



Aaron Ahuvia / Brand love

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Professor Ahuvia, you have been working for many years with the topic of brand love and have published numerous of publications about it. How did you get on this subject?

It's kind of a funny story. I did my PhD in marketing at Northwestern University's Kellogg school of management and was fortunate enough to work with Prof. Philipp Kotler. In his marketing seminar he explained how, in his view, marketing was everywhere: nonprofit organizations needed marketing, governments needed marketing, and even dating was a form of marketing where you had to be attractive to other people. Dating is always an interesting topic, and even more so when you are single as I was at that time. So, I decided to do my semester project in his seminar about dating as marketing. Prof. Kotler liked my work and referred me to Prof. Mara Adelman who had collected a



Prof. Aaron Ahuvia

Aaron Ahuvia, Ph.D., is Professor of Marketing at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He was the first person to do empirical research on the psychology of love when people love something rather than someone. Among other topics his research looks at consumers' love of certain brands.

lot of data about a matchmaking service. This was in the early 1990s and dating services were just starting to become popular. I ended up collaborating with Prof. Adelman on a series of major projects related to dating services. These projects got a lot of press attention and I even appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show talking about this work.

But when it became time for me to pick a dissertation topic I wanted to study something with broader applicability than researching dating services. However, I had already invested a huge amount of time in studying the research on love, attraction, and romantic relationships. And I wanted to put all that knowledge to good use. So I decided in to study how the psychology of love could help us understand why people where attracted to certain products and services. It turned out that although there was lots of research on love, and lots of research on consumer preferences, I was the first person to do empirical research on the psychology of love when people love something rather than someone.

Would you mind telling us something about your research? What do you see as the most important insights you have gained during these years?

At a practical level, the most important conclusions are just how strongly people's love for a brand can influence what they buy, how much they're willing to pay, and how likely they are to brag about the brand to all of their Facebook friends.

At a psychological level, a big insight for me, was that people use the things they love to do two things: define who they are as a person and manage their social relationships with other people. So in a way then, studying the things that people love turns out to be a roundabout way of studying how people create a sense of identity and how they build bonds with other people.

Regarding identity, I resisted this idea when I first started doing this research, but I have come to see that the things we love really do become actual parts of who we are. People have a mental category that I call the "me category". Our

bodies are core members of the me category, but this category contains much more than just our anatomical self. It contains all the things we feel strongly connected to and proud of. It contains not just the things we love, but also the people we love. That is why when we lose a person or thing that we love we feel that a part of ourselves has been lost, because it has. In keeping with this, when people want to figure out if they really love something, they often try to imagine how they would feel if it disappeared. The more horrible they anticipate the loss to be, the more sure they are that they truly love that thing.

Were there any surprises during your research, results that you have never expected?

I was surprised at how broadly applicable brand love is for marketing. Most consumers don't have strong feelings for most brands. When I started doing this research, I assumed it would be relevant for those fairly rare brands that have a really passionate following of consumers. But I did not think it would be relevant for the majority of brands that don't generate that kind of intense response. What we've learned however, is that even though we normally reserve the word "love" for very strong attachments, at a psychological level the mechanisms that drive love are still operating even when our feelings aren't that strong. So if you're selling toothpaste you don't need consumers to have a burning passionate love for your brand, you just need them to love it a little bit more than they love the competition.

Are there, in your experience, big differences between countries and / or generations when it comes to brand love?

There are certainly big differences in the specific things that people love. There are also big differences in the way people talk about love. For example, in English it's very common for people to say "I love ice cream", but in many languages people simply don't use the word love that way. However, what I have found is that while people use different words to describe their experiences, the underlying experiences are often pretty similar.

Finally, a personal question: Do you know brands yourself which you really love? And if so, what are the causes and reasons? What is special about these brands?

One of the things I love is this device called a grid-it Organizer. It's a great invention for keeping my pens, business cards, cords, and whatnot organized. Like most things that people love, it does its job very well. But if that was the end of the story, I wouldn't love it.



One of the reasons I do love it is that I find it oddly fun. It's like a big puzzle where I can arrange the various things I need in different ways to get everything to fit and be easily accessible. Another reason I love it is that it connects to a deeply held value of mine: creativity. Finding creative solutions to problems is something that helps make my life feel meaningful. And to me, this represents a great example of applied creativity.

Finally, being creative comes pretty naturally to me but being organized is something I've needed to work on. So this object also represents my ability to be organized and efficient. There can sometimes be a tension between being organized and being creative, by which I simply mean that people who are naturally very organized sometimes find it challenging to be creative and people who are naturally very creative sometimes find staying organized to be difficult. This little device represents a harmonious synthesis of creativity and organization. As I've found in my work, it is frequently the case that when people love things, they do so in part because the thing they love allows them to create a kind of harmony between two aspects of themselves that they had previously seen as somewhat incompatible with each other. I'm no exception to that, as this

simple little organizer allows me to see harmony rather than conflict between creativity and organization.

Read more about "brand love" in our Focustopic "[Brand images: I post, therefore I like](#)".

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