

Crazy Little Thing Called Love: A Consumer-Retailer Relationship

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Consumers use the word love to describe their feelings about objects, brands, and activities. Literature has explored relationships with brands and objects, however, emotions towards a specific retailer have not been explored. This study extends previous findings to qualitatively examine consumer-retailer love and its relationship with self-concept and identity development. Nostalgia and comfort are two of the factors that lead to retailer love. Informants find congruity between their self-concept and the retailer's personality. Consumers believe that the retailer can help them achieve their aspirations. This consumer-retailer love should lead to profitability for the retailer and improved self-concept for the consumer.

INTRODUCTION

A brochure at Target reads: "If you've ever said 'I love Target' this [credit] card is for you". Gap recently opened an all-accessories store in Manhattan called "Love". Spirit Airlines sends e-mail promotions called "I Love Tuesdays and Wednesdays", and Southwest Airlines had a "Vote for LUV" contest to find the best story of how Southwest helped keep a customer's love alive. Americans frequently use the word "love" to describe their feelings about objects, possessions, brands, and activities.

Much of the marketing literature has focused on consumer-brand or consumer-object love relationships. Fournier (1998) proposed an integrated framework for brand-consumer relationships categorizing relationship quality as love/passion, commitment, and intimacy. Shimp and Madden (1988) proposed a continuum of emotions which includes loyalty and love. Previous research in marketing has found that Harley Davidson is romantically loved (Whang, Allen, Sahoury, & Zhang, 2004) and that consumers love their collections (Ahuvia, 2005). Roberts (2004) describes many types of brands he calls "lovemarks" for which consumers exhibit great passion. In addition, previous research has explored the retailer's emotional connection with consumers (Arnold, Reynolds, Ponder, & Leug, 2005; Robinette & Brand, 2002), consumer-brand relationships (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004), and emotional attachment to brands (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). It is a high level of emotion that we seek to understand in exploring consumer-retailer love. Consistent with Shimp and Madden (1988), we believe love is a useful metaphor to describe consumer emotions and behaviors which exceed mere loyalty. Consumers exhibit extreme enthusiasm, attachment, passion, and devotion. Love is a term commonly used by consumers to describe their feelings about a brand or object they favor; we seek to understand if the concept of "object love" also applies to consumer-retailer relationships and if so, in what ways it manifests itself.

Concepts such as brand loyalty and product involvement have been examined in the marketing

literature; however, little research has been conducted in the context of a specific emotional attachment towards a retailer. The goal of this article is to explore the consumer-retailer relationship that extends beyond loyalty and incorporates self-expression and identity development. Toward this goal, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the nature of consumer-retailer love?

RQ2: What factors lead a consumer to love a retailer?

RQ3: How does consumer-retailer love relate to the self-concept?

We approach this study using a combination of qualitative methodologies appropriate to understanding a phenomenon that has yet to be extensively explored. Qualitative methodologies have been previously used in the marketing literature to explore consumer–retailer relationships (Beatty, Mayer, Coleman, Reynolds, & Lee, 1996; Gwinner, Greiner, & Bitner, 1998; Noble & Phillips, 2004). In this study we conduct in-depth interviews with consumers to better understand how their retail-love relationship developed, why it is important, and how it has impacted their identity. In the balance of this paper, we provide a review of the marketing and psychology literature followed by the methodology and results from our inquiry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

RQ1: What is the nature of consumer-retailer love?

While consumers frequently say that they are in love with objects or activities and assign human characteristics to them, the specific construct of love has only been minimally explored in the marketing literature (See Table 1). Whang et al. (2004) provide a thorough summary of the various love relationship theories as well as the existing measures for love, and they develop a theoretical framework and scale to understand a consumer's love for a product in the context of Harley Davidson bikers. The authors find that Eros (romantic passion), Mania (possessive dependent), and Agape (selfless all-giving) love have a positive impact on a successful romantic consumer-object relationships. Ahuvia (2005) differentiates love from constructs such as cathexis, involvement, and consumer-brand relationships. Based on Sternberg's theory of love (1986), Shimp and Madden (1988) develop a conceptual framework of consumer-object relations. The authors adapt a three part approach that includes intimacy (liking), passion (yearning), and decision (commitment). They further conceptualize consumer-object love as a metaphor representing a unidirectional psychological process that leads to a decision to commit.

