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Research Article

Individual's Perceived Value And Materialism As Drivers To Self-Brand Integration And Brand Love For Smartphones In India

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ARTICLE INFO **ABSTRACT**

Smartphones as a high involvement product has been gaining popularity in Indian markets since last decade. The smartphone market in India has been ever evolving and expanding with multiple brands rolling out their products in quick succession and upgrading the same over and over again. Smartphones have slowly taken the position of luxury items and consumers tend to put a lot of mental and physical effort in choosing a brand of smartphone. This makes the market a very busy and very competitive place. It is very difficult for the brands to stay on top of the minds of the consumers consistently and generate a positive sale. Hence it becomes necessary for the brands to have very strong association with the prospective consumers so as to create a long transactional journey with the consumers and also to bring new consumers on board. Brand Love and Self-Brand integration concepts which have been gaining popularity since a decade now and they have been very instrumental in bringing about a positive consumer relationship for certain product categories. The idea behind this research is to understand whether the consumers in Indian markets tend to relate brands with their self-identity and does the self-identity have a synergy in creating brand love or not. This research is a small attempt to uncover the probable latency in relationship between perceived value of a smart phone, its self-brand integration with the consumers and ultimately brand love. This study is made on 273 respondents from 4 major cities of Gujarat State of India and method of Regression analysis and Path coefficient is used to validate perceived value and consumer materialism as drivers to creating brand love.

Keywords: High involvement product, consumer relationship, self-identity, regression analysis

1. Introduction:

By the end of the decade, India's economy is expected to rank third in the world thanks to rising levels of digitization and a growing middle class. In the next ten years, the nation of over a billion people is poised to become the smartphone market with the fastest rate of growth in the world thanks to the same factors.

According to Erik Woodring, U.S. hardware analyst for Morgan Stanley, "India's smartphone market now looks set to reach its potential after 20 years of lagging behind its global peers." "By 2032, we project the market to triple from its current size to reach $90 billion." India has been the world's fastest-growing population, but investors had long expected the country to offer substantial chances for smartphone usage growth.
The smartphone market in India has reached to an exorbitant number of 160.70 million in terms of shipment in the year 2021. With 555% of unbelievable growth year on year, this probably is an industry that is growing in an unprecedented manner (Market Research, 2022a). India's smartphone industry was estimated to be worth US$ 139 billion in 2021; by 2028, it is projected to have grown to US$ 281 billion at a compound annual growth rate of 10.5%. The causes to this humongous growth of the industry (Market Research, 2022b), is primarily because of factors like growing purchasing power of the middle class of the economy, rapid

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development of telecom sector, increase in the number of affordable smartphones and increase in the number of product launches and latent variants.

As report of Morgan Stanley (2023), people would be willing to pay up to 20% more for their next smartphone, and those in the 18 to 25 age group would contemplate paying up to 30% more. Indian consumers are becoming more and more prepared to shell out more money to get access to technology like greater storage capacity, 5G compatibility, longer battery life, and higher-quality cameras. The same survey also demonstrated that three-quarters of Indian smartphone users stated they plan to purchase a new gadget within the next year, with some even saying they will buy it before a car, refrigerator, or personal computer.

These tastes are driving a trend toward more expensive gadgets from non-Indian suppliers. Compared to roughly 10% over the previous five years, handsets costing more than $250 will account for 80% of the increase in India's smartphone market during the next ten years. Supply-chain firms with production facilities in India that assemble or manufacture parts for these highly sought-after phones should gain as well as the vendors.

This scenario leaves a picture for the marketer in this industry that the market is a very busy place and sooner, marketers will have to identify micro niches in order to position their brands in such a way that they do not go unnoticed. It also becomes important for the marketer to understand the reasons why a few brands in India is doing way better in terms of being crowd favored or being able to communicate their value propositions in a better manner than the others.

The current research is a small attempt by the researchers to understand factors that may lead to a strong brand love and self-brand integration which in turn may result into a strong purchase intention.

2. Literature Review and hypothesis development

2.1. Perceived value

The customer's assessment of the utility they will obtain from the goods is linked to perceived value. There are various kinds of utility. These utilities can be Form utility, time utility, place utility, task utility etc. However, this could be a very narrow meaning of perceived value. A wider meaning with the context of consumer expectation can be considered in order to give meaning to perceived value. According to that context, a consumer's perspective or opinion regarding a good or service is known as perceived value, and it is frequently impacted by how well the goods and services fulfilled the demands and expectations of the consumer.

