A New Contemporary Model of Brand Fidelity: A Sustainable Clothing Brand Perspective

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Abstract: The concept of brand is notoriously difficult to define and the findings of existing studies on this concept are mixed and inconclusive. This current study enriches the brand study reservoir by developing a new conceptual model of brand fidelity. It also presents a set of hypotheses that aim to provide a better understanding of the moderating effect of brand prominence and self-brand connection on the relationship between brand love and brand fidelity. The responses of 200 Indonesian online respondents were analyzed using Smart-PLS. The statistical results demonstrate that brand love, brand prominence, and self-brand connection positively and significantly influence brand fidelity. In contrast, it was found that brand prominence does not moderate the relationship between brand love and brand fidelity, while self-brand connection negatively and significantly does. Further, this study provides future research avenues and important implications for academics and business practitioners.

Keywords: brand fidelity, brand love, brand prominence, self-brand connection.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable fashion is important (Pastran et al., 2021) because it impacts future generations and the development of global socioecological systems (Pratama et al. 2022). This industry is predicted to grow by 8.6% and to be worth $17 billion in 2032 (Lindner, 2023), D'Arpizio et al. (2022) suggest that this achievement only represents 15% of global fashion consumers' commitment to purchasing sustainable fashion on a consistent basis. The authors suggest that this percentage could be improved if fashion brands removed a number of barriers and encouraged their consumers to shift to sustainable clothing consumption.

Scholars have attempted to respond to the purchasing issues surrounding sustainable fashion from two angles. First, scholars have intensively investigated the direct effect of various brand elements on positive sustainable clothing behaviors. For example, it has been found that brand attitude (Leclercq-Machado et al., 2022), brand awareness (Alam et al., 2022), brand trust (Pang et al., 2022), and brand image (Lee & DeLong, 2021) increase purchase intention, brand recognition (Palomo-Domínguez et al., 2023) enhances sustainable clothing market penetration, and brand credibility (Chaves et al., 2023) improves consumers' willingness to pay

more. Second, scholars have focused their examinations on the moderating role of different brand elements. To illustrate, Kumagai (2021) identified the moderating role of brand luxury on the relationship between brand attitude and sustainable clothing purchase intention. Similarly, Kim & Oh (2020) found that brand reputation moderates the association between perceived sustainability and purchase intention. Further, Kumagai & Nagasawa (2020) found that brand experience negatively moderates the link between a sustainable clothing launch and brand attitude.

However, while these studies provide good knowledge of the relationship between brand and the sustainable clothing phenomenon, Pang et al. (2022) argue that studies are inconclusive and require a different framework. To improve our understanding, this study seeks to integrate brand fidelity, brand love, brand prominence, and self-brand connection. Brand fidelity refers to the degree of a consumer's faithfulness toward a brand (Grace et al., 2020). According to Uygun & Gujrati (2021), the higher the degree of faithfulness toward a brand, the stronger consumers' actual buying behavior. The relationship between brand love and brand fidelity has been established (Grace et al., 2020; Joshi & Garg, 2022; Quezando et al., 2022); however, there have been no studies conducted in the context of sustainable clothing and it may not be possible to generalize the findings of prior studies to this context. Brand prominence and self-brand connection are considered two important elements of brand attachment. Brand prominence refers to the degree of consumers' perceived memory of a brand (Park et al., 2013). Those with a high level of perceived memory can easily identify and differentiate a brand's logo or mark from others (Han et al., 2010). On the other hand, self-brand connection indicates the degree of connection between a brand and consumers' self-concept (Stuppy et al., 2020). This definition suggests that consumers tend to buy a brand that can help improve their self-image or status (Gaustad et al., 2019). Brand attachment is one of the most important antecedents of consumers' willingness to stay in a relationship with a brand (Frasquet et al., 2017). However, it is unclear which element of brand attachment (brand prominence vs self-brand connection) is stronger in improving such a relationship.