In the psychology literature, the majority of research on love involves romantic and sexual love (Bachman & Zakahi, 2000; Masuda, 2003; Myers & Shurts, 2002). Fehr and Russell (1991) developed a typology, which includes maternal love, romantic love, affection, love of work, self-love, and infatuation. Aron and Westbay (1996) extended their research by focusing on a three factor structure of love including passion, intimacy, and commitment. Yela (2006) states that the most frequently cited dimensions of love in the psychology literature are: passion, intimacy, caring (for a partner), and attachment.

In the marketing literature, love is used as a construct to understand consumer-object relationships (Ahuvia, 2005; Fournier, 1998; Shimp & Madden, 1988). Love relationships between people are bi-directional (Fournier, Dobscha, & Mick, 1998; Shimp & Madden, 1988; Whang et al., 2004), whereas consumer-object relationships are unidimensional (Shimp & Madden, 1988). A retailer-consumer relationship can be seen as differing from object-consumer relationships because the retailer can initiate the relationship and, in a sense, return a consumer's love.

TABLE 1
STUDIES OF OBJECT LOVE OR BRAND LOVE IN THE MARKETING LITERATURE

Study	Summary	Definition of Love
Ahuvia, 2005	Found that “loved” objects are closely related to self-identity. Loved products have the ability to solve identity conflicts.	A loved object is defined as something to reflect true self and find ideal self.
Whang, Allen, Sahoury, & Zhang, 2004	Developed a framework to structure “love for a product.” Found that the relationship between motorcycle riders and their bike is a romantic relationship.	Based on Lee’s (1977) love style typology, love style is defined as Eros (romantic, passionate love), Ludus (game-playing love), storage (friendship love), Mania (possessive, dependent love), Agape (all-giving, selfless love), and Pragma (logical ‘shopping list’ love).
Ji, 2002	Examined the relationship between children and brands. Found that children develop love relationships with a variety of brands.	A child’s true love of a brand is characterized by focused attention (substitute brands are not acceptable), strong attachment, and high commitment over a long period of time. A child’s first love experience with a brand is characterized by a child’s adoration of the brand, and has some significant meaning to the child’s development of self-concept and gaining competence.
Fournier, 1998	Proposed an integrated framework for brand-consumer relationships categorizing relationship quality as love/passion, commitment, and intimacy. Found that consumers apply human characteristics to brands and the brand becomes an active member in the relationship.	The feeling of love ranges from warmth and affection to passion, infatuation, selfish, and obsessive dependency. Love of a brand is characterized by separation anxiety; a feeling that something is missing when it is not in your life.
Belk & Coon, 1993	Gift giving can be a form of agapic love. Found that while most gift-giving models are based on exchange, dating partners eventually reject this model.	Agapic love paradigm of gift giving is defined as expressiveness of feeling, passionate emotion, specialness and singularity, and selfless sacrifice.
Shimp & Madden, 1988	Applied Sternberg’s theory of love to consumer-object relationships. Found eight different consumer-object relationships: nonliking, liking, infatuation, functionalism, inhibited desire, utilitarianism, succumbed desire, and loyalty.	Based on Sternberg (1986), types of love are defined as nonlove, liking, infatuated love, empty love, romantic love, companionate love, fatuous love, and consummate love. Those types of love are differentiated in terms of intimacy, passion, and decision commitment.
Brinberg & Wood, 1983	Six categories of love are identified: love, status, information, money, goods, and services.	Love is defined as an expression of affectionate regard, warmth, or comfort and viewed as highly particularistic because its value is closely tied to a particular person.

