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ARTICLE

This anthropomorphised brand is so loveable: The role of self-brand integration☆



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Abstract Brand love has become an important topic of research in academic literature and applied marketing alike. Most of these studies have resulted in a better understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of the concept, as well as in the identification of some of its antecedents (consumer aspects and personality traits). However, in order to explain how brand love is created, this study focuses on anthropomorphism as a potential antecedent of brand love. Based on the interpersonal theory of love and self-expansion theory, our study tries to shed more light on the process under which brand love is built by focusing on self-brand integration as a key element in that process, and proposing anthropomorphism as the mechanism that helps that integration. Findings from the empirical study conducted amongst a sample of 256 individuals demonstrate that brand love is built, not only through the integration of the anthropomorphised brand, but also that anthropomorphism exerts a direct effect on brand love. The moderating effect of brand attitude is also analyzed.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Amor hacia la marca;
Integración personal
con la marca;
Antropomorfización

El papel de la integración personal con la marca en el amor hacia marcas antropomorfizadas

Resumen La investigación sobre el amor a la marca ha despertado un enorme interés tanto en el ámbito académico como en el empresarial. La mayor parte de estos estudios se ha centrado en mejorar la comprensión del concepto dada la complejidad, riqueza y naturaleza multidimensional del mismo, así como en analizar sus antecedentes relacionados con el consumo y los

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rasgos de la personalidad del individuo. Sin embargo, este trabajo trata de comprender cómo se crea el amor a la marca centrándose en que los procesos de antropomorfización o humanización de la marca pueden favorecer la integración personal de la marca y, por ende, sentimientos de amor hacia ella. Con una muestra de 256 individuos se constata empíricamente que el amor hacia la marca no solo se ve favorecido a través de la integración de la marca antropomorfizada sino que también el antropomorfismo ejerce un efecto directo sobre el amor hacia la marca. El efecto moderador de la actitud hacia la marca es también analizado.

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Introduction

The idea that consumers may see brands as partners and develop relationships with them is referred to as 'brand relationship' or 'consumer-brand relationship' (e.g., Fournier, 1998; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). The consumer-brand relationships literature contains myriad consumer-brand relationship constructs, including brand trust and brand commitment (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Elliot & Yannopoulou, 2007; Fournier & Yao, 1997; Sung & Choi, 2010), brand connectedness (Escalas, 2004), emotional brand attachment (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005), and brand passion (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2013; Bauer, Heinrich, & Martin, 2007). Nevertheless, the past few years have seen a burgeoning fascination for an emerging concept to describe consumer-brand relationships: brand love. It has become an important topic of research because functional differentiation among brands get closer, and building and strengthening emotional bonds between consumers and brands becomes more and more crucial (Grissafe & Nguyen, 1997). For example, empirical evidences demonstrate that brand love is a stronger subject than brand satisfaction and brand liking to predict desirable post-consumption behaviour such as repurchase intentions, positive word-of-mouth and brand loyalty (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Heinrich, Albrecht, & Bauer, 2012; Lastovicka & Sirianni, 2011). It also increases consumers' willingness to pay a price premium and forgiveness potential brand failures (Bauer, Heinrich, & Albrecht, 2009; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Thomson et al., 2005).

Practitioners have also recognized the relevance of the brand love concept. Kevin Roberts (2006), CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, introduces the expression "Lovemarks" to refer to those brands that are in the mind of people, and especially, in the heart of them. In Spain, some rankings have topped the most-loved brands among consumers (<http://www.cotoconsulting.com>). In addition, the words "Amour" and "Amor" are among the most frequently used in the European Union in the design of new brand names (ABC, 2013). Since 2012 new Spanish brand names with the word Amor are *Amor Jamón*, *Viajes Amores*, *Amor de Mami*, *Amor con Mayúsculas* o *Más Amor* (Oficina Española de Patentes y Marcas, <http://www.oepm.es>) (see Appendix A).

As a topic of research, the vast majority of the studies have focused on exploring the concept of brand love,

its nature and dimensions to propose a reliable and valid measure (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Shimp & Madden, 1988; Thomson et al., 2005; Whang, Allen, Sahoury, & Zhang, 2004). A second stream of research has centred on identifying its antecedents such as brand quality (Batra et al., 2012), trust and brand identification (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010), brand satisfaction (Sarkar, 2011; Sarkar, Ponnamp, & Murthy, 2012) and hedonic shopping motivations (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), as well as other consumers' personality traits such as materialism, romanticism and extroversion (Alfonso, Delgado, & Peláez, 2014; Rauschnabel, Ahuvia, Ivens, & Leischnig, 2013; Sarkar, 2011).

To move beyond the current state-of-the-art in explaining how brand love is created, new studies are needed to analyze the underlying process that facilitate the emergence of this emotional bond with brands, beyond consumption aspects or personal traits of individuals.

The fact that love is a concept that derives from interpersonal love in psychology ("I love you") to be applied in a consumption context ("I love my car") makes difficult to be understood by consumers as far as brands are inanimate and non-human. However, what happens if brands get placed in the human category? In other words, what happens if brands are seen as people? May this thinking foster brand love? It is possible because people have an innate tendency to see nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics or emotions such as when they have conversations with animals, or see a human face in the moon or human figures in the clouds. This tendency is known as anthropomorphism (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007).

Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014) are the first authors in analyzing the role of anthropomorphism as a potential antecedent of brand love. While they have provided an interesting contribution about the theoretical mechanism linking anthropomorphism to brand love, more research is needed in this domain. They analyze the relationships between anthropomorphism and the different dimensions of brand love identified by Batra et al. (2012), but not the contribution of these dimensions to the generation of brand love as a whole. As Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014) posited, brand love has a fairly large number of dimensions and these dimensions are conceptually quite distinct from each other. Then, a more precise understanding of how anthropomorphism influences brand love through these dimensions is needed, because

thinking in the brand like a person may not influence all the dimensions of brand love in the same way. For example, [Rauschnabel and Ahuvia \(2014\)](#) do not find a significant influence of anthropomorphism on all the sub-dimensions of passion-driven behaviours and positive emotional connection, and other dimensions such as brand attitude or attitude strength may be less relevant for the emerging of love. Among the different dimension of the brand love concept, the notion that love involves an integration of the self and the love object (i.e., the brand), so that the love object becomes an important part of the lover's identity ([Ahuvia, Batra, & Bagozzi, 2009](#)), may suggest that integration of a brand into the consumer's identity is particularly important to consumers' love of brands. Therefore, we are interested in analyzing how anthropomorphism could influence this dimension of brand love, integration of the brand into consumers' self, and its contribution to the brand love as a whole. The own nature of the anthropomorphic thinking, considering the brand like a person, may lead us to think that self-brand integration may play an important role in this process. Specifically, this work empirically explores the relationships among brand anthropomorphism, self-brand integration and brand love. The moderating effect of brand attitude in these relationships is also analyzed as not all brands are equally plausible of being integrated and loved depending on consumers' attitude to them.

To accomplish with this objective the paper is organized as follows. In the first section, we review the literature of brand love by describing the different theoretical perspectives existing in defining the concept, and its main antecedents. That section is followed by a description of the methodology. The empirical results are then described and discussed. We conclude with implications for managers, and propose some limitations that open opportunities for further research.

Theoretical perspectives in brand love research

The idea that love is a notion that can be applied not only to people but also to anything from inanimate things (objects), animals, and abstract entities (an idea) to actions (hobbies) is amply accepted in the academic literature ([Ahuvia et al., 2009](#); [Heinrich et al., 2012](#)). For example, [Fehr and Russell \(1991\)](#) found that people manifest love to work, books, money, art, sports, honesty, animals, nature, pets, country, and others. [Ahuvia \(1992\)](#) identified a wide variety of things that people love beyond family and friends such as natural objects (e.g., plants, water, clouds), commercial products (e.g., clothing and collections), art forms (e.g., music, visual arts) and places among others.

In the branding literature, [Fournier \(1998\)](#) was the first to introduce the concept of love to describe that consumers may experience a feeling of love towards a brand. Since then, the study of consumer-brand relationship in terms of love has resulted in a myriad of research that has adopted different theoretical perspectives in their studies ([Albert et al., 2008](#)): the interpersonal theory of love applied to consumer situations (e.g., [Ahuvia, 1993](#); [Whang et al., 2004](#)) and an empirical approach consisting of a

conceptualization of consumers' declaration of "love towards brands" ([Fournier, 1998](#)).

The first framework relies on interpersonal theories in psychology to define and explain the nature of brand love under the assumption that interpersonal love and object love are sufficiently similar in nature ([Shimp & Madden, 1988](#), p. 163). Among the different prominent interpersonal theories, [Sternberg and Barnes's \(1986\)](#) Triangular Theory of Love is the most frequently framework used to explain brand love. Based on this theory, [Shimp and Madden \(1988\)](#) defined it along three components (liking, yearning and decision/commitment) which correspond to Sternberg and Barnes's components of interpersonal love. [Fournier's \(1998\)](#) work is another pioneering study in arguing that people in many ways relate to brands similarly to how they relate to people. [Ahuvia \(1993, 2005a, 2005b\)](#) initiated empirical research looking in detail at consumers' ability to love products and consumption activities. Ahuvia's work suggests that interpersonal love and love in consumer contexts have more similarities (e.g., the lover finds the object attractive, the object provides something the lover wants or needs, a sense of natural fit, and so on) than differences (e.g., self-sacrifice).

Against this background, a second group of studies argue that brand love is a different form of love than interpersonal love because consumer-brand relationships involve a monetary exchange and brands cannot reciprocate consumers' love like humans can (see [Albert et al., 2008](#); [Batra et al., 2012](#); [Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006](#)). Under this second framework, the study of [Batra et al. \(2012\)](#) is the only one that conceptualizes and measures brand love based on an understanding of how consumers experience the phenomenon of love. As a result, they highlight the multidimensional approach of brand love and define it as consumers' intimate and emotional attachment with brands that is characterized by a set of cognitions (self-brand integration), feelings (positive emotional connection, and anticipated separation distress) and behaviours (passion-driven behaviours, and long-term relationships).