Second, Marakas (2023) suggests that investigating moderating roles in any relationship is important because it helps us to understand beyond what is happening between two variables in question by understanding why it is or is not happening. However, the extant literature has neglected the moderating role of brand prominence and self-brand connection in the relationship between brand love and brand fidelity. Third, most studies on the issue of brand and sustainable clothing have been performed outside Indonesia and the findings may not apply to the Indonesian context. Cited in MasterCard's report, Preuss (2015) asserts that more than 70% of Indonesian consumers are concerned about sustainable products and willing to pay more for such products. Based on this data, therefore, scholars must extend their research in the Indonesian context.

To fill the research gaps above, we conceptualized brand love as the degree of satisfied consumers' emotional attachment toward a particular brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). When consumers experience high brand love, they remain attracted to the brand (Ahuvia, 2022) and exhibit feelings of positivity and confidence (Bairrada et al., 2018). Their overall experience of using the brand is one of happiness (Karjaluoto et al., 2016). Such happiness increases consumers' faithfulness or brand fidelity, that further promotes their relationships with the brand (Batra et al., 2012). In addition, consumers with high brand love tend to be aware of high brand prominence (Batra et al., 2012) which stimulates their attraction to the brand (Park et al., 2013). This results in high self-brand connection (Lee et al., 2022) as consumers feel connections between the brand and their self-concept generates positive emotion (Sundie et al., 2012). Based on this argument, we assume that brand love positively influences (a), brand fidelity, (b) brand prominence, and (c) self-brand connection.

As discussed above, brand prominence represents consumers' memory of a brand. According to Herjanto & Gaur (2015), positive memory generates pleasant feelings that further encourage repeat behavior as well as a high sense of loyalty or fidelity toward a brand. Phillips (2010) argues that a high sense of loyalty is equal to a high degree of faithfulness as it improves consumers' attachment and feelings toward a brand and dissuades them from engaging with other brands. On the other hand, self-brand connection refers to the degree of suitability of a brand and how well the brand fits with the self (Stuppy et al., 2020). According to Yu et al. (2023), a high level of fitness generates more comfort and intimacy and more importantly, it increases retention (Yu & Tseng, 2016). Thus, these argument leads us to predict that brand prominence and self-brand connection significantly influence brand fidelity.