What is it that differentiates retailer-love from other constructs such as loyalty or commitment? We believe that the concept of retailer love is distinct from previous constructs currently in the literature. Consumer loyalty reflects a consumer's values, trust, and commitment towards a retailer (Buttle & Burton, 2002). Wallace, Giese, and Johnson (2004) conceptualize consumer-retailer loyalty as the consumer's preference for the retailer when compared with available alternatives. However, the literature does not incorporate duration or exclusivity of the relationship, separation anxiety, identity development, emotional attachment, or improved self-esteem. Although loyalty is a component of retailer-love, we believe these additional attributes differentiate love from loyalty.

Van Lange et al. (1997) define commitment as the degree to which a relationship is viewed from a long-term perspective, and whether an individual is willing to stay in the relationship despite difficulties. A consumer's emotional attachment has been shown to predict commitment (Thomson et al., 2005). Both commitment and retailer-love have enduring relationship potential—the higher the level of commitment, the greater the probability that the consumer will feel love towards a retailer. However, commitment does not incorporate aspects of self-concept, identity formation, and aspirations.

RQ2: What factors lead a consumer to love a retailer?

RQ3: How does consumer-retailer love relate to the self-concept?

“The people, and things, we love have a strong influence on our sense of who we are, on our self” (Ahuvia, 2005, p. 171). The relationship between falling in love and changes in self-concept has also been established in psychology (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995). It has defined self-identity as a person's self-perception as a spiritual, physical, and social being (Gecas, 1982) and belief about his/her own self-worth (Branden, 1994).

Ahuvia's research (2005) explores how “object love” can create identity narratives. Consumers also define themselves in terms of activity (Guiry, Magi, & Lutz, 2006) and define possessions as being “me” or “not me” (Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995). As proposed by Ahuvia (2005), identity issues are “likely to remain a major area of inquiry for consumer researchers” (p. 179); however, the literature does not explore if this creation of self-identity can be extended to a consumer's relationship with a retailer as opposed to simply possessions. We seek to understand how a loved retailer influences a consumer's self-concept.

METHODOLOGY

Framework

We apply several qualitative approaches in this research in order to strengthen the study design through data, investigator, and methodological triangulation (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Patton, 1990). Consistent with the three types of qualitative data collection discussed by Patton (1990), our data were gathered from a combination of in-depth interviews, direct observation, and written documents. For the purposes of this study, we include more contemporary written documents, including the content of chat rooms, web sites, and blogs, which are more commonly used today (Kozinets, 2002). In order to gather impressions of the retail surroundings and witness the phenomena we are studying, we conducted participant observation at specific retailers based on the techniques recommended by Patton (1990) and Whyte (1984). We use a phenomenological framework to explore the individual consumer's thoughts and feelings about their experiences with a specific retailer and a foundation of grounded theory.

Sampling and Interview Procedures

Informants for in-person interviews were obtained through recommendations and snowball sampling (Patton, 1990) to find consumers with strong, passionate feelings towards a retailer. These respondents were screened prior to the interview to determine their passion for shopping and affinity towards a specific retailer in order to uncover strong insights into the retailer-love relationship. The final sample of 14 informants consisted of 10 women and four men ranging in age from 18 to over 50, and four

were married. However, one limitation of our sample is that most informants were in their 20 (9 out of 14) and Caucasian (11 out of 14). An additional sample (over 100 individuals) was sought using Internet chat rooms and blogs. These online consumers were deemed appropriate because their passion and love for the retailer caused them to create web sites, participate in chat rooms, and create blogs to express their feelings towards the retailer.