Despite of the existence of different theoretical perspectives in dealing with the concept of love, the truth is that all of them, in whole or in part, have something in common that unite them, which is the notion that love involves an integration of the individual's self and the love object so that the love object becomes an important part of the lover's identity. Nevertheless, there is a gap in the number of studies addressing how to build brand love through the integration of the brand in consumers' self because most studies have focused on consumption aspects and personality traits. Therefore, this research studies the process under which brand love is built, focusing on self-brand integration as a key element in that process and analyzing anthropomorphism as the mechanism that helps that integration.

Theory development and hypotheses

The idea that brands can be perceived in a similar way to how they perceive a person by attributing them human-like features, personalities and intentions is well grounded in the branding literature ([MacInnis & Folkes, 2017](#)). For consumers, this humanization of the brand is just a vehicle

of self-expression because it helps consumers to express and project personal aspects that might be desirable to influence, or reflect the influence of a social relationship (Ahuvia, 2015; Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009).

Furthermore, MacInnis and Folkes (2017) state that the humanization or anthropomorphism of the brand makes also sense in specific contexts when (1) they need to connect with people because they felt socially excluded, lonely or nostalgic; (2) they feel low in power or control or self-efficacy, or (3) even when something about the product mentally activates or prompts them to think about other people (e.g., Jean Paul Gaultier "Le Male" cologne).

Consequently brand anthropomorphism empowers the brand to play a more central role in the consumers' life, and in this study we focus on the idea that this central role manifests in terms of love feelings.

Relationship between anthropomorphism and brand love

Anthropomorphism describes the tendency to imbue physical characteristics, behaviours, motivations, mental states, and emotions that are typical of human beings to objects, non-human agents (Epley et al., 2007), natural forces, supernatural entities (Epley, Waytz, Akalis, & Cacioppo, 2008) animals or pets (Chartrand, Fitzsimons, & Fitzsimons, 2008), and mechanical or electronic devices (Waytz, Cacioppo, & Epley, 2010). Consequently, anthropomorphizing a brand involves going beyond observable "actions" to draw inferences about the brand's unobserved personality, intention, and motivations (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012).

General findings support that using an anthropomorphized representation of a brand generally creates positive outcomes because "attributions of human nature characteristics leads to a feeling of social connectedness with this entity" (Puzakova & Aggarwal, 2015, p. 667).¹ Specifically, recent academic researches has shown that anthropomorphism has some positive effects on product evaluation (Landwehr, McGill, & Herrmann, 2011), brand recall and brand attitude (Basfirinci & Çilingir, 2015), and purchasing behaviour (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Chandler & Schwarz, 2010).

Two main theoretical mechanisms can be offered for explaining the positive effects of anthropomorphism in consumers, which also provide a framework for our predictions that anthropomorphic thinking helps to foster brand love. One mechanism that links anthropomorphism to brand love is the category level evaluation. When people anthropomorphize they get placed to products and brands into human category, being evaluated as members of that category (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). Specifically, human category is seen in positive terms, as evidenced by the value people place on human life and the typical view that humans are superior to other animals, objects or other things. Being so, anthropomorphic thinking increases positive evaluations of brands because as placed on the human category they are

favoured by the individual's favourable attitude towards the human category as a whole.

A second mechanism is cognitive consistency. Cognitive consistency proposes that the human mind prefers situations in which one's different beliefs and attitudes fit together in a coherent way (Awa & Nwuche, 2010; Higgins, 1987). Being so, the more things resemble people the more cognitively consistent it is to love these things (Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014) because love is primarily viewed as evolved for interpersonal relationships. Therefore, whether the brand is considered as a person, it is more probably that love towards the brand emerges because love naturally appears in interpersonal relationship.

In sum, when people perceive humanlike traits, characteristics, abilities and motivations on brands increase their humanity sense (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Ahuvia, 1993; Waytz, Cacioppo, & Epley, 2007), which favours people perceiving brands as more plausible relationship partners (Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone, 2012; Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014). In that situation, based on category level evaluation and cognitive consistency we propose that anthropomorphic thinking may favour brand love.

H1. Anthropomorphism has a positive effect on brand love.

The generation of brand love through self-brand integration

Due to the multi-dimensional nature of the brand love concept, and the conceptual differences between dimensions, it is quite important to analyze those dimensions that may be especially relevant to the generation of brand love. In particular, due to the importance of the integration of the brand on the individual's self for the emerging on love, we focus on self-brand integration.

According to self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986), people are motivated to enter and maintain close relationship to expand their self by including resources, perspectives, and identities from loved others that enhance the ability to accomplish their goals. As brands can serve as resources or symbols that transfer meaning which consumers may use to reflect their identities (Belk, 1988), this theory may be also relevant to examine consumers' close relationships with brands (Reimann & Aron, 2009). Extending self-expansion theory to a consumption context implies that consumers integrate or include brands into their self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). From this approach, self-brand integration occurs when a brand is integrated into the consumer's current and desired self-identity (Batra et al., 2012).

Anthropomorphism may help fostering the integration by two mechanisms proposed by Ahuvia et al. (2009): cognitive incorporation and investiture of social meanings. Cognitive incorporation involves learning about the object, fantasizing about it, or in some other way thinking about it so as to strengthen its importance within one's self image. Objects (e.g., brands) can also be integrated into a person's identity through the investiture of social meanings that help to define consumers' self (Belk, 1988).

