. Therefore, the following is hypothesised:

H₂. The relationship between brand self-congruence and brand advocacy is mediated by brand love.

2.5. The mediating role of brand attachment

Brand attachment is the emotional connection between a consumer and a brand (Park et al., 2010; Thomson et al., 2005). Built on self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1985), extant research argues that consumers build an attachment to brands with either self-verification or self-enhancement motives (Malär et al., 2011). In particular, consumers prefer brands that match their self-concept, and they buy self-expressive brands to validate their image (Aaker, 1996). Likewise, the feeling of togetherness developed between consumers and brands generates an emotional connection and subsequently forms brand attachment (Park et al., 2010). In other words, consumers' brand self-congruence is positively related to brand attachment (Malär et al., 2011; Guèvremont, 2021).

Social identity theory suggests that positive self-esteem is essential for individuals, and this can be accomplished by receiving recognition and affirmation from the groups to which they belong (Turner and Brown, 1978). Through self-brand identification, individuals can

achieve a sense of belonging to a particular group and enhance their self-esteem. This feeling of belonging can lead to an emotional connection to the brand (Wallace et al., 2014). When consumers develop an emotional connection to a brand that is congruent with their self-concept, they may experience self-expansion through their relationship with the brand. This process of self-expansion may lead to an enhanced brand attachment, which in turn, results in greater brand advocacy. This further aligns with the self-expansion theory that people seek to expand their self-concepts and experience personal growth through their relationships and interactions with others (Aron et al., 2013).

Extant research argues that brand attachment makes the consumer loyal and positively impacts brand equity (e.g., Park et al., 2010; Malär et al., 2011; Boateng et al., 2020). Such an emotional bond provides the consumers with a sense of belongingness, security, and happiness (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008; Shimul et al., 2023), whereby the consumers seek to continue the mutual relationship for a more extended time (Shimul and Phau, 2022). Consequently, they share their brand-related positive experience with others and then recommend the brand (Japutra et al., 2019; Jillapalli and Wilcox, 2010). Based on the afore-discussed theoretical expectations and empirical findings, we predict that consumers' brand self-congruence, in combination with brand attachment, will generate a greater level of brand advocacy. Therefore, the following is hypothesised:

H3. The relationship between brand self-congruence and brand advocacy is mediated by brand attachment.

2.6. The relationship between brand love and brand attachment

Brand love and attachment are often considered "the same core knowledge product offered under different brand names" (Moussa, 2015, p. 69). The current body of research argues that brand love and attachment are related to consumers' feelings and emotions toward the brands (Babić-Hodović et al., 2022). Moreover, consumers develop a deep emotional intimacy with the brand whereby they feel joy and delight in the brand (Thomson et al., 2005; Batra et al., 2012). Hence, the consumers' self-concept connection has been identified as the key antecedent of brand love and attachment (Hwang and Kandampully, 2012; Malär et al., 2011; Wallace et al., 2017). Past studies largely posit that consumers exhibit a greater commitment to the brand they love or are attached to (Babić-Hodović et al., 2022). Taken together, both brand love and attachment strengthen the long-term relationship between brands and consumers. Despite these similarities, the conceptual distinctions between the two constructs have also been evident in the literature (e.g., Albert, 2008; Hwang and Kandampully, 2012). Referring to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1979), we argue that attachment formation starts with the desire for intimacy, whereby perceived value, security, and care are the key instruments for building attachment (Liu et al., 2020; Molinillo et al., 2022). Next, building on the notion of the consumers' emotional attachments to brands (Thomson et al., 2005) and applying the understanding of human attachment (Hazan and Shaver, 1994) to brand attachment, we contend that attachment is more enduring than love. Whereas consumers may fall in love with a brand at first sight (Langner et al., 2016), attachment takes longer to develop (Park et al., 2013). For example, brand attachment results from the interplay of brand trust (i.e., reliability and benevolence) and brand resources that

gratify, enrich, and enable the consumers' perceived self-concepts (Park et al., 2008).

Therefore, we propose brand love as a precursor of brand attachment in this paper.

Given that brand advocacy requires consumers' voluntary and active recommendations to others, brands must use different mechanisms to amplify the consumers' advocacy intentions. While consumers' brand self-congruence may activate brand advocacy, we put forward that the advocacy intention can be amplified by generating brand love and attachment. Noteworthy, we have argued prior to postulating H_2 and H_3 that consumers' brand self-congruence results in brand love and attachment. Therefore, in view of the foregoing discussion, the following is hypothesised:

H4. Brand love is positively related to brand attachment.

H5. The relationship between brand self-congruence and brand advocacy is serially mediated by brand love and attachment.

