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MARKETING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Do you love me? The relationship between sport-related branded entertainment and brand love

Hildegard Liebl[1], Jana Turčínková[2], Rupert Beinhauer[1] and José Magano[3,4]*

Abstract: Brand love, the most intense relationship between a consumer and a brand, drives valuable outcomes like increased brand loyalty. Sport-related branded entertainment (SRBE) represents a content marketing opportunity to build on brand love and provides a research gap. This research investigates the impact of sport-related branded entertainment on brand love using a mixed-method approach, including a quantitative survey (n = 372) conducted in Austria, followed by a focus group discussion. A structural equation model revealed a positive impact of SRBE on brand love. Furthermore, brand love is positively associated with brand loyalty, spreading positive word-of-mouth, and the willingness to pay a higher price. Results show that it is most effective in the younger, male, and sporty consumers. Finally, the qualitative focus group discussion revealed deeper insights into consumer motivations. SRBE is a valuable content marketing instrument for brand love. Results revealed that it is most effective in the younger, male, and sporty consumers. The impact of SRBE on brand love has been examined for the first time.

Subjects: Marketing; Brand Management; Consumer Behaviour

Keywords: Sport-related branded entertainment; branded entertainment; content marketing; brand love; self-expressiveness of brands

1. Introduction

Brand equity is a valuable key performance indicator (KPI), especially in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry. Strong brands positively impact demand and profits; they can reduce consumer confusion due to information overload (Esch, 2018). Whether Apple, LEGO, or Nivea—love for brands is no longer a rarity (Gundelach, 2020). For years, science has been concerned with brand love, which describes the most intensive relationship between consumers and brands (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Ferreira et al., 2019).

Building brand love is a difficult task, but it pays off in several ways: brand mistakes or misbehaviors are more easily forgiven, and consumers buy more often. They are also willing to pay a higher price or recommend the brand to others (Langner et al., 2013). The most important positive effects of brand love are brand loyalty, positive word of mouth (WoM), and willingness to pay a higher price (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Albert et al., 2009; Batra et al., 2012; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Thomson et al., 2005). Hence it is a valuable goal to increase or expand brand love.

Academic literature reflects different brand love study approaches: In some cases, studies focus on specific brands. Rossiter asked precisely for the brands: Ariel, Persil (detergent), Jacobs, Tschibo,

HP, Sony,H&M and Adidas (Rossiter and Bellman, 2012). Baena (2016) studied different online and mobile marketing strategies as drivers of brand love for Real Madrid. Borges et al. (2016) proved that brand love exists for a medical product—Aspirin. Other studies focused directly on product categories. Ismail and Spinelli (2012) examined the effects of brand love on fashion brands for young consumers, while Batra et al. (2012) asked participants to choose a brand for different categories such as consumer electronics or clothing.

Branded entertainment was first mentioned in the literature in 2005. It serves as an important topic in content marketing. As the definition is partly unclear, it must be distinguished from terms such as product placement or sponsorship. Johnston (2009) explained that within sponsorship, there is no integration of the brand, apart from the presentation of the credits or opening credits. Product placement consists of active or passive products on screen or/and mention of the brand name within the film (Johnston, 2009). Kunz et al. (2016) introduced a conceptual model of branded entertainment to sports marketing by highlighting Red Bull's branded entertainment creations. Based on this concept, SRBE can be defined as follows: *Sport-related branded entertainment is any sports entertainment, created by a given brand during sports events (e.g., events organized by this brand) or created by athletes and teams sponsored by that brand. These contents may report an event (e.g., a racing competition) or refer to extraordinary achievement in the sponsored sports. The content can be found on various channels (websites, social media, mobile apps, TV channels, print media . . . .) and will be co-created or shared frequently by fans.*

Compared to brand love, the literature on sport-related branded entertainment is very sparse. That creates research opportunities. In particular, the impact of sport-related branded entertainment as a powerful content communication tool and its influence on brand love has not yet been researched. The main research question is: *"What is the influence of sport-related brand entertainment on brand love?"*.