Anthropomorphism of a brand facilitates these two mechanisms of integration of the brand aspects into the self.

¹ With the increasing importance of anthropomorphism as marketing tool the Journal of Marketing Management has published a special issue for this topic.

As the essence of anthropomorphism is attributing human-like characteristics, motivations, intentions and emotions to nonhuman creatures (p.e., a brand), it implies thinking and fantasizing about the brand to be brought it to life in the consumer's mind. As a consequence, the brand will be more important for individuals and they will incorporate some characteristics of the humanized brand into their self-image. On a social level, anthropomorphism may be seen as a cognitive and a perceptual strategy akin to satisfying the desire for social affiliation (Epley et al., 2007) by endowing the brand with the particular human-like trait that facilitates to communicate to others the type of person he or she is or would like to be (Belk, 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

In sum, the notion that loves involves an integration of the self and the love object, and that anthropomorphism fosters self-brand integration suggests that anthropomorphism not only has a direct effect on brand love but it may generate brand love through the dimension of self-brand integration.

H2. Anthropomorphism has an indirect effect on brand love through self-brand integration.

The moderating effect of brand attitude

Consumers can integrate into their self some brands but the integration of a brand into a person's self may be favoured when consumers like some brand aspects. In other words, brands have characteristics and values that may be positively (e.g. quality) or negatively (e.g. price) evaluated, resulting in different brand attitudes towards them. Therefore, in the same way that people form relationships with other people (Fournier, 1998), those brands that evoke more favourable consumers' attitudes are more plausible to be integrated into consumers' self when they are anthropomorphized than those other that are less liked. That is, individuals can be able to integrate it better in their self because they like it (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). As noted by Ahuvia et al. (2009), integration of an object into a person's identity only constitutes love when that integration is highly desired. Being so, we propose that when consumers have positive attitudes towards a brand they are more likely to integrate it into their self when it is anthropomorphized.

H3. As consumers attitude towards the brand increases, consumers are more likely to integrate the brand in their self (SBI) when they anthropomorphize the brand.

Based on the same reasoning, we also propose that individuals who have a positive attitude towards a brand are more likely to love it when they anthropomorphize it compared to other brands that evoke less favourable attitudes. Specifically, we propose that:

H4. The direct effect of anthropomorphism on brand love is likely to be greater for consumers with a better attitude towards the brand.

Finally, due to the fact that it is more likely that individuals integrate anthropomorphized brands in their self when there is a positive attitude towards them, and that self-brand integration generates brand love, it follows that

brand attitude may moderate the anthropomorphism-brand love link indirectly, that is, the indirect effect of anthropomorphism on brand love through self-brand integration. More formally, we propose that:

H5. The indirect effect of anthropomorphism on brand love through self-brand integration is likely to be greater for consumer with a better attitude towards the brand.

All the hypothesized relationships are depicted in the conceptual model in Fig. 1.

Method

Data collection and procedure

Previous studies on brand love and anthropomorphism have indistinctly used any age cohort, gender, convenience group (students) or population in general as the target sample, suggesting that both brand love and anthropomorphism are not related to specific individuals' characteristics and that can be studied with people in general. Being so, we focused on population in general and specifically on two demographic characteristics (age and gender) to address a variety of respondents from different demographic groups.

Specifically, participants were contacted through an online panel of a market research company. The study employed a self-administered online survey as the data collection method. The sample was randomly selected although a quota system was established to guarantee that the sample represented gender and different age groups that resemble the distribution of the Spanish population. Following this procedure, a total of 256 individuals participated in the study (mean age: 40.70 years, SD = 12.4; 50% females; 54.7% workers). The demographic profile presented in Table 1 reveals that gender and all age groups between 18 and 65 years old are fairly represented. The two predominant categories for occupation were workers (54.7%) and unemployed (21.9%). Percentages of the frequency of clothing purchase were also reported and indicated that only a minority of respondents buy clothes weekly (1.6%) or once per year (7%) while the rest of the sample by one per month (25.4%), each three months (29.3%) or each six months (25%).

The procedure used was as follows. We established a focal product category that the participants would answer the questions about. The product category selected was clothes for several reasons. First, it has been hardly analyzed by previous studies in comparison to consumer electronics. Second, consumers may develop more frequently strong bonds with their fashion brands because of the passion they inspire in them by feeling well dressed and groomed (Ahmed & Spinelli, 2012). Third, compared to products like computers and cell phones which are highly responsive to their users, which may facilitate brand love, clothes has less interactive and anthropomorphic qualities as a product category.