The hypothesised relationships are presented in Figure 1.

=== Figure 1 about here ===

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research model

This study expects that consumers' brand self-congruence will be positively related to their brand advocacy intentions. Next, the relationship between brand self-congruence and

brand advocacy will be mediated by brand love and brand attachment. Thus, serial mediation yields a "three-path mediation model" (Hayes, 2012), as presented in Figure 1. The reliability and validity of the measurement constructs were assessed through AMOS 27, and the mediation tests were conducted through the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2012) in IBM SPSS 27.

3.2. Survey instrument

A self-administered online survey questionnaire was prepared to collect the responses from the participants. The questionnaire was approved by the research ethics committee of the researchers' university. The first section of the survey provided a brief note about the survey structure. The participants were informed about the privacy and confidentiality of their responses. Thereby, the participants' informed consent was obtained. Consequently, in completing the survey instrument, in the beginning, the respondents were exposed to an advertisement for *Dior* perfume, under which the screening question ensured that the respondents had used *Dior* perfume in the past. *Dior* was selected as the focal brand in this research as it is considered one of the most popular luxury brands (Beauloye, 2023). The symbolic values of the brands and products also supported the suitability of the category in this research (Perry and Kyriakaki, 2014). We further note that scholars have utilised *Dior* as the focal luxury brand in their research as well (e.g., Moreau et al., 2020; Riley et al., 2004). Moreover, the participants were exposed to an advertisement for Dior perfume for two primary reasons. First, we attempted to control for the "brand affect" (Moorman et al., 1992), and so all the participants were exposed to the same stimuli in the survey. Second, we attempted to make the context of the survey realistic. In particular, in order to make our findings as transferable as possible, we made sure the stimulus resembles its real-life counterpart. The usage of a real-life brand also provided ecological validity to our findings.

We further note that past studies on luxury brand attachment employed a similar approach (i.e., showing an advertisement of the focal brand to the survey participants) in their research (e.g., Shimul and Phau, 2022). The subsequent sections of the survey questionnaire included the scale items for the four constructs. The closing section inquired about the respondents' demographic profiles.

3.3. Measures

Empirically established scales from previous research were utilised to measure the constructs. For example, actual brand self-congruence was adapted from Sirgy et al.'s (1997) five-item scale. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the actual brand self-congruence scale was 0.93, which indicated a strong internal consistency. Caroll and Ahuvia's (2006) 10-item scale was used to measure brand love ($\alpha = 0.91$). The brand attachment was assessed using the seven-item luxury brand attachment scale (Shimul et al., 2022). The scale's alpha reliability was 0.92. Finally, the three-item scale for measuring brand advocacy ($\alpha = 0.87$) was adapted from Kim et al. (2001). The measurement items (Table 1) were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 = "strongly disagree; 7 = "strongly agree").

=== Table 1 about here ===

3.4. Data collection and sample

Data were collected through a market research agency in Australia. We asked the agency to collect data from Australian participants who were over 18 years old, had previously used Dior fragrances, and included an approximately equal number of male and female

respondents. A total of 350 responses were collected, of which 26 were discarded due to failure in the attention trap question. Thus, 324 responses were considered valid and useable for further analysis. This sample size met the suggested ratio of observations (N) to estimated parameters (q) as 10:1 (Hair et al., 2010; Schreiber et al., 2006). Of the sample collected, 56% are female, 73% are aged 31-40 years, and 34% have an undergraduate degree, whilst 73% of the respondents earn more than AUD 60,000 annually. The sample characteristics are summarised in Table 2.

3.5. Common method bias

As the collected data were collected at a time and were self-reported by the participants, the presence of common method bias was a concern. As a precaution, the order of measurement items and constructs was randomised in the survey (MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012). After data collection, Harman's single-factor test was used to check the potential common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). An exploratory factor analysis with an unrotated solution revealed that the single factor explained 43.63% of the variance, which was lower than the 50% threshold (MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012). Thus, common method bias was not considered a problem in our research.

=== Table 2 about here ===

4. Results

Data were analysed in IBM SPSS 27. Several assumptions of multivariate statistics (e.g., linearity, normality, homogeneity) were assessed and found satisfactory. Before testing the

hypotheses, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed by optimising the measurement model and purifying the scale items to assess the constructs' reliability and validity. The measurement model resulted good fit with χ^2 = 435.935, df = 174, χ^2/df = 2.50; RMSEA = 0.06. CFI = 0.95, and TLI = 0.95 (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

4.1. Reliability and validity

The internal consistency of the measures was achieved as the composite reliability (CR) was above 0.88 for all the constructs (Hair et al., 2010). The CFA loadings for the items and construct reliabilities are presented in Table 1. In addition, the AVE (Average Variance Extracted) values for the constructs were more than 0.50, suggesting the convergent validity of the constructs (Malhotra, 2010). Furthermore, the square root of the AVE values was higher than the pair-wise inter-construct correlations (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Thus, the discriminant validity of the constructs was assured as well (Table 3).