2. Literature review

2.1. Brand love by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006)
Based on studies on object love (Ahuvia, 2005), Carroll and Ahuvia created a concept detached from interpersonal theories as a combination of interrelated behavioral, cognitive, and affective processes; they also stressed the integration of self-expression to explain brand love. They developed a scale to measure brand love with ten items focusing on: (1) passion, (2) attachment, (3) positive evaluations of the brand, (4) positive emotions in response to the brand, and (5) declarations of love for the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). The individual components are combined into a unidimensional construct. This approach has faced criticism because many researchers see brand love as multidimensional (Pontinha & Do Vale, 2019). In 2020, Carroll and Ahuvia extended their research on brand love by showing the connection between it and materialism. Materialistic individuals are more subject to developing a love relationship with their favorite brands (Ahuvia et al., 2020).

Despite all the criticism, the concept of Carroll & Ahuvia represents the most applied one in academic literature: Ismail and Spinelli (2012) focused on fashion brands, Wallace et al. (2014) researched the importance of Facebook likes and later (2017) tested similarities between the self-image for Facebook likes and the brand image. Vernuccio et al. (2015) elaborated on antecedents of brand love in online network-based communities. Algharabat (2017) explored the link between social media marketing (SMM) activities and brand love taking the mediating role of self-expressive brands into account. In contrast, Hegner et al. (2017) applied the theory of planned behavior to the context of brand love and applied the research in the context of the fashion industry. Huang (2017) examined the mediating role of brand trust and brand love on brand loyalty and the brand experience relationship. Coelho et al. (2019) further underlined the impact of brand love on WoM, brand loyalty, and brand advocacy. Junaid et al. (2019) investigated generation-M (Muslim) and researched the role of brand love as a mediator between consumption engagement and customer experience. Wu and

Chang (2019) examined the relationship between brand supportive intentions and their seven drivers. Fernandes and Inverneiro (2020) developed a holistic model to understand how Millennials interact with their loved self-expressive brands on social media platforms. Harrigan et al. (2020) explored the role of value cocreation on brand evangelism (brand advocacy and brand defense) on social media.

The studies mentioned above focus on the most important applications to underline the importance of this model; this list could be extended, not all studies using the brand love scale from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) are discussed here. Nevertheless, the focus lies on recent studies.

2.2. Brand love according to Bagozzi et al. (2017), (2012)

Batra et al. (2012) designed a multidimensional model of brand love, which is cited often in academic literature. Their concept is based on a higher model order of seven elements (1) passion-driven behavior, (2) self-brand integration, (3) positive emotional connection, (4) long-term relationship, (5) anticipated separation distress, (6) positive overall attitude valence, and (7) attitude strength (Batra et al., 2012). To specify further, the components 1, 2, and 3 offer subcomponents. Brand love is created when these individual dimensions are summarized; consumers interact with the brand and when they are interested in a long-term relationship. This is reinforced by the opportunity to express their own self (Kühn, 2018).

Later, Bagozzi et al. (2017) developed a measurement scale to make the model more quantifiable and applicable for branding issues with a scale of twenty-six items. A range of thirteen and six items was designed for short questionnaires to analyze sub-dimensions or new phenomena like brand hate (Bagozzi et al., 2017). Nevertheless, their approach was not as much applied as the brand love scale originated by (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Further applications of the model of Batra et al. (2012) can be found at Daniels et al. (2020): the authors focused on the intensity of brand love rather than its absence or presence.

2.3. Recent developments of brand love

Researchers examined consumer-brand relationships in industries (Khan et al., 2020; Pan & Ha, 2021; Shen et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020) or further explored additional factors leading to brand love (Handique & Sarkar, 2021; Joshi & Garg, 2021; Safeer et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2021). Joshi and Garg (2021) underlined the importance of brand engagement: it has a mediating role between loyalty intentions and brand love. The positive mental image of brands and brand engagement can encourage brand love (Borges et al., 2016; Verma, 2021). However, identification with brand values can be triggered with storytelling and advertising: these elements do not serve as brand love antecedents but reinforce brand-self-identification (Dias & Cavalheiro, 2022).

Ahuvia et al. (2022) explored that the link between social relationships with other consumers and brand love is mediated by the degree to which consumers perceive they belong to a community. Brands can gain meaning for consumers by fostering interpersonal relationships and helping consumers define their identities.