Regarding the brands on which the study is focused, previous studies of brand love have typically establish as a focal brand the respondent's favourite brand. We avoided using this same procedure because it would lead to biased positive perceptions and ties with the brand (e.g., brand love). If we use brands that a priori individuals may feel attach to (e.g.,

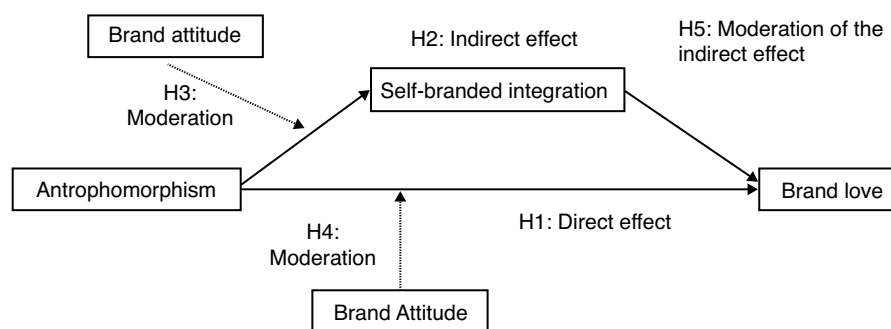


Figure 1 Theoretical model of Brand Love.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the sample.

<i>Age groups. Mean age: 40.70 years old (SD = 12.4)</i>		<i>Gender</i>	
18–24	14.5%	Male	50%
25–35	19.1%		
36–44	27.7%		
45–54	21.9%	Female	50%
55–65	16.8%		
<i>Clothes purchase frequency</i>		<i>Occupation</i>	
Weekly	1.6%	Student	11.7%
Several times per month	11.7%	Workers	54.7%
Once per month	25.4%	Student + worker	11.7%
Each three months	29.3%	Unemployed	21.9%
Each six months	25%		
Once per year	7%		

favourite brands or even aspirational brands), we would not capture enough brand love variance to observe the effect of anthropomorphism on brand love, and consequently we will fail to observe whether the anthropomorphism thinking or the humanization of the brand may foster brand love.

Therefore we followed the procedure suggested by Malar, Kromer, Hoyer, and Nyffenegger (2011). A specific brand was randomly assigned to each participant among only those brands that he/she manifests to have bought from a list of 16 clothes brands previously elaborated by the authors. These brands were chosen from different studies of fashion clothing brands in Spain (De Juan, 2006; Rageh & Spinelli, 2012; Riaño, 2012). By doing so, we ensure that at least these brands evoke a minimum familiarity and awareness among participants of the study (see Appendix B) and also that the product category is well represented by the inclusion of the most important brands of the category.

Once the brand was assigned, this brand was displayed in all further brand related questions (brand attitude, task of brand anthropomorphism, self-brand integration, and brand love). First, participants rated their attitude to the brand. Next, in order to induce the anthropomorphic thinking, individuals performed the following task. They were encouraged to imagine that the brand had come to life as a person and to describe the sort of person the brand would be in terms of its personality, physical appearance, opinions, approach, profession, conversational style, and so forth. With this procedure, individuals should imagine the brand assigned in terms of personal characteristics. This proce-

dure has been used by several studies of anthropomorphism in consumer behaviour literature (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Kim & Kramer, 2015). It is more robust and strong than that the one used by Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014), because in their work the anthropomorphic thinking is not encouraged and individuals just rated anthropomorphism for their favourite brand. Therefore, individuals may have problems to rate whether the brand has free will, emotions or consciousness if they have never imagined it like a person.

Measures

We adopted existing measures from the literature and most of them adopted a Likert-format, scaled from 1 (=totally disagree) to 7 (=totally agree).

Brand attitude (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.83$) was measured with three items (I do not like this brand/I like this brand, It is not a good brand/It is a good brand, It is not attractive brand/It is an attractive brand) that have been previously used on the study of Yoo and Donthu (2001).

Self-brand integration (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.967$) was measured with the scale developed by Batra et al. (2012). The scale originally consists on 12 items that represent the degree to which the brand is integrated into the consumer's self, express deeply held value and important group identities and provide intrinsic rewards.

To measure *Brand love* a direct global measure was used to rate the degree to which the respondents loved the brand

in question in an overall sense (Batra et al., 2012): “Overall, how much do you love [brand]” (1 = Not at all, and 7 = Much).

Based on the definition of anthropomorphism provided by Waytz, Epley, and Cacioppo (2004) we used an item ranked from 1 to 7 to measure the degree of *anthropomorphism* or the degree to which the participants have attributed human-like attributes, behaviours and capacities to the brand in the anthropomorphism task. In other words, it measures the extent to which the brand was described as an actual human being. We do not employed the scale used by Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014), because it was composed of three items taken from psychology research that has neither received psychometric validation nor was it developed in a consumer context, making many of the scale items inappropriate in a branding context (Guido & Peluso, 2015; Hart, Jones, & Royne, 2013). Finally, sociodemographic variables were surveyed.

Results

Direct and indirect effects of anthropomorphism on brand love

To test whether there is a direct effect of anthropomorphism on brand love (H1) and an indirect effect through self-brand integration (H2), we used the bootstrapping procedure recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). They suggest using a bootstrapping procedure to compute a confidence interval (CI) around the indirect effect. A bootstrap CI that does not include zero provides evidence of a significant indirect effect of anthropomorphism on brand love through self-brand integration. The mediation analysis was performed by applying Hayes' PROCESS SPSS macro (model 4), using 5,000 bootstrapped samples to estimate the indirect effect.