The term "perceived value" became the key commercial concern of the 1990s, and it has attracted a lot of study interest even in the current century. Zeithaml (1998) defines value as consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given. The price that the general public is willing to pay for a commodity or service is what determines perceived value. Even a rash choice made in the middle of a store aisle requires consideration of a product's suitability for a given purpose and degree of satisfaction in relation to similar products sold under different brands.

Enhancing the perceived value of the brand they are selling is the responsibility of the marketing specialist. Consideration is given to perceived value in product pricing. In certain instances, a product or service's pricing may reflect its emotional appeal more so than its true cost of manufacture. In general, perceived value is the product of perceived quality of an offering in the minds of the consumers. This could be a generic quality or just a perception of quality in the consumer's mind. It is a sensitive and subjective evaluation that a consumer does about a product offering as per his values, beliefs, past experiences.

The research undertaken by Grewal et al. (1998), Parasuraman and Grewal (2000), Sweeney and Soutar (2001), Mathwick et al. (2002) and Gallarza and Saura (2006), lays down the factors that contribute the most to assessment of perceived value for high involvement products and those are "Aesthetic Value", "Social Interaction Value" and "Acquisition value".

2.2. Brand love

Brand Love has been a concept of research by many researchers. Largely it means the relationship of a consumer with a brand. The consistent favourable attitude towards a brand by the consumer, sometimes even without using it, may be generalized as brand love. However, this cannot be called as a final definition because a limited empirical study has been done on this concept by a few researchers. The concept of brand love has its roots in anti-morphism affections which means finding human like characteristics in a non-human thing and admiring it. The tendency of a consumer to admire, affectionally associating him/herself to a particular brand is a common yet very confusing phenomenon that needs wider and deeper researches.

Numerous organizational advantages have been linked to brand love (Rossiter, 2012). Positive word-of-mouth and brand loyalty are the two most often mentioned beneficial brand outcomes. The term "brand loyalty" describes a consumer's dedication to a particular brand that embodies "an enduring desire to maintain a

valued relationship. Research has shown that the relationship between brand love and brand loyalty is frequently mediated by improved consumer attitudes, which lead to loyalty and increased readiness to pay a premium price (Park et al., 2006). Additionally, loyal consumers can participate in positive word-of-mouth marketing (Batra) and develop into committed brand ambassadors and spokespersons.

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) began empirical research examining in-depth customers' capacity to fall in love with goods and consumption behaviors. Ahuvia discovered that many consumers do, in fact, have strong emotional attachments to some "love objects" by using an interpretive paradigm, which he liberally interpreted as everything that is not another person (such as engaging in musical activity, spending time with a pet, using a computer, gazing at art, reading, the ocean, an ancient car that served as a "traveling companion," and so on). Ahuvia (2005) also examined the degree to which consumers' statements of object love and their mental models of interpersonal love—also known as the love prototype—fit together, but significant discrepancies were identified. According to Ahuvia's research, love in consumer contexts and interpersonal relationships have many essential characteristics.

2.3. Consumer materialism and self-brand integration

Consumer materialism can be understood as the tendency of consumer to feel important, worth and significant by the materialistic items that he/she possess. Factors like culture, the importance in the media on buying, owning materialistic goods can be considered as indicators of Consumer Materialism (Ahuvia & Wong 2002). Consumer Materialism is an important construct that could define as to why do consumers form favourable attitude towards a brand or a product or an offering.

In order to get consumers to think about brands in terms of people, marketers infect brands with human interface (also known as brand personification), a phenomenon known as anthropomorphism. This study is to investigate the effects of anthropomorphism on brand-consumer relationships under the likely moderating influence of self-brand integration and brand attitude. It is based on the literature concentrating on brand-consumer relationships and the prevalent theory of anthropomorphism. According to literature, anthropomorphism influences brand love, which is a psychosomatic explanation of the relationship between a brand and a consumer. Self-brand integration and brand attitude will be examined since they are likely to have an impact on how anthropomorphism affects the interaction between brands and consumers. (Baksi & Panda, 2018).

The theory of self-expansion suggests that people often try to widen their own sense of self, concreting their identity and experiencing more satisfaction from their respective life.