3. Conceptual development

3.1. Sport-related brand entertainment (SRBE) and brand love

Various brands and companies use SRBE; sports companies and brand sponsors can gain consumer attention and engagement if they use it (Kunz et al., 2016). The Red Bull brand is one of the most visible examples. So far, the connection between SRBE and brand love has not been investigated. For this reason the main research question is: "What is the impact of sports-related branded entertainment on brand love?". To fully answer this question, the following hypothesis was tested:

H1: Sports-related branded entertainment is positively associated with brand love.

3.2. Sport-related branded entertainment and self-expressiveness of brands

When discussing brand love and relationships between consumers and brands, it is important to think about how a brand can reflect the consumer's personality (Ahuvia, 2005). Fournier (1998) argued that there was a self-relationship between the brand and the consumer through issues, concerns, personality traits, and shared values. This self-connection shows that consumers recognise how they can identify and relate to a brand (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2016). Self-image congruence is the term used to describe the match between brand personality or brand image and the consumer (Kressmann et al., 2006). A self-expressive brand (inner) can act as a mediator between social media marketing activities and brand love, this relationship is only partly mediated by a self-expressive brand (social; Algharabat, 2017). Brands can serve as a reference for self-expression and purpose and become an extension of one's personality (Wallace et al., 2014). Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) define brand self-presentation: *"The customer's perception of the extent to which the specific brand enhances their social-self and/or reflects their inner self"*. In this study the following two sub-hypotheses are related to the connection between SRBE and Brand Expression, based on the definition and findings of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006):

H2a: Sport-related brand entertainment is positively associated with the inner self.

H2b: Sport-related brand entertainment is positively associated with the social self.

3.3. Brand love and brand loyalty

Loyalty describes the desire to maintain a long-term relationship (Thomson et al., 2005). Various bases of brand loyalty can be found in the literature. According to Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), it is a combination of underlying behavioral, cognitive, and affective processes. Brand loyalty begins with cognitive processes associated with the brand, brand trust and brand affect are important determinants of brand loyalty. Based on the assumption that the brand represents a subjective value for the consumer, they see loyalty as a commitment together with the determination and desire to continue the relationship with a brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). However, authors such as Albert et al. (2008) argue that brand loyalty is only partially clarified by brand loyalty, and this loyalty is influenced by brand love. (Sarkar, 2014) states that willingness to repurchase is determined by the relationship with passion and that romantic brand love shapes behavioral brand loyalty.

The link between passion, commitment, and brand loyalty shows a possible relationship between brand loyalty and brand love (Fetscherin, 2014). Brand loyalty may result from brand love (Albert et al., 2009; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Thomson et al., 2005) and it is proven that brand love is a major force in developing customers' behavioral loyalty (Huang, 2017).

The third hypothesis is based on these assumptions:

H3: Brand love is positively associated with brand loyalty.

3.4. Brand love and positive WoM

Brand love stimulates various forms of brand engagement (Wallace et al., 2014), with positive WoM being a common outcome that can be defined as: *"informal communication between private parties about the evaluation of goods and services"* (Anderson, 1998). To engage consumers and improve the consumer-brand relationship, marketers should be aware of the factors for positive WoM (Sarkar, 2014). The importance of brand love for positive WoM is shown in many qualitative and quantitative studies (e.g., Albert & Merunka, 2013; Batra

et al., 2012; Fetscherin, 2014; Wallace et al., 2014). It is further argued that the origin lies in the passion component of brand love, as motivation or enthusiasm directly influences positive WoM (Fetscherin, 2014). This leads to the following hypothesis:

H4: Brand love is positively associated with word-of-mouth.

3.5. Brand love and the willingness to pay a higher price

It is important for marketers to understand this motivation. It can be described as the willingness to pay more for a service or product when comparing the benefits offered by similar brands (Netemeyer et al., 2004). Thomson et al. (2005) argued that willingness to pay a price premium is influenced by affection, passion, and the connection component of emotional attachment. Still, Albert and Merunka (2013) argued that passion has no influence, while brand loyalty is a mediator between these two constructs. That indicates the multidimensionality and different roles of the different elements of brand love concerning post-consumption behavior. Thomson et al. (2005) concluded that willingness to pay a price premium is predicted by brand love, but it cannot be the only predictor.