Each in-depth interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, was tape-recorded, and transcribed before interpretation. The interviewer began by prompting the respondent to “think for a minute about a retailer you really love.” The most frequently mentioned category of loved retailers was specialty clothing stores (50%). Other retailer categories receiving one mention each were department stores, electronics stores, outdoor stores, home improvement stores, bookstores, pet stores, and toy stores. We then proceeded with an open-ended in-depth interview style and asked respondents to “tell a story” describing their past (how the relationship developed), present (buying behavior and emotions), and expected future with the retailer. Finally, respondents were asked about how they individually benefited, both financially and non-financially, from the relationship, and whether the relationship influenced their identity or self-concept. Verbatim transcripts of the audio-taped interviews were analyzed based on the guidelines provided by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The interviews were summarized in memo form and were reviewed and discussed by the authors.

In order to further our understanding of the informants’ retailer-love, one of the authors visited one-half of the stores that informants had mentioned in their interviews. This author observed the atmosphere, shoppers, and employees while in the store and looked for specific things in the store that the informants had mentioned in their interviews. In addition, the author observed the body language and facial expressions of the customers and listened to shoppers’ conversations.

To find informants online, the authors searched for blogs. We paid special attention to websites dedicated to one specific retailer with many different contributors (i.e., www.slavetotarget.blogspot.com). Each of these blogs was treated as text from a verbatim transcript for discussion and coding purposes. After we had an exhaustive list of blogs, we visited the websites of those stores that our in-person informants loved. We found that many of these retailers had sections on their website that allowed guests to give feedback or post their opinion about the store (i.e., www.buildabear.com/aboutUs/OurCompany/GuestTestimonials.aspx). We also looked at data from a site devoted to consumer love stories with brands and retailers, (www.lovemarks.com).

Data Analysis

After all interviews were completed, transcribed, and summarized, themes were developed based on recommended procedures by Strauss and Corbin (1998). These processes allowed us to discover emerging similarities and relationships among the data. Through the methods used and the processes involved in data collection and analysis, we attempted to ensure trustworthiness of the findings. We attempted to create a study that is transferable by using multiple sources of data—interviews, literature review, participant observation, and online diaries and blogs.

FINDINGS

Overall, there were several themes that emerged in the data that help to explain why consumers develop retailer-love. These themes are summarized in Table 2 and discussed in detail below. Retailer-love manifests in both behavior and attitudes towards the retailer. Consumers led us to understand the reasons why they felt a special commitment to a particular retailer. These thoughts and memories helped us to understand how their emotions led to the development of a deeper, enduring commitment we call retailer-love.

TABLE 2
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Theme	Retailer	Quote
Nostalgia	NY & Co.	“My dad would sit outside the dressing room, and me and my mom would just try on clothes. It was cool. I still shop there with my mom” (Georgia, 18-year-old female).
	IKEA	“Reminds me of my youth when we were poor and full of hope” (http://www.lovemarks.com/index.php?pageID=20015&lovemarkid=163).
	Target	“I can still remember when Target first came to my small town when I was in grade school. I couldn't understand why my mother was so excited to take me shopping there on Saturday mornings, but it wasn't long before I became infused with the same excitement. To this day, I still carry around that love and loyalty for Target stores” (http://www.lovemarks.com/lm/read/792#Scene 1).
Comfort	Neiman Marcus	“I feel totally welcome, when you try on something, there is always somebody right there to bring you a different size, and it's easy to maneuver around there, they treat like you want to be treated” (Felicity, 21-year-old female).
	Express	“They're very understanding about it, they don't treat you badly because you had to return something. I guess maybe because I have a relationship with the employees there, they know me. Maybe that's why, because they know I'm going to come back. Two of them know me by name” (Inez, 19-year-old female).
	Victoria's Secret	“I love that store. It's a very comfortable atmosphere. I'm not—but a lot of people are—really uncomfortable buying bras and stuff – so it's really comfortable. They're helpful without chasing you around, they don't follow you around or get in your face” (Ellie, 23-year-old female).
It's Me	Abercrombie & Fitch	“Abercrombie people are fun and laid back. Abercrombie is me” (http://www.lovemarks.com/index.php?pageID=20015&lovemarkid=233).
	Express	“Express is my go out personality” (Inez, 19-year-old female).
	Nordstrom	“The love of my life. Each new city I move to, I move close to the Nordstrom because I consider her one of my closest and dearest friends. Always there when I need her and treats me like a queen. I will always be loyal to her” (http://www.lovemarks.com/index.php?pageID=20015&lovemarkid=1035).
	Whole Foods	“For a vegetarian, even in a big city, life in a world full of meat is not easy. For the veggie lovers, the surplus of food keeps this young man alive” (http://www.lovemarks.com/index.php?pageID=20015&lovemarkid=423).
Aspiration	NY & Co.	“So I would go in there and look for suits and some really nice clothes so I could go to work... You want to be this corporate business person, so the clothes you buy are the outside appearance” (Georgia, 18-year-old female).
	Best Buy	“But I always want to keep track of their prices on stuff, so when I'm ready to buy a house I can fill the entertainment center. You've got to know what they got, what the price range is, how often it goes up, how often it goes down, and stuff like that” (Kurt, 22-year-old male).
	Aquarium Designs	“That's what I want to do. I want to have my own salt water fish store to have here, so people like me don't have to go up to [name of city]. So, yes it inspires me, I think about it all the time” (Melody, 22-year-old female).