This can occur through intimate connections that stem from a variety of possible sources, not just from people or the ownership of tangible items; in fact, expensive & technological advanced, high involvement product brands can function as resources (Aron & Aron, 1986). According to studies, materialism is seen to be a predictor of how much a brand gets incorporated into a consumer's self-concept (Rindfliesch et al., 2009). Therefore, those who are more materialistic can view the usage of luxury brands as a more pertinent resource. This kind of customer would incorporate the brand's features and overall features, that is, aesthetics, price, technological advancement into his/her identity and will use it to create a self-integration.

As the different concepts researched points out variety of factors that can affect or create Brand Love for the consumers, the researchers at this juncture, wanted to uncover whether there are latent relationships and impacts among these factors which ultimately lead to brand love. The researchers proposed a theoretical model which required testing to validate.

The researchers needed to understand that does, consumer materialism leads to brand love as mentioned in the previous studies given the Indian context or not. Consumer Materialism being a very wide term, it was important for the researchers to finalize on the indicators of the construct and hence quoting the studies made by Lewis and Moital (2016), “Purchasing & using expensive smart phones” and “Purchasing & using technologically advanced smart phones” were finalized as indicators.

Based on the constructs and indicators, the following hypothesis were framed.

H1a: The higher the consumer materialism resulting from using expensive smart phones, the higher is consumer’s brand love.

H1b: The higher the consumer materialism resulting from using technologically advanced smart phones, the higher is the consumer’s brand love.

The above hypothesis are framed to test and validate the impact of materialism resulting out of using premium-priced expensive smartphones on brand love. This would help the researcher to understand the covert aspect of consumers belonging to the upper middle-class segment in Gujarat with respect to their favorable and unfavorable attitude towards certain brands of smartphones.

Next, as Materialism also being, a key driver for self-brand integration, it was important for the researchers to understand the relationships and impacts of materialism over self-brand integration too and hence the following hypothesis were framed.

H2a: The higher the consumer materialism resulting from using expensive smart phones, the higher the consumer's cohesion with self-brand integration.
H2b: The higher the consumer materialism resulting from using technologically advanced smart phones, the higher the consumer's cohesion with self-brand integration
The researchers needed to understand that whether "perceived value" of a brand lead to creation of a Self-Brand Integration in the minds of consumers or not; as well as to understand the absence or presence of direct impact of perceived value over brand love. Hence hypothesis was framed as:

H3a: The higher the perceived value of a smart phone brand, the higher the self-brand integration with an individual.
H3b: The higher the perceived value of a smart phone brand, the higher the brand love for that brand with an individual.
Finally, the researchers wanted to uncover the latent probable relationship and impact of self-brand integration over brand love and hence the following hypothesis were framed:

H4: Consumer's cohesion with self-brand integration has a positive impact on his/her brand love.
As per the hypothesis framed, Figure 1 shows the proposed conceptual model.

3. Research methodology

The research was conducted in the state of Gujarat, India using primary data collected through structured questionnaire. The research was focusing on Individuals from an age group of 25 to 40. The reasoning behind taking this age group was that the researchers wanted to understand the research phenomenon on individuals who are earning their livelihood by themselves and have been doing so at least since last 5 years of their respective life. The data was collected from 4 major cities of Gujarat, that are, Ahmedabad, Rajkot, Vadodara and Surat.
A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed through a data collection agency UKIC, Ahmedabad. The data was collected using Non-Probability Convenient Sampling Method. After clearing the data and removing errored data, biased data, a total of 273 responses were recorded.
As the data was to be collected through structured questionnaire, it was necessary to finalize the constructs and indicators for the same. Table 1 mentions the same.