Uniqueness or country of origin and consumer perception may also be associated (Anselmsson et al., 2014). According to Netemeyer et al. (2004), brand loyalty is believed to be an important determinant of willingness to pay a price premium. Literature findings reveal that within the streaming TV services, industry brand love has a significant impact not only on brand loyalty but also on the willingness to pay a price premium (Santos and Schlesinger, 2021). It can be assumed that a brand with a high level of awareness for SRBE will also lead to a higher willingness to pay a price premium.

H5: Brand love is positively associated with the willingness to pay a price premium.

The factors mentioned above lead to the research construct shown in Figure 1.

4. Methodology

4.1. Questionnaire design

The survey questionnaire started by explaining the aim of the research and the importance of sport-related branded entertainment. As SRBE is overall very diverse and varied, a description was given based on the theoretical framework of Kunz et al. (2016). Then, the respondents were asked

Figure 1. Research construct.
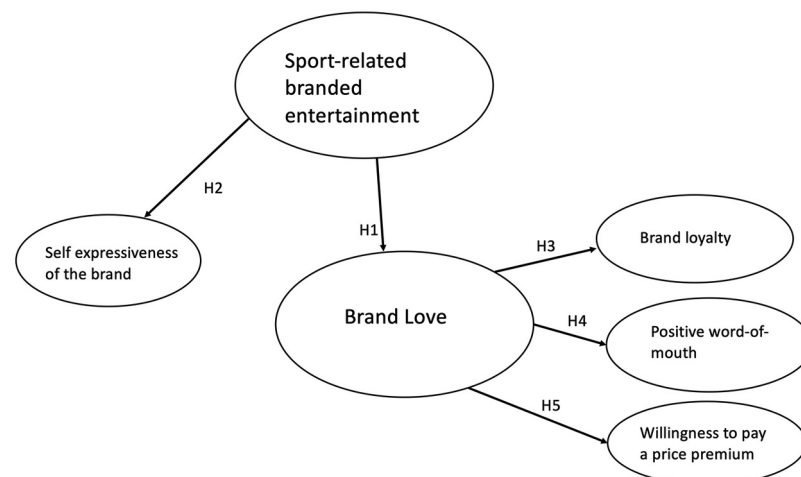
to think of a famous or well-known brand for selling SRBE. They were also informed that all upcoming questions would be related to this brand.

The first 28 questions formed the main section measuring brand love, brand self-promotion, positive WoM, brand loyalty, and willingness to pay a price premium. Within each dimension, questions were automatically shuffled to ensure random order. A 7-point Likert scale was used, and respondents were asked to agree or disagree, with "7" being the right anchor for very strongly agree and "1" being the left anchor for very strongly disagree. The next five questions were related to SRBE. The questionnaire continued with two additional questions asking respondents if they practiced some sports and consumed products of the mentioned brand, attended events, and read or watched SRBE. These five questions were also shuffled and given a 4-point Likert scale, with "1" representing "never" and "4" representing "very often". The questionnaire items were based on Carroll and Ahuvia's (2006) brand love model, the most widely used.

The brand love scale used by Baena (2016) served as a dependent variable with the following ten items (originally from Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Table 1).

The work of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) supplied the items for brand loyalty (BLY1-BLY4), word of mouth (WOM1-WOM4), self-expressiveness for inner self (IS1-IS4), and for social self (SS1-SS4); the scale for willingness to pay a price premium (WPP1-WPP3) was introduced by Netemeyer et al. (2004) (Table 2).

To measure the consumption of sport-related brand entertainment, the "active engagement" factor developed by Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen (2010) was used; the items used were also adapted by Baena (2016). In contrast to Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen's (2010) study, active engagement was used as an antecedent rather than an outcome of brand love. In addition, four questions were included, referring to the visit of events, the overall consumption of SRBE, the respondents' brand consumption, and active or passive sports participation (Table 3).

Finally, demographic questions on age and gender were asked at the end of the questionnaire.

4.2. Procedures

The quantitative study with the above questions was conducted using an online questionnaire distributed in Austria via the QuestionPro platform to a target group of adults (aged 18+) Austrian citizens who know a brand that offers SRBE. As most SRBE is provided online, using an online platform connects well to the target group. The present study is based on a (non-random) convenience sample of online contacts of the lead researcher who is based in Austria. Participants were asked to name a brand using SRBE they remember at the beginning of the questionnaire.