As an identifier tool, brand prominence stimulates consumers' memory of a brand. That is, the more memorable consumers' experience with a brand is, the happier they feel (Herjanto & Gaur, 2015) and the more inclined they are to love the brand. Overall, a high degree of brand love improves consumers' willingness to continue their relationship with the brand with a deeper sense of brand fidelity. As previously discussed, self-brand connection serves as a barometer to evaluate how suitable the fit between a brand and the consumer's self-concept is. When a consumer finds that a brand appropriately fits their self-concept, it strengthens their self-identity and level of love for the brand (Palazon et al., 2019), which further improves brand fidelity. Based on these discussions, we predict that brand prominence and self-brand connection moderate the relationship between brand love and brand fidelity. Figure 1 presents a brief conceptual framework of the direct and indirect role of the various brand elements in developing brand fidelity.
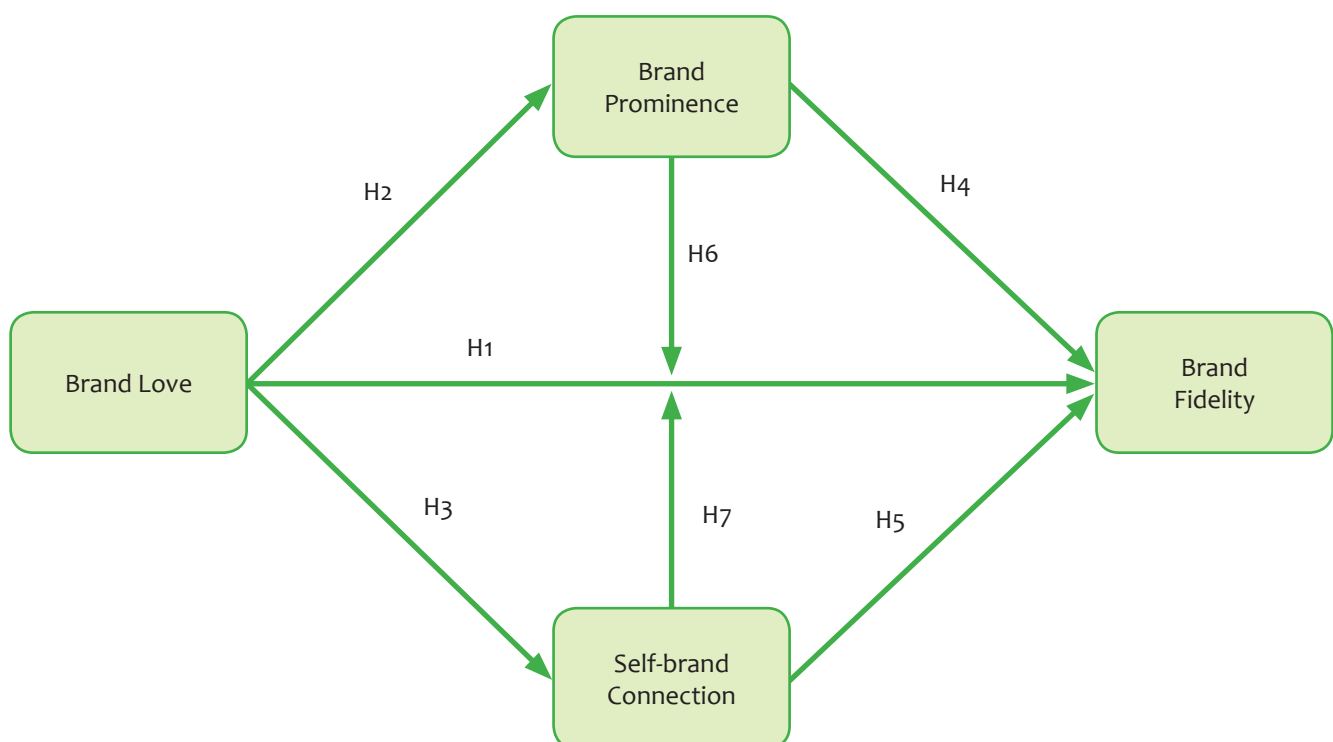

Figure 1 The Brand fidelity model

METHODS

Following Rahman et al.'s (2020) data collection process, an online survey was developed on Google Forms and distributed to social media users who had bought and worn sustainable clothing brands. At the beginning of the online survey, respondents were asked to answer a screening question by selecting at least one local sustainable clothing brand (including Erigo, Hijup, 3Second, Maternal Disaster, Thanksinsomnia, and Thenblank) they had bought in the previous six months. This screening question confirmed the eligibility of respondents and accuracy of the data collected. Respondents who had never bought from these brands were disqualified. The data for this study was collected between 1 October 2022 and 31 December 2023. A total of 265 respondents participated in this survey; however, only 200 (75%) were useable and subsequently analyzed by Smart-PLS. Table 1 offers a brief overview of respondents' characteristics. All the scales used in this study were adopted and adjusted from the published literature. A four-point Likert-type scale was used, anchored at extremely agree to extremely disagree. Eight brand fidelity scales were borrowed from Junaidi (2022), eight brand love scales were adopted from Carroll & Ahuvia (2006), four brand prominence scales were borrowed from Lee & Kim (2022), and six self-brand connection scales were taken from Li et al. (2021). Further, this study adopted Herjanto et al.'s (2020) and Herjanto & Hendriana's (2020) double translation procedure to ensure the accuracy of the adopted scales. First, a professional translator translated the questionnaire into the Indonesian language, then one of the authors translated the Indonesian version to English.