=== Table 3 about here ===

4.2. Hypothesis testing

The hypotheses were examined, with a bootstrapping of 10,000 times and a 95% confidence interval, by utilising the PROCESS macro (Model 6) plugin for SPSS, developed by Hayes (2012). H_1 tested the total effect of self-congruence on brand advocacy (c'). The results show a statistically significant relationship (β = 0.139, SE = 0.057, p = 0.014, CI: 0.028, 0.250), supporting H_1. Subsequently, H_2 expected that the relationship between self-congruence and brand advocacy is mediated by brand love. The mediation test resulted in a statistically significant indirect effect (β = 0.201, SE = 0.035, p < 0.001, CI: 0.133, 0.273). Next, H_3

postulated that brand attachment mediates the relationship between self-congruence and brand advocacy. The test revealed that self-congruence predicted brand attachment (β = 0.379, SE = 0.044, p < 0.001) and that brand attachment predicted brand advocacy (β = 0.303, SE = 0.070, p < 0.001). Thus, self-congruence affected brand advocacy indirectly through the mediation of brand attachment (β = 0.379 X 0.303 = 0.115, SE = 0.030, p <0.001). Therefore, H_3 is supported as well. The results also revealed a positive relationship between brand love and luxury brand attachment (β = 0.582, SE = 0.056, p <0.001, CI: 0.492, 0.673), supporting H_4. Finally, H_5 states that brand love and luxury brand attachment serially mediate the relationship between self-congruence and brand advocacy. Thus, the indirect effect of self-congruence -> brand love -> brand attachment -> brand advocacy was examined. The indirect effect of self-congruence through the mediation of brand love and luxury brand attachment was significant (β = 0.087, SE = 0.023, p <0.001, CI: 0.046, 0.134). Thus, H_5 is supported as well. The mediation test results are summarised in Table 4.

=== Table 4 about here ===

5. Discussion

The findings of our research show that consumers' brand self-congruence generates brand advocacy. This finding validates the results of past studies reporting that consumers spread positive word-of-mouth and recommend their self-congruent brand to others (Leckie et al., 2022). The link between brand self-congruence and brand advocacy signifies the importance of self-concept, consumer personality and brand personality within the context of the consumer-brand relationship (Sirgy, 2018). This further supports the notion that self-congruence increases consumers' product and brand involvement (Kressmann et al., 2006).

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Our research has also found that consumers' brand self-congruence creates love and attachment to the brand (Malär et al., 2011; Roy et al., 2012). As a result of the dyadic impact of brand self-identification and self-expansion motives, consumers consider the self-congruent brand as a part of their lives. Like human relationships, consumers develop a strong emotional tie with the brand; consequently, the emotional significance is reflected through their affective and behavioural intentions. In particular, consumers feel a sense of emotional security derived from the brand and want to continue the relationship with their beloved brand (Molinillo et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the consumer-brand relationship quality is strengthened through consumers' love for and attachment to the brand. While a brand is considered a relationship partner to the consumers, they are willing to patronise the brand through repeat purchases, positive word-of-mouth, and recommendations across online and offline platforms (Park et al., 2010). Moreover, brand love and attachment motivate consumers to defend the brand against public opprobrium (Wilk et al., 2018; Shimul et al., 2023). Our research further reveals that consumers' love for brands results in brand attachment. Referring to the conceptual similarities between brand love and attachment as well as their relationships with consumers' brand self-congruence, we found the serial mediating role of love and attachment between self-congruence and brand advocacy. This finding illustrates the importance of brand love and attachment as the commitment-centred bridge for elevating self-congruence to brand advocacy.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Theoretical implications