Table 1. Dependent variable—Brand love items (**Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006)**	
BL1	The brand is a wonderful brand.
BL2	The brand makes me feel good.
BL3	The brand is totally awesome.
BL4	I have neutral feeling about the brand.
BL5	The brand makes me very happy.
BL6	I love the brand.
BL7	I have no particular feelings about the brand.
BL8	The brand is a pure delight.
BL9	I am passionate about the brand.
BL10	I am very attached to the brand.

Table 2. Independent variables—Scales and items	
BLY1	The brand is the only brand that I will buy.
BLY2	When I go shopping for the brand, I don't even notice competing brands.
BLY3	If my store is out of the brand, I'll postpone buying or go to another store.
BLY4	I'll "do without" rather than buy another brand.
WOM1	I have recommended the brand to lots of people.
WOM2	I "talk up" this brand to my friends.
WOM3	I try to spread the good word about the brand.
WOM4	I give the brand tons of positive word-of-mouth advertising.
IS1	The brand symbolizes the kind of person I really am inside.
IS2	The brand reflects my personality.
IS3	The brand is an extension of my inner self.
IS4	The brand mirrors the real me.
SS1	The brand contributes to my image.
SS2	The brand adds to a social "role" I play.
SS3	The brand has a positive impact on what others think of me.
SS4	The brand improves the way society views me.
WPP1	The price for products of the brand would have to go up quite a bit before I would switch to another brand.
WPP2	I am willing to pay a higher price for products from the brand than for products for competing brands.
WPP3	I am willing to pay a lot more for products of the brand than other brands of the same product category.

Table 3. Independent variable—Active engagement	
AE1	To what extend do you follow news about the brand sport-related branded entertainment?
AE2	How often do you talk about sport-related branded entertainment from the brand to others?
AE3	How often do you watch/read sport-related branded entertainment from the brand?
AE4	How often do you visit an event sponsored or organized by the brand?
AE5	How often do you watch/read sport-related branded entertainment?
AE6	How often do you practice sport?
AE7	How often do you consume a product from this brand?

The questionnaire in German was then pretested with six participants to check the wording, resulting in minor adjustments. Finally, the questionnaire was inserted into the online tool to be pretested with 50 students. As a result, an additional comment explained that all the questions will refer to the brand stated at the beginning of the questionnaire was integrated.

The distribution of the questionnaire started on 31 January 2020 and was completed on 28 February 2020. A total of 372 participants completed the questionnaire. The total number of respondents required as calculated a priori was 268, easily achieved.

To create more qualitative insights, the authors personally conducted a focus group discussion. To avoid another convenience sample, a professional market research institute, well known for conducting qualitative research, was hired. The technical equipment installed in the discussion room further facilitated recording. The institute has a database with 3,000 possible participants; every participant is acquired for one focus group per year only. Before recruiting the eight participants, a screener, which is a kind of briefing, was developed. The age split was defined as follows: two persons between 18–25, 26–39, 40–54, and one in the age group 55–65, 50% male and 50% female. This demographic split should be as representative as possible within such a small group. Furthermore, all participants had to consume SRBE within the last year. The brand name was recorded during the recruitment, and at least one mention for Red Bull and Nike had to be stated. Participants working in market research, marketing, or advertising were excluded. Due to the COVID-19 situation and the room size (25 m^2), only six participants were allowed.

The questions for the focus group discussion were created after the literature review and the quantitative research. The transcript was analyzed in line with the summarizing approach by Mayring (2015). He differentiates between structuring, explication, and summarizing. The use of the summarizing technique was chosen to mirror the key content and to contain understandable deliverables. The transcript is paraphrased, generalized, and later reduced, which leads to a category system based on a deductive approach (Mayring, 2022).

5. Results

5.1. Questionnaire results

The quantitative research mirrored the dominant position of Red Bull using SRBE: 133 respondents recorded it (37.15%), followed by the brand Nike with 84 mentions (23.46%), and Adidas with 33 recordings (9.22%). A mean score of the dimensions' items was calculated for each participant and dimension, resulting in one score per dimension and participant. Table 4 shows the descriptive for these dimensions:

Cronbach's α has been checked for all final dimensions (Table 5); the highest value is related to brand love with 0.942, the lowest value to SRBE with 0.798.