RQ1: What is the Nature of Consumer-Retailer Love?

Retailer-love is defined by high levels of emotion. This was conveyed in both the informants' expressions and words during the interviews. Many informants spontaneously smiled when asked to talk about the experience or share a special memory about the store. Their body language changed, they sat up taller, and they became more animated as they shared their stories. Excitement was also conveyed in how they spoke, often repeating "very," "really," or extending vowels "soooooo awesome." They shared how they felt happier and got excited when they shopped at the loved retailer: "Woah, it is like nothing I've ever seen before" (Anna, 18-year-old female).

The interviews also revealed consistency with the literature on love (Aron & Westbay, 1996; Roberts, 2004). The informants expressed their passion and commitment towards the retailer – "Oh, I have really positive emotions towards it, I really like it, and I don't like shopping at other places. So when I say love, I mean, aside from the way I love people and my animals, the next thing is Banana Republic" (Catherine, 38-year-old married female). This is consistent with Shimp and Madden's framework (1988) in which consumers have a liking or intimacy that leads to a motivated passion, resulting in a committed relationship with the retailer. All of our respondents expressed how deeply committed they felt toward their favorite retailer and how unhappy and lost they might feel if that retailer were no longer available to them. This sense of abandonment and separation anxiety is also consistent with previous literature on emotional attachment (Fournier, 1998; Vormbrock, 1993). Consumers expressed the importance of the retailer as instrumental to their identity and as a reminder of special life events. This retailer-love extends previous literature on loved-objects (Ahuvia, 2005; Shimp & Madden, 1988) finding similar relationships based on more than object attachment. Finally, as with romantic love relationships, we find that this consumer-retailer love is not unidirectional. As Fournier et al. (1998) explored brands as active relationship partners, we find that retailers are also actively engaging in this relationship (i.e., sending birthday cards; sending invitations to special events; sending gifts as a reward for spending a certain amount of money). The retailers' actions reinforce consumer emotion, lead the consumer to a stronger love, and build a foundation for an enduring, committed relationship.

RQ2: What Factors Lead a Consumer to Love a Retailer?

Nostalgia

The first theme we saw in the findings is named "nostalgia." Consumers often have a longing for things, persons, or situations of the past. Nostalgia is "a preference (general liking, positive attitude, or favorable affect) toward objects (people, places, or things) that were more common (popular, fashionable, or widely circulated) when one was younger" (in early adulthood, in adolescence, or in childhood) (Holbrook & Schindler, 1991).