The results (see Table 2) reveal that anthropomorphism has a significant positive effect on self-brand integration ($b = 0.3849$, $SE = 0.0414$, $t = 9.2927$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that when consumers anthropomorphized more the brand they will integrate it more in their self. We also found a significant effect of self-brand integration on brand love ($b = 0.3890$, $SE = 0.0546$, $t = 15.3686$, $p = 0.000$). As hypothesized, a significant positive indirect effect of anthropomorphism on brand love via self-brand integration was found (point estimate = 0.3229, 95% CI = 0.2435 to 0.3984). Thus, H2 was supported. In addition, the direct effect of anthropomorphism on brand love remains significant ($b = 0.0916$, $SE = 0.0417$, $t = 2.1960$, $p = 0.0290$). This result supports H1, which predicts that as individuals anthropomorphize a brand, it will have a direct influence on brand love. A significant positive direct effect of anthropomorphism on brand love was found (point estimate = 0.0916, 95% CI = 0.0095 to 0.1738). In sum, there are a direct and an indirect effect of anthropomorphism on brand love.

Moderation of the effect of anthropomorphism on self-brand integration by brand attitude

Although the finding of an indirect effect for the generation of brand love is interesting, the process linking anthropomorphism to self-brand integration is likely to be more

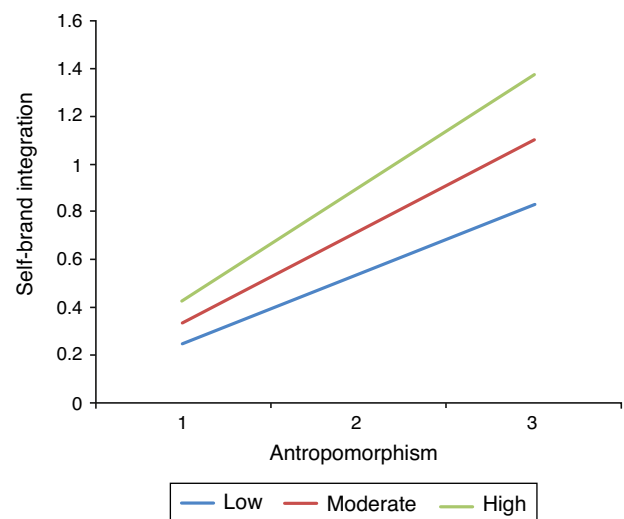


Figure 2 Simple slopes for SBI on anthropomorphism at values of the moderator.

sophisticated. The level of integration of the brand in the self is not always increasing as the level of anthropomorphism increases. Rather, the integration of the brand in the self was likely to depend on the attitude towards the brand. Thus, the influence of anthropomorphism on self-brand integration will be higher for those individuals with a better attitude towards the brand (H3).

In order to test for moderation of the effect of anthropomorphism on self-brand integration by brand attitude, a regression was performed on self-brand integration with independent variables mean-centred anthropomorphism and brand attitude. As predicted, the results showed a significant two-way interaction between anthropomorphism and brand attitude ($b = 0.098$, $t = 2.048$, $p = 0.042$). Thus, H3 was supported.

To further understand the nature of anthropomorphism and brand attitude interaction, conditional effects ('simple slopes') of anthropomorphism on self-brand integration were estimated using the 'pick-a-point' approach (Hayes & Matthes, 2009), with the sample mean and plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean representing 'moderate', 'high' and 'low' attitude towards the brand respectively. Fig. 2 shows the pattern of results. Anthropomorphism was significant and positively related to self-brand integration at low, moderate and high levels of brand attitude ($p = 0.000$), conditional effects were 0.29, 0.38 and 0.47 respectively. As hypothesized, the influence of anthropomorphism on self-brand integration is higher when the attitude towards the brand is better.

Moderation of the indirect effect of anthropomorphism on brand love by brand attitude

The indirect effect provided evidence of a mechanism carrying the effect of anthropomorphism on brand love through self-brand integration. Next, the moderation analysis revealed that the extent to which individuals integrate the brand into their self was contingent on brand attitude. Putting these findings together, the indirect effect may be

Table 2 Direct and indirect effect of anthropomorphism on brand love.

Independent variables	Outcome variables			
	M: SBI		Y: Brand Love	
	Coeff.	<i>t</i>	Coeff.	<i>t</i>
X: Anthro.	0.3849	9.2927***	0.0916	2.1960*
M: SBI			0.8389	15.3686***
R2	0.2537		0.6286	

* $p < 0.05$.
 *** $p < 0.001$.

moderated (H5). That is, the indirect effect of anthropomorphism on brand love through self-brand integration may depended on brand attitude. In this situation, Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007) recommend the estimation of conditional indirect effects and testing whether these indirect effects differ from zero at specific value of the moderator (e.g. attitude towards the brand) using a bootstrap CI.

As our conceptual model includes hypotheses for the indirect effect of anthropomorphism on brand love through self-brand integration and for the moderating effect of brand attitude in the relationship between anthropomorphism and self-brand integration, in order to test such effects it is necessary to run a conditional process analysis in which both effects are tested simultaneously. We used the PROCESS macro (model 8, Hayes, 2013).