A structural equation model was calculated using the R package LAVAAN (Figure 2); a maximum likelihood estimation using the Wishart approach was chosen to keep the output comparable to other software packages as QS, LISREL, or AMOS. The "self-expressiveness" scale was removed to create a stable model. Three hundred thirty-two observations could be included in the analysis. The model test (without self-expressiveness) resulted in a Chi-square of 488.97 with 245 degrees of freedom. The Chi-square is below 2*df, so the model can be considered a good fit. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.955) and the Rucker-Lewis Index (TLI = 0.949), as well as the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.055), produced good to acceptable results.

Table 4. Descriptive							
	BL	**BLY**	**WOM**	**IS**	**SS**	**WPP**	**AE**
N	360	371	366	370	350	349	351
Missing	12	1	6	2	22	23	21
Mean	3.38	2.61	2.73	2.05	2.44	3.17	2.05
Median	3.38	2.25	2.50	1.50	2.00	3.00	2.00
Standard deviation	1.48	1.56	1.46	1.36	1.51	1.82	0.60

Table 5. Cronbach's alpha		
Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Brand Love (BL)	8	0.942
Brand Loyalty (BLY)	4	0.829
WOM	4	0.877

Self-Expressive Brand
  Inner Self (IS)
  Social Self (SS)
	2 × 4
	4
	4
		
		0.938
		0.927

Pay a Price Premium (WPP)	3	0.908
Active Engagement (AE)	3 + 2	0.798

Source: Questionnaire survey, January-February 2020, *n* = 352

Figure 2. SEM results.
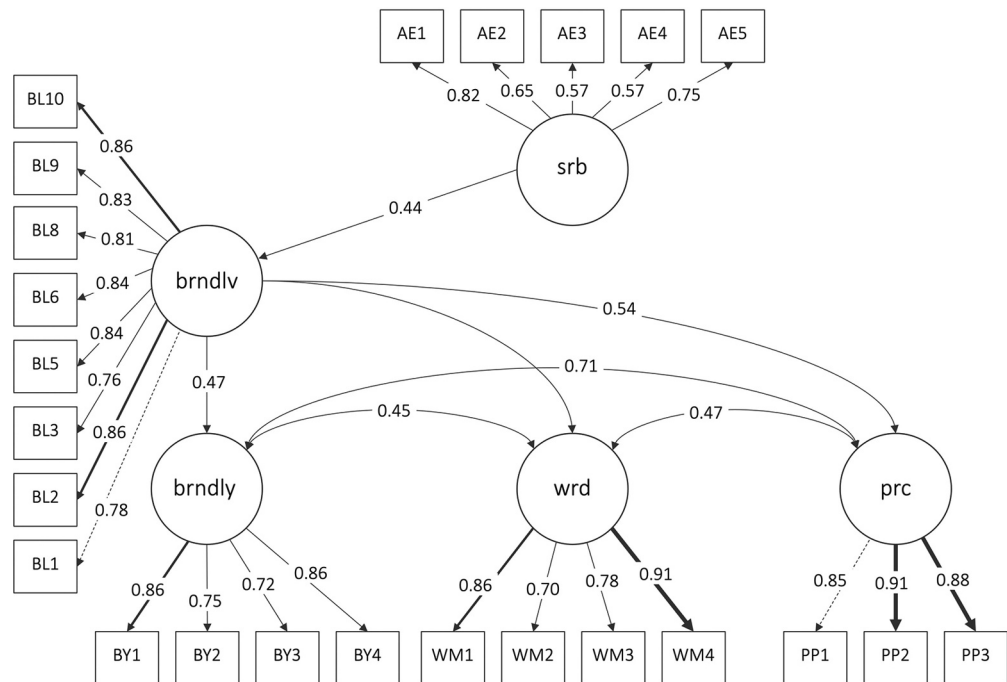
Evaluation of the Hypotheses

H1: Sports-related branded entertainment is positively associated with brand love.