Parents introduced their children to their own favorite retailer and helped to create the positive experience and happy memories that serve as the foundation for retailer-love – "I have grown up with their stuff [hunting and fishing equipment] and I really relate to it" (Jerry, 22-year-old male). Informants had fond memories of shopping with a family member at a particular retailer or the retailer reminded them of their childhood: "So, basically, it was like I was a kid again, just like reliving those memories, and I made a bear, I got a birth certificate, and I bought clothes..." (Anna, 18-year-old female). This is also supported by literature on place attachment (Milligan, 1998; Rosenbaum, 2006) in which the emotional bond to a place, in this case a retail environment, is due in part to past interactions and memories that elicit emotions and anticipation for future interactions.

"Well, my grandmother and mom both shop there, it's a family thing...the last time we went there, it was my birthday, so my mom hired a personal shopper for me, we drank wine, and it was just really cool...I think it is just the atmosphere when I am in there and it's always associated with being with my mom, too." (Felicity, 21-year-old female)

"It was with my mom because she was addicted to that store too. We both got credit cards there. And I remember, I was probably in 7th grade, and my mom had all of her clothes from there. I always wanted to be just like her, so we would get the same outfits so we could be twins." (Inez, 19-year-old)

female)

Comfort

The second theme is labeled “comfort.” Comfort has been found to have a significant impact on satisfaction with service providers (Spake, Beatty, Brockman, & Crutchfield, 2003) and has been identified as one of the five important determinants of adolescent girls’ favorite malls (Haytko & Baker, 2004). Consumers who love a particular retailer are very comfortable there. There is a sense of security knowing that they have a place to shop where they have consistently had positive experiences with sales personnel, product assortment, and atmosphere – “But I guess the reason is just because I’ve been going there for years. I just feel more comfortable” (Jerry, 22-year-old male). They express a desire for the familiar environment and experience as well as product assortment. This supports the research on place attachment (Fullilove, 1996; Milligan, 1998) in which consumers form bonds due in part to familiarity and a need for cognitive knowledge of their environments. Our respondents used words like “welcoming” to describe the retailer that they love – “Every time I enter the store a sense of calm comes over me” (Container Store, http://www.lovemarks.com/lm/read/3944#Scene_1). The sales personnel contribute to the feeling of comfort: “Wherever I’ve lived, I’ve known the people that worked there and I really liked them and felt comfortable around them too” (Catherine, 38-year-old female).

RQ3: How Does Consumer-Retailer Love Relate to the Self-Concept?

“It’s Me”

As found in the literature on self-concept, the things we love have an influence on how we see ourselves and serve to strengthen or redefine our sense of identity (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988; Gecas, 1982). Consumers often buy products that make them feel better about themselves, improve their sense of self-worth, convey a specific mood or emotion, and define themselves. Respondents openly talked about how they liked being up-to-date on product trends and familiar with new items. Respondents focused on how they felt during the consumption of the product and how they would appear to others, not simply on the process of buying or consuming the product itself: “It’s like a power suit...it makes me feel like I have more of a presence” (Hillary, 21-year-old female). “I like...the image that other people see in my clothes” (Louis, 22-year-old male). Consumers come to love retailers that “understand” them or “know” them and what their needs are. Consumers can relate to the retailer because they feel like the retailer knows what they want and how they want it. Individuals describe how the products purchased from the loved retailer positively contribute to their self-concept: “When you put on something from there, then you feel better and the inner fits the outer and you carry yourself better. You feel better” (Ellie, 23-year-old female).

Our informants found congruity between their own self-concept and the retailer’s personality. The products that their beloved retailer offers help to define them in some way – “Once I went in the store I realized these clothes are perfect for me. I have yet to go shopping at any other clothing retailer since, and will continue to do the same for a long time to come” (American Eagle, http://www.lovemarks.com/lm/ead/2681#Scene_1). The loved retailer seems to be the only one who has the right products and style for them. “I think their style matches me. When I go in there, it looks like me” (Catherine, 38-year-old female).