Table 1 A Brief Overview of Respondents' Characteristics

Characteristics	Frequency (%)	Characteristics	Frequency (%)
Gender			
Male	144 (72)	Female	56(2)
Age			
17-20	15(8)	26-30	72(36)
21-25	84(42)	>30	29(14)
Education			
High school	27(14)	Post-graduate	27(14)
Under-graduate	146(72)		

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The statistical results show that these scales had high factor loadings (0.779–0.888) and acceptable composite reliabilities (0.859–0.941). We utilized Smart-PLS to run path coefficient and t-value analysis to further examine the validity of our hypotheses. Semuel et al. (2018) recommend that the t-value should reach a minimum of 1.96 to be considered significant. Table 2 shows the results of the path-coefficient (β) and t-value for each relationship in question. The table shows that except for the moderating effect of brand prominence on the relationship between brand love and brand fidelity, all path-coefficients were significant. As predicted, brand love positively influenced brand fidelity, brand prominence, and the self-brand connection. The table also shows that brand prominence failed to moderate the relationship between brand love and brand fidelity,

while the self-brand concept was found to negatively and significantly moderate the relationship (refer to Table 2).

Table 2 Path Coefficient and T-statistic

Hypothesis	Relationships	Path Coefficient	T-statistic*	Results
H1	BL $\rightarrow$ BF	0,226	2,750	Supported
H2	BL $\rightarrow$ BP	0,866	44,629	Supported
H3	BL $\rightarrow$ SBC	0.952	141,251	Supported
H4	BP $\rightarrow$ BF	0,104	2,059	Supported
H5	SBC $\rightarrow$ BF	0,278	3,613	Supported
H6	BP X BL $\rightarrow$ BF	−0,048	1,306	Not Supported
H7	SBC X BL $\rightarrow$ BF	−0,183	3,506	Partially Supported

Notes: *Based on a significance level of 5% or t-value of 1.96.

The findings show that brand love played an important role as it affected brand fidelity, brand prominence, and the self-brand connection positively and significantly. This means that the higher brand love is, the stronger brand fidelity, brand prominence, and self-brand connection are. Therefore, businesses should focus their efforts on developing and maintaining consumers' love of their brand. In today's extremely competitive business atmosphere, consumers have greater power and more options when spending their money. Accordingly, consumers are likely to be less loyal to brands (Yuliana & Putra, 2020), especially if a brand is modest or not so popular (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2005). However, Awasthi & Mehta (2020) argue that in contrast to the trend, Gen Z tend to be more loyal than their predecessors, as Gen Z is more emotionally attached to a brand. As shown in Table 1, 86% of our respondents were aged between 17–30 years old, which according to Taylor & Keeter (2010), represents Gen Z. Chicca & Shellenbarger (2018) maintain that Gen Z is a unique generation because its members are not risk-takers. For this reason, members of this generation tend to be loyal when a brand earns their trust and fits with their values (Ismail et al., 2021). Most importantly, Gen Z is more environmentally concerned than previous generations (Chaturvedi et al., 2020). Our respondents believed that buying sustainable clothing fit their values of maintaining the environment. Clothing that aligns with their values can generate a high level of positive emotion, allowing these young consumers to feel good about themselves. Over time, this multiple positive experience increases their level of brand love which further heightens their level of loyalty or fidelity (Grace et al. 2020).

As pointed out earlier, brand love represents the degree of a consumer's emotional involvement with a brand. According to Sternberg's (1986) triangular love theory, the degree of love is determined by three factors: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Intimacy reflects the level of liking that results in a consumer being open in sharing their feelings and connectedness to a brand (Shrimp & Madden, 1998). When customer experience such liking, they are more likely to experience a strong engagement with a brand and a desire to know more about it (brand prominence). Passion is an expression of desires or needs, and further strengthens a consumer's strong affiliation with a brand (Shrimp & Madden, 1998). Commitment, the last component of love, symbolizes the motivation to maintain a relationship with a brand. To maintain motivation, a consumer is required to have a good level understanding of a brand. Together, these components result in a consumer

becoming more cognizant and aware of a brand (Shrimp & Madden, 1998). In other words, when a consumer is highly motivated to know a brand, they will experience a high level of brand prominence.