A significant correlation (*r* = .44**) has been found between Sports-related branded entertainment (srb) and brand love (brndlv).

H2: Sport-related branded entertainment is positively associated with the self-expressiveness of the brand.

As self-expressiveness could not be fit in the current structural equation model, regressions between the factor scores have been calculated. This hypothesis was divided into two sub-hypotheses, as the work from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) suggests. The authors measured brands' self-expressiveness with two dimensions, the inner-self and the social-self.

H2a: Sport-related branded entertainment is positively associated with inner the self.

A significant ($r = .51^{**}$) correlation was found between Sport-related branded entertainment and the subdimension the inner-self.

H2b: Sport-related branded entertainment is positively associated with social self.

A significant ($r = .40^{**}$) correlation was found between Sport-related branded entertainment and the subdimension social-self.

H3: Brand love is positively associated with brand loyality.

The results show a significant correlation ($r = .47^{**}$) between brand love (brndlv) and brand loyalty (brndly).

H4: Brand love is positively associated with word-of-mouth.

The results show a significant correlation ($r = .78^{**}$) between brand love (brndlv) and positive word-of-mouth (wrd).

H5: Brand love is positively associated with the willingness to pay a price premium.

The results show a significant correlation ($r = .54^{**}$) between brand love (brndlv) and willingness to pay a price premium (prc).

Therefore, all hypotheses can be accepted.

5.2. Explorative subgroups' results

The subgroups were defined as follows: "Red Bull" vs. respondents who recorded "Other brands", a "Sporty", and a "Less sporty" subgroup, "Females" vs. "Males", and finally "Younger" vs. "Older" (25+ years old).

The following differences have been found:

"Other brands" subgroup shows a higher value for brand love than the "Red Bull" respondents. That leads to the assumption that brands who manage to be recognized with SRBE, aside from Red Bull (which has a dominant position), will be rewarded with a higher amount of brand love. Furthermore, the subgroup "Sporty" show higher means for SRBE, brand love, and inner self. The difference in gender reveals that men consider the topic of SRBE more serious or important: their mean values are higher, likewise with the dimensions WoM, social- and inner-self. Finally, the Youth subgroup (up to 25 years old) seems to be more attached to SRBE, showing higher mean values for brand love, SRBE, and WoM.

5.3. Focus group results

Concerning brands mentioned for using SRBE, the respondents were asked specifically about SRBE content they remember. Red Bull was mentioned most often, but the respondents had different associations: Red Bull Airs Race, mountain bike races, downhill racing, and dangerous sports were mentioned. Other brands mentioned in the introduction round were KTM, an Austrian-based motorbike producer, and Nike. Furthermore, Monster (energy drink) was associated with dangerous

motorbike jumps during their events. Also, short videos were produced by Verival (Austrian organic Muesli producer) about team sports, the influencer Pamela Reif with her fitness videos wearing Puma dresses and shoes all the time, and an Austrian bank supporting the women's run were mentioned. The brands discussed later were Red Bull, hohes C (Fruit Juice), Verival, KTM, Puma, and Monster.

The brands are partly known since childhood. Red Bull releases enthusiasm, KTM evokes trust and safety feelings, hohes C is a likable and friendly brand, and Verival serves as a symbol for a healthy, young, and sporty lifestyle. Monster was described as distant but colorful. Only the brand Puma evoked negative feelings because the respondent wanted to wear Puma shoes when being a child. Unfortunately, the family could not afford the expensive shoes at the time. The respondent, though able to purchase it, currently refuses to do so because the brand is perceived as not sustainable. Three respondents mentioned pleasant memories from childhood, which goes in line with the model of Albert et al. (2009).

The Red Bull respondent mentioned that he would buy Tonic water in case Red Bull is not available before purchasing a competitor's product, and the brand triggers emotions of action, excitement, and a kick. Concerning WoM, the respondents need to fit the audience (= their friends) with the content before sharing it; otherwise, they would not talk about it. A fit in personality traits for the brand Red Bull could be detected; the respondent perceives people were wearing a Red Bull T-shirt as likable and sporty. In order to share a story, the content should be informative (how to become a fitter and healthier person, what the brand KTM provides for the next launch ...), or really funny entertainment (like the Red Bull flight day). Furthermore, the respondents will buy a product when they perceive the value, regardless of the price; this is precisely the case for Red Bull. Also, the other mentioned brands were not perceived as price-sensitive; on the contrary, if a branded product was perceived as too cheap, it would raise suspicion.