Both anthropomorphism ($b = 0.2905$, $SE = 0.378$, $t = 7.6935$, $p = 0.000$) and brand attitude ($b = 0.5378$, $SE = 0.0598$, $t = 8.9812$, $p = 0.000$) were found to have a positive effect on self-brand integration. In addition, the interaction between anthropomorphism and brand attitude was significant ($b = 0.0576$, $SE = 0.0282$, $t = 2.0484$, $p = 0.0416$) (see Table 3). The effect of self-brand integration was also significant ($b = 0.7468$, $SE = 0.0609$, $t = 12.2560$, $p = 0.000$). To examine H5, we focused on the conditional indirect effect of the interaction between anthropomorphism and brand attitude on brand love through self-brand integration. The indirect effect was consistently positive and increased with the level of brand attitude as proposed in H5. The effect was significantly different from zero among those who have low (95% CI = 0.0766 to 0.2689), moderate (95% CI = 0.1564 to 0.2904), and high levels (95% CI = 0.1827 to 0.3681) of brand attitude. Table 4 provides a summary of all the results.

The results also show the moderating effect of brand attitude in the effect of anthropomorphism on brand love (H4). As predicted, the interaction between anthropomorphism and brand attitude on brand love was significant ($b = 0.0997$, $SE = 0.0275$, $t = 3.6225$, $p = 0.0004$) (see Table 3). To further understand the nature of this interaction, conditional direct effects were analyzed (see Table 5). The results show that the direct effect of anthropomorphism on brand love was not significant among those with relatively low attitude towards the brand (95% CI = -0.1218 to 0.0784). However, the effect was significant different from zero among those who have moderate (95% CI = 0.0209 to 0.1808) and high (95% CI = 0.1155 to 0.3312) brand attitude. Thus, the modera-

tion analysis revealed that the impact of anthropomorphism on brand love is contingent on brand attitude. Thus, H4 is supported.

Discussion

The present study contributes to the brand relationship literature by suggesting that brand anthropomorphism could be considered as an antecedent of brand love. The results suggest that when people think in the brand as a person brand love may emerge. Thus, this study lends support to the basic theoretical premise that consumer-brand relationships, such as brand love, are in some sense analogous to, or modelled on, interpersonal relationships.

This result is also in line with Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014) who found a positive effect of brand anthropomorphism on different dimensions of brand love. However, the major contribution of the present paper is a more complex analysis of the mechanism through which anthropomorphic thinking generates brand love, because Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014) do not analyze the contribution of the brand love dimensions to the generation of brand love as a whole.

The new insight documented by this paper has to do with the effect exerted by self-brand integration in the relationship between anthropomorphism and brand love. Contrary to the theoretical underpinning of self-expansion theory (Aron & Aron, 1986), which suggests that love emerges as a result of individuals' motivation to maintain close relationships to expand their self by including others' resources in one's self, the empirical evidences obtained suggest that this integration is not necessary in a context of consumer-brand relationships. Specifically, in a brand domain, brand love may emerge thanks to a direct effect of brand anthropomorphism. According with the theoretical propositions of category level evaluation and cognitive consistency, the anthropomorphised brand could be loved because (1) the brand is placed in the human category and (2) it is more consistent love humans than love objects. Therefore, the brand could be loved without integrating the brand in the individual's self and, indirectly, through an integration of the anthropomorphized brand in the individual's self. The integration of the anthropomorphized brand in the self is conducted because (1) individuals may incorporate some characteristics of the humanized brand into their self (cognitive incorporation) and (2) the humanized brand has a social identity that may define their self (social meaning).

Table 3 Moderation of the indirect effect.

Independent variables	Outcome variables			
	M: SBI		Y: Brand Love	
	Coeff.	t	Coeff.	t
X: Anthro.	0.2905	7.6935***	0.1008	2.4848*
W: Brand Attitude	0.5370	8.9819***	0.1830	2.7539***
Int: Anthro.* Brand Attitude	0.0578	2.0484*	0.0997	3.6225***
M: SBI			0.7468	12.2560***
R2	0.4365		0.6201	

* $p < 0.05$.
 *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4 Conditional INDIRECT effects of anthropomorphism on brand love through self-brand integration at levels of brand attitude.

Brand attitude	Indirect effect	
	Effect (boot SE)	95% Bias corrected bootstrap confidence interval
Low -1.2285	0.1639 (0.0483)	0.0766 to 0.2689
Moderate 0.000	0.2169 (0.0343)	0.1564 to 0.2904
High 1.2286	0.2700 (0.0464)	0.1827 to 0.3691

Note: Values for brand attitude are the mean and plus/minus one SD from mean.

Table 5 Conditional DIRECT effects of anthropomorphism on brand love at levels of brand attitude.

Brand attitude	Indirect effect	
	Effect (boot SE)	95% Bias corrected bootstrap confidence interval
Low -1.2285	-0.0217 (0.0508)	-0.1218 to 0.0748
Moderate 0.000	0.1008 (0.0406)	0.0209 to 0.1809
High 1.2286	0.2234 (0.0548)	0.1155 to 0.3312

Note: Values for brand attitude are the mean and plus/minus one SD from mean.