This research contributes to the theoretical advancement of brand advocacy research in several ways. ***First,*** the findings of this research provide further evidence for the importance of brand self-congruence in driving consumers' behavioural intentions (i.e., brand advocacy). By empirically showing that brand self-congruence indirectly influences brand advocacy through the mediation of brand love and attachment, our research highlights the complex nature of the relationship between consumers and brands. In addition to advancing the current understanding of brand love (Huang, 2017) and brand attachment (Heinberg et al., 2020), our findings underscore the importance of marketers understanding the specific identity-relevant aspects of their brand that are most important to consumers and developing strategies to create a sustainable brand-consumer connection. ***Second***, the study builds on previous research on brand attachment and brand love (e.g., Rahman et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020) by examining the sequential mediating role of these constructs in the relationship between brand self-congruence and brand advocacy. By examining the serial mediation process, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underlying the relationship between consumer-brand identity fit and brand advocacy. ***Third***, the study adds to the growing body of research on self-expansion theory in the context of the consumer-brand relationship. By showing that the desire for self-expansion can drive consumer attachment and love for a brand, the study highlights the importance of considering not only identity-relevant aspects of the brand but also the potential for the brand to provide opportunities for self-expansion. Overall, the study has important theoretical implications for understanding the complex relationship between brand self-congruence, brand attachment,

brand love, and brand advocacy and for providing guidance to marketers on how to foster these important consumer-brand connections. Taken together, our research provides empirical evidence regarding the psychological mechanism (i.e., love and attachment) for enhancing brand advocacy from self-congruence.

6.2. Managerial implications

From a practitioner's viewpoint, our research offers several meaningful directions for brand managers, advertisers, and strategists. We suggest that cultivating emotions is essential in building a commitment-based consumer-brand relationship. While the market is becoming more competitive and consumers are increasingly attracted by competing brands, nurturing emotional connections is critical for maintaining a sustainable customer relationship. Given the context of our research, we suggest that brand practitioners understand their consumers' habits, preferences, and personalities to enhance the corresponding brand self-congruence. In doing that, brand managers should craft a cohesive strategy for capitalising on the specific emotions (e.g., joy, hope, confidence) that will be integrated with the consumers' self-concept and subsequently transmitted toward building brand love and attachment. Advertisements and other communication tools should portray the role of emotions in consumers' lives within the notion of the brand as an effective relationship partner. Hence, a strong diffusion of brand positioning and consumers' psychological identities (e.g., self-image, self-concept, self-esteem) across the brand and communication strategies are imperative. We put forward that brand love and attachment are the outcomes of purpose-driven campaigns (i.e., brand storytelling) in which consumers can relate to themselves through self-identification. A strong brand narrative can further elevate the brand-related thoughts and memories, and if the consumers feel like a part of the

"brand story", they will be motivated to advocate for the brand. When a brand executes two-way communication with a consistent narrative and delights the customers with a stupendous experience, they will feel greater love and attachment toward the brand and are more likely to encourage their peers to patronise it. Such peer-to-peer recommendations are considered more effective than traditional marketing communications in a world full of clutter. Therefore, emotionally connected consumers create a snowball effect through brand advocacy that positively impacts brand equity. Brand managers can also identify the consumers with a higher level of brand love and attachment and then get them involved in active brand advocacy to elevate the 'net promoter score' (Baehre et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, advocates' brand self-connection can be fostered by community initiatives. For instance, the "*Cisco Champion Program* encourages customer advocates to showcase their networking expertise on Cisco's blog, via #CiscoChat on Twitter, on the company's weekly podcasts and in their Engineers Unplugged video series. Cisco received great exposure from this initiative while the customer advocates were rewarded with exclusive event invitations, early previews of new products and the opportunity to discuss the latest networking technology with Cisco's top engineers" (Senyard, 2021). Therefore, branding practitioners should focus on enhancing brand self-congruence and consequent love and attachment to elevate consumer advocacy among the brand communities.

6.3. Limitations and future research

We acknowledge that Harman's single-factor test has certain drawbacks, which means that our evaluation of common method bias in this research is not rigour. We further admit that despite the strong theoretical underpinnings, our research model was parsimonious.

Therefore, future research can examine the role of other variables (e.g., brand aspirations, need fulfilment, brand competence) that might directly impact brand love and attachment. Also, the influence of moderating variables (e.g., self-expression motives, sense of belonging) can be assessed further. The research model, in particular the concurrent impact of brand love and attachment, can be examined across different product categories (e.g., functional vs symbolic, luxury vs non-luxury). We also call for additional research to examine the contexts (e.g., brand transgression, scandal, misconduct) that may adversely impact the variables in our research model.

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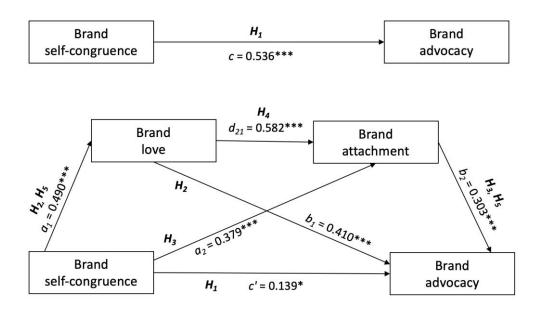Shukla, P., Banerjee, M., & Singh, J. (2016). Customer commitment to luxury brands: Antecedents and consequences. *Journal of Business Research, 69*(1), 323-331.