6. Discussion

The authors have chosen the model of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) to measure brand love. However, the brand love model from Albert et al. (2009) could have been applied because other dimensions like passion, trust, and duration of the relationship were detected in the answers as well. Also, passion-driven behavior, positive emotional connection, a long-term relationship, and self-brand integration could be found in the answers, which is in line with the findings of Batra et al. (2012). Strong loyalty bonds were found towards the brand Red Bull. This research underlines the multidimensionality and complexity of brand love, which is in line with academic literature.

All stated alternative hypotheses are accepted. A closer look at the frequency plots shows that some respondents have chosen "1 = not at all" for several answers. That indicates not every consumer may come close to a "love relationship"—marketing professionals should consider this fact.

The quantitative research was conducted in February 2020, meaning that the COVID-19 pandemic impact is not reflected. Consequences on branding and consumer behavior are varied. Brands should be strongly committed to social responsibility. Although sustainability is a long-lasting trend, it has become an additional twist. To be trusted, brands should rebuild a more equitable and greener world and a more resilient place (Westbrook & Angus, 2021). Consumers expect brands to behave authentically and have a purpose, visible in the whole company, in every product, and in every piece of communication (Accenture International, 2020). The consumption pattern changed, consumers are spending their money more carefully because of economic uncertainty, and companies taking more care about the well-being of their employees are rewarded by consumers (Arora et al., 2020). Products produced locally will be further valued, and companies must understand the needs of the consumers quite well to

remain successful in their business (Monitor Deloitte, 2020). This study could be repeated in the future to account for the pandemic impact on the importance of SRBE.

7. Conclusions

7.1. Theoretical contribution
The positive impact of brand love on brand loyalty, WoM, and the willingness to pay a price premium was further acknowledged, according to literature findings. The results highlight the importance of brand love and its contribution to increasing brand equity. The positive impact of SRBE on brand love was proven for the first time, and the positive association of self-expressiveness (split into inner and social self) with SRBE was confirmed. The conclusion is that SRBE is an important marketing communication tool. The explorative subgroup results revealed a target group responding strongly to SRBE: young (up to 25 years) and sporty male adults. The focus group results indicated that the ideal content (which would be shared with friends) should be funny or convey helpful information on how to become fitter and healthier or how to optimize, for example, marathon training. Helpful physical exercises would be interesting as well. Extreme sport is not interesting enough to be shared, according to this focus group.

The research gap is filled with the adopted mixed-method exploratory approach, and the quantitative analysis shows that all hypotheses stated can be accepted.

The quantitative research constructs partly followed the approach of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and could significantly prove the positive association of SRBE on brand love and self-expressiveness. Also, the output of brand love was confirmed, in line with literature findings. The qualitative research further indicated that dimensions of other brand love constructs were visible as well: pleasure, duration of the relationship, trust, and memory, which were defined by Albert et al. (2008).

7.2. Hypotheses for future research
Taking the explorative results of the different subgroups into account, the following hypotheses can be developed to be tested with conclusive research in future studies:

- Young consumers (25+ years) show significantly higher mean values for the dimensions SRBE, brand love, and WoM.
- Females show significantly lower mean values in the dimensions SRBE, Inner self, Social self, and WoM.

People personally more active in sports show significantly higher mean scores for brand love, SRBE, and Inner self. *Limitations*

This research offers several limitations: respondents were intentionally Austrians; the results cannot be transferred into other cultural contexts without additional research. The dominant role of Red Bull (close to 40% nominations in the quantitative study) could be explained by a country-of-origin effect: the founder, Dietrich Mateschitz, is an Austrian citizen, and the Red Bull headquarter is still located in Austria. Moreover, the sample for the quantitative study was based on a convenience sample due to time and budget restrictions. All results show significant results, but they are not representative of the adult Austrian population. The focus group discussion was organized with the help of a market research institute: the authors tried to ensure an equal distribution of age and gender, but only six participants were allowed due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Additional focus groups would increase qualitative insights.

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