Furthermore, beside the capacity of anthropomorphism to directly or indirectly generate brand love, our results reveal that previous attitude towards the brand moderates these effects. The positive effect on brand love is higher for those individuals with a better attitude towards the brand. This finding reinforces the point of past studies on anthropomorphism that concluded that anthropomorphic thinking may lead to more positive evaluations only when the type of person brought to mind is associated with positive feelings (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). As Fournier and Alvarez (2012) posited, all brands are not equal in their ability to be considered and judged as persons. Thus, the positive effects of anthropomorphism on brand love are conditioned by a positive or negative attitude towards the brand.

Managerial implications, limitations and further research

Derived from our findings, we propose some useful recommendations to anthropomorphize their brands for those companies that would like to foster love feelings towards

their brands. First, managers should consider humanizing them. Then, they may stimulate that brands resemble or imitate human characteristics and behaviours. For example, first-person communication such as the one used by Central Lechera Asturiana in a recent commercial (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlqt-qoNTyw>), or designing the brand in such a way that resembles or imitates human characteristics (see for example the commercials of brand of candies M&M or the brand of plastic bags Zipper: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loHHLz5LVcM>), are mechanisms to improve the anthropomorphic thinking.

Second, marketing communication tools could support the transmission of the human characteristics of the brand. Until now, advertising has been used as the main tool to improve the anthropomorphic thinking. However, others actions such as direct marketing or brand pages on social network sites (e.g., Facebook) may help in this process. For example, the emails campaigns should reflect how the brand is and its values, as well as communicate the message in first person. Even the communication in Facebook brand pages and blogs may be an important way to present the brand as a person. In these platforms, conversations between

individuals and brands happen, being a perfect context to develop anthropomorphic thinking towards the brand. In fact, some companies use an avatar in brand pages to communicate with consumers with the aim that the company or the brand was perceived as a person.

Third, the design of the branding elements (e.g., logo, colours, forms, slogan) can be an important tool to humanize the brand. Managers may improve the anthropomorphic thinking and they can transmit the person the brand wants to be through these elements. In sum, using all the tools commented above, managers may provide their brands with characteristics, behaviours, motivations and emotions in order that (1) the brand becomes a person that could be loved by consumers and (2) the humanized brand traits would better fit with those of their consumers' current or potential self as a way of helping the brand integration in consumers' self.

Although we attempted to rule out rival explanations with our chosen procedure (e.g., the use of only one product category: clothes) when testing the proposed relationships, we acknowledge that more empirical evidences are needed before generalizing the results. Future studies should replicate our analysis for different products in other product categories to add further empirical evidences to the role of anthropomorphism and self-brand integration in building brand love. Furthermore, as past research has stressed that more hedonic products tend to be more loved, research is needed to analyze whether the consumer's perception of the relative role of hedonic (as compared with utilitarian) benefits offered by the product may moderate the relationships suggested in the conceptual model.

Second, the use of larger samples can increase the generalizability of our findings. In this sense, a larger sample and testing the relationships in a real environment can increase the validity of our results.

Third, [Batra et al. \(2012\)](#) suggested the use of a multiple-component higher-order brand love prototype instead of an overall brand love measure because it has a higher predictive power. Therefore, the measure used lacks the rich and multidimensional nature of the construct and we acknowledge that it is an important limitation of this study. However, in some circumstances the use of an overall measure of brand love may be justified. First, a multidimensional mea-

sure of brand love may be useful for explaining the capacity of brand love to predict consumers' reactions towards the brand. However, other studies ([Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010](#)) used a single measure to explain how brand-related variables may influence brand love (i.e., brand identification, self-brand integration), in order to avoid an overlap with other brand-related constructs. In addition, the multidimensional measure developed by [Batra et al. \(2012\)](#) may be too complex for the purpose of some studies as they proposed 57 items.

Beyond these limitations and the associated research avenues, there are several directions that subsequent research on brand love could take. First, research is needed to expand this conceptual model by incorporating personality traits as past research have revealed that materialism and romanticism ([Alfonso et al., 2014](#)) and neuroticism and extraversion are positively related to brand love ([Rauschnabel et al., 2013](#)). Further studies may investigate more precisely whether different forms of anthropomorphism suggested by [Guthrie \(1993\)](#), partial, literal and accidental, have the same effects found in the present study. As [Guthrie \(1993\)](#) posited, partial anthropomorphizing is relevant in a product context because the others two simply occur because of some mistaken perception (accidental) or just simply for the existence of some coincidence between the elements of the human form and the brand (literal). Thus, it may be expected higher effects of partial anthropomorphizing on brand love. Although it is the type of anthropomorphism conducted in this study empirical evidences are needed to clarify this issue.

Finally, another interesting question pertains to the fact that recent research has provided new insights on the antecedents of product anthropomorphism (see [Chen et al., 2013](#)), suggesting the existence of some motivations (e.g., social exclusion, brand personality) that may prompt some consumers, and not others, to humanize brands. The inclusion of these motivations may enrich the empirical findings of our research.

Conflict of interest

The authors do not have any conflict of interest.

Appendix A. New brands names with the word Amor (OEPM)



Appendix B. List of brands

U de Alfonso Domínguez	H&M
Cortefiel	Desigual
Springfield	Punto Roma
Massimo Dutti	Pedro del Hierro
Pull & Bear	Jack and Jones
Stradivarius	Esfera
Zara	Easy Wear
Mango	Pepe Jeans

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