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Figure 1. Three-path mediation model

Notes: n = 324, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Source(s): Authors own

Table 1. Measurement items with factor loading

Measurement constructs and items	Loading
Brand self-congruence	
This brand is consistent with how I see myself.	0.73
This brand reflects who I am.	0.76
People similar to me use brand like this.	0.79
The kind of person who typically uses this brand is very much like me.	0.85
This brand is a mirror image of me.	0.85
Brand love	
This is a wonderful brand.	0.69
This brand makes me feel good.	0.88
This brand is totally awesome.	0.80
This brand makes me very happy.	0.86
I love this brand.	0.85
This brand is a pure delight.	0.83
Brand attachment	
I have a deep emotional connection to this brand.	0.83
I feel this brand helps me achieve what I want.	0.82
I feel a sense of exquisiteness from this brand.	0.60
I will feel a sense of loss if this brand is no longer available.	0.70
I am deeply passionate about this brand.	0.82
When I think of this brand, I feel a sense of joy.	0.89
I am deeply in love with this brand.	0.85
Brand advocacy	
I recommend this brand to other people.	0.83
I talk directly to other people about my experience with this brand.	0.77
I suggest others for taking service from this bank.	0.93

Source: Authors' own creation

Table 2. Respondents' profile (n = 324)

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	181	56
Male	143	44
Age (years)		
18-25	23	7
26-35	104	32
36-45	152	47
45-55	45	14
Education		
Primary	3	1
Secondary/High School	62	19
Diploma/Certificate	36	11
Undergraduate	110	34
Postgraduate	75	23
Other	38	12
Occupation		
Student	10	3
Self-employed	84	26
Professional	113	35
Unemployed	13	4
Homemaker	75	23
Other	29	9
Annual income (AUD)		
0 - 20,000	6	2
20,001 - 40,000	36	11
40,001 - 60,000	45	14
60,001 - 80,000	75	23
80,001 - 100,000	65	20
100,001 - 120,000	84	26
120000+	13	4

Source: Authors' own creation

Table 3. Validity and reliability of the measurement constructs

	CR	AVE	BA	BL	BAd	BSc
Brand attachment (BA)	0.921	0.629	**0.793**			
Brand love (BL)	0.926	0.676	0.818***	**0.822**		
Brand advocacy (BAd)	0.881	0.714	0.708***	0.748***	**0.845**	
Brand self-congruence (BSc)	0.896	0.633	0.708***	0.569***	0.544***	**0.795**

Notes: CR = Construct reliability. Figures in the diagonal (values given in bold) are the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE); those below the diagonal are the correlations between the constructs. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Source: Authors' own creation

Table 4. Regression coefficients, standard errors and model summary information for the serial multiple mediator model

Antecedents		M_1 (BL) Coefficient	SE	p		M_2 (BA) Coefficient	SE	p		Y (BAd) Coefficient	SE	p
X (SC)	a_1	0.490	0.05	<0.001	a_2	0.379	0.044	<0.001	c'	0.139	0.057	0.014
M_1 (BL)		_	_	_	d_{21}	0.582	0.046	<0.001	b_1	0.410	0.063	<0.001
M_2 (BA)		_	_	_		_	_	_	b_2	0.303	0.070	<0.001
Constant	i_{M1}	3.471	0.379	<0.001	i_{M2}	-0.638	0.304	0.036	i_y	0.405	0.323	n.s.
Age		-0.163	0.085	n.s.		0.003	0.061	n.s.		-0.100	0.064	n.s.
Gender		-0.240	0.127	n.s.		0.079	0.101	n.s.		0.278	0.148	n.s.
Income		-0.009	0.014	n.s.		-0.008	0.011	n.s.		0.009	0.012	n.s.
		$R^2 = 0.277$				$R^2 = 0.625$				$R^2 = 0.739$		
		$F_{(4, 319)} = 35.517, p < 0.001$				$F_{(5, 318)} = 134.539, p < 0.001$				$F_{(6, 317)} = 83.054, p < 0.001$		

Notes: SC: Self-congruence, BL: Brand love, BA: Brand attachment, BAd: Brand advocacy. Controls: Age, Gender, Income level.
M_1: First mediator, M_2: Second mediator, $M_1 = 3.471 + 0.490X$; $M_2 = -0.638 + 0.379X + 0.582M_1$; $Y_1 = 0.405 + 0.139X + 0.410M_1 + 0.303M_2$

Source: Authors' own creation