In a different study, Carroll & Ahuvia (2006) conceptualized brand love as a barometer to measure a consumer's satisfaction with a brand. According to traditional satisfaction theory as proposed by Lerner et al. (1973), the strength of a consumer's satisfaction is psychologically related to his/her self-concept. That is, the more a brand elevates a consumer's self-concept, the more he/she becomes satisfied. Accordingly, when a consumer experiences high satisfaction, they are more willing to express their identity through a brand (Hajibabaei & Esamilpur, 2018). As a result, this positive feeling improves the level of love and the positive attitude toward a brand, leading to a higher self-brand connection (Tan et al., 2018).

The results also confirm the relationship between brand prominence and brand fidelity. According to Cheng et al. (2016), the degree of brand prominence reflects the strength of consumers' memory of the brand. In this situation, consumers tend to remember a brand and can easily identify or differentiate brand attributes, such as logo or mark, from other brands, as they have strong feelings toward the brand. Gill-Simmen et al. (2018) maintain that these feelings psychologically promote attachment that further increases consumers' level of commitment to the brand, ultimately leading to stronger brand fidelity. For example, when a global traveler experiences high brand prominence toward Coca-Cola, they tend to easily identify the red can and silver lining as characteristic of Coca-Cola packaging. Being able to identify such characteristics sends a strong signal to consumers that this brand is safe and trustworthy or vice versa. In other words, this signal helps consumers to evaluate the quality and level of comfort that the brand provides. Thus, the higher the quality and comfort of a consumer's experience with a brand, the higher their satisfaction and ultimately, the higher their commitment and fidelity toward the brand.

The statistical analysis shows that self-brand connection is also responsible for brand fidelity. Strong self-brand connection can increase a consumer's confidence in the suitability and appropriateness of a brand in terms of their self-concept. In this situation, a consumer views a brand as a tool to maintain or improve their self-image and to validate their self-concept. Accordingly, the brand supports the consumer's personal belief which consequently leads to stronger self-confidence (Gomez et al., 2011). However, when a consumer is separated from the brand, they may experience a lower level of self-confidence. To maintain their high level of self-confidence and their positive self-concept, a consumer may choose to maintain their relationship commitment and faithfulness or fidelity with a brand.

Interestingly, the present study found no moderating effect of brand prominence on the relationship between brand love and brand fidelity. There may be two possible explanations for this finding: First, when a consumer experiences high brand love, they do not need more information to improve their commitment toward the brand and accordingly, the level of brand prominence has no effect. Second, the result of a consumer's high brand love is that they tend to be more independent, with little desire to seek further information or to acknowledge other people's opinion (Agustina, 2016). Finally, it was found that the self-brand connection negatively and significantly moderates the relationship between brand love and brand fidelity. Table 2 shows that the path coefficient (β) was statistically negative. This means that the self-brand connection weakens the relationship between brand love and brand fidelity. This finding can be explained by Sternberg's triangle of love theory. As Sternberg (1986) suggests, one of the components of brand love is intimacy or liking. Although a consumer may regard a brand as being in line with their self-concept, it is not necessary for them to like the brand. For example, a consumer may think that NIKE shoes validate their self-concept but at the same time, they may not like the design of these shoes. Therefore, this situation may weaken their degree of love for the brand.

CONCLUSION

The present study provides important additional understanding of the concept of branding in three different ways: 1) Our model conceptualized brand fidelity as a product of brand love, brand prominence, and self-brand connection. 2) Our study found that brand love is responsible for improving brand attachment prominence and self-brand connection. 3) The study also found that brand prominence and self-brand connection do not improve the relationship between brand love and brand fidelity. These findings highlight the need for business practitioners to focus their efforts on developing consumer brand love as this is a central to building brand fidelity. Like any empirical study, this study also has several limitations. First, this study only utilized respondents from Indonesia. Because of this limitation, any generalization of the findings should be cautiously undertaken. Future research should extend this study by involving a larger pool of respondents from different parts of the world. Second, the present study focused on the sustainable clothing context and the findings may not be transferable to other sustainable products. Accordingly, future researchers may choose to focus their investigation on other sustainable products and behaviors such as rental clothing. Lastly, our model may be oversimplified in its utilization of only four different brand elements to represent the brand fidelity phenomenon. Future research could incorporate brand evangelism, brand reputation, brand experience, and brand habit into the existing model.

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