Aspiration

Aspiration refers to aspirational purchases as well as the aspiration reference groups that influence consumers’ behavior. Loved retailers provide consumers with a wide variety of product options that they might like to buy immediately and others they would like to have at some point in the future. Consequently, consumers often think about and long for products they hope to obtain in the future. Previous research shows that brands used by aspiration groups can become connected to the consumer’s own mental self-representation (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). The following quotes illustrate the aspirations that consumers have and how they think the retailer will help them achieve these:

“And one day I would like to have my own workshop, and outfit it with all of the latest and

greatest tools from them [the retailer]...and when that time comes, I'll know what I want in my workshop.” (Danny, 26-year-old male)

“It [the retailer] fits who I want to be and the profession I want to be in...” (Hillary, 21-year-old female)

“It is the trendiest stuff and the clothes they carry and the brands I like. They carry such large brands and all different brands too. I've always had a dream of being a designer one day.” (Felicity, 21-year-old female)

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate consumer love toward retailers. Through the use of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and the content of chat rooms, feedback forums and blogs, we uncovered some of the mystery behind this concept. These insights allowed us to develop themes that embody the meaning of love in a consumer-retailer relationship. As a result of this retailer-love, retailers enable consumers to form their identity and have aspirations for the future. Retailers benefit by increased profitability and the development of enduringly loyal customers.

Informants divulged that they experienced heightened positive emotions when visiting or even thinking about their loved retailer. The demeanor of respondents changes when they begin discussing the retailer that they love; they show signs of adoration and dedication when speaking of this retailer, and they did not express feelings of guilt or remorse about the time and money they spend there or the feelings they have. We found that these themes characterized the retailer-love relationship: nostalgia, comfort, it's me, and aspirations. Nostalgia represents the consumer's past relationship with the retailer. Comfort and it's me represent the present relationship, while aspirations represents the future relationship with the loved retailer.

These findings initially emerged from the in-depth interviews conducted by the researchers. They were then corroborated with quotes found in blogs and on Internet sites where consumers wrote about their love for a particular retailer. The findings are consistent across the results of both the in-depth interviews and the information online. This triangulation of the data increases the generalizability and validity of our findings. Our findings support those of Rosenbaum and Montoya (2007), who found a five-factor model for place identity (the congruency between one's self-identity and a place), and recognized two of these five factors as “verbal/non-verbal comfort” and “like-me.”

IMPLICATIONS

Consumer love in a retail context is important because it can lead to extreme loyalty for the firm. In addition, love for the retailer can lead to commitment, increased share of wallet, higher customer satisfaction, and overall increased profitability for the firm. Consumers who love a retailer build an emotional bond that leads to the retailer being preferred almost exclusively over others—loyal customers buy more, are willing to pay higher prices, and generate positive word-of-mouth (Reichheld, 1993; Wright & Sparks, 1999).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has looked at the nature of consumer-retailer love relationships, but the findings do not exist without limitations. A very limited sampling approach was used in this study (the majority of informants were young, Caucasian, and female). Future research could replicate these findings to establish the boundaries of generalizability. In addition, the interviewed respondents were a convenience sample of individuals. This friendship or familiarity may have restricted the respondents' answers, as they may not have wanted to share information that would be considered outside of social norms. If a respondent was self-conscious or embarrassed about the extent of their love for a retailer, they may have

chosen not to share this information. It is possible that this type of theme may be underrepresented because of the sampling approach. Despite these limitations, this study generates important insights into the emotional love that consumers exhibit towards retailers.

CONCLUSION

This research contributes to the marketing literature by exploring a consumer's love for a retailer and the relationship among the concepts of love and self-concept. Understanding this extends the literature on consumer-object relationships and our current knowledge of consumer-retailer relationships. This understanding is important because researchers have recently found that retailers need to go above and beyond the emotion of satisfaction to truly have an influence on and gain the loyalty of consumers (Arnold et al., 2005). Although further research in this area is warranted, the themes that emerged from this study offer insight into the consumer-retailer love relationship.

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