Table1: (Constructs & Indicators)

Constructs	Indicators	References
Perceived value	Aesthetic value	Mathwick et al. (2002) and Gallarza and Saura (2006)
	Social interaction value	Gallarza and Saura (2006) and Sweeney and Soutar (2001)
	Acquisition value	Grewal et al. (1998) and Parasuraman and Grewal (2000)
Self-brand integration	Brand and personality cohesion	Batra et al., 2012; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Albert et al., 2008
	Brand and emotions cohesion	
	Brand and self-identity cohesion	
Materialism (expensive factor)	Expensiveness and success integration	Lewis and Moital, 2016
	Expensiveness and admiration integration	
Materialism (technological advancement)	Advancement and success integration	Lewis and Moital, 2016
	Advancement and admiration integration	
Brand love	Brand and excitement	Caroll and Ahuvia, 2006
	Brand and goodness	
	Brand and happiness	
	Brand and attachment	

4. Results

The proposed model was tested in terms of intensity and importance of path coefficients and their ratio of variance as depicted by R^2 through the dependent variables.
4.1. Data reliability
Cronbach's alpha is a measure of internal consistency, that is, how closely related a set of items are as a group. It is considered to be a measure of scale reliability (Lee Cronbach, 1951). A "high" value for alpha does not imply that the measure is unidimensional. If, in addition to measuring internal consistency, you wish to provide evidence that the scale in question is unidimensional, additional analyses can be performed. Exploratory factor analysis is one method of checking dimensionality. Technically speaking, Cronbach's alpha is not a statistical test – it is a coefficient of reliability (or consistency). Cronbach's alpha can be written as a function of the number of test items and the average inter-correlation among the items.

The collected data in this research was assembled and Cronbach's Alpha Test was used to see the overall internal consistency & reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha amounted to 0.83 which indicates excellent reliability of the data.

5.2. Mean and standard deviation

The structured questionnaire yielded data on which the researcher has calculated the means and standard deviation of each construct whether formative or reflective. This is done so as to get the standardized values of the responses of each section. The standardized values so calculated, are essential to understand the regression coefficient which was used later in the research. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of all constructs.

Table 2 (Means & Standard Deviations)

	Perceived value	Self-brand integration	Materialism (expensive factor)	Materialism (technological advancement)	Brand love
Means	327.60	273.00	218.40	218.40	273.00
Standard deviations	150.97	183.77	118.72	152.62	188.90

5.3. Standardized values of constructs

The standardization is needed to put different variables on the same scale. Table 3 indicates the standardized values of different constructs and its responses received through the structured questionnaire.

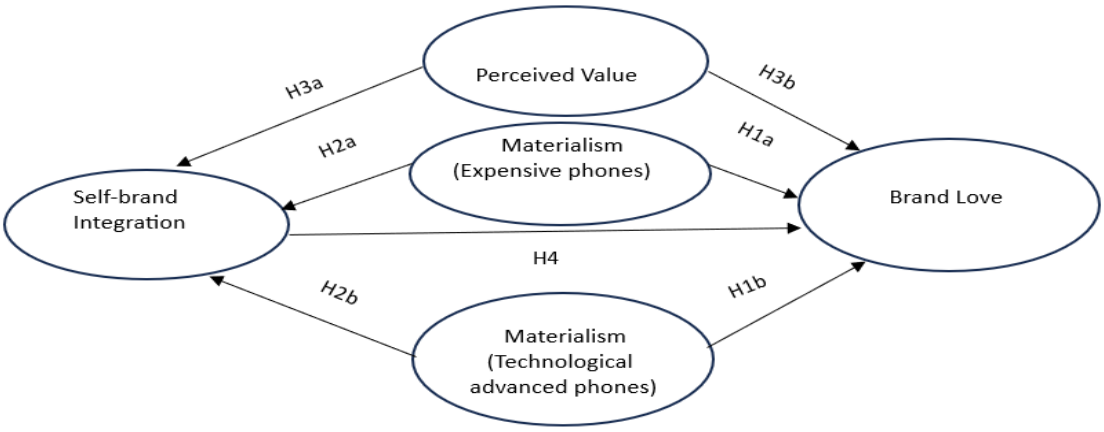
Table 3 (Standardized Values of constructs)

Perceived value	Self-brand integration	Materialism (expensive factor)	Materialism (technological advancement)	Brand love
1.43337035	1.310699834	0.999838145	1.251553577	1.291665377
0.631901716	0.636818171	0.875349778	0.84343828	0.804644005
-0.851808812	-0.929956694	-1.10336005	-1.10463207	-1.021686138
-0.812066566	-0.011792929	0.213595829	-0.418998371	-0.359972318
-0.401396688	-1.005768381	-0.985423702	-0.571361415	-0.714650926

5.4. Theoretical model validation

As per the hypothesis testing and receiving data on the relevant R2, significance values and path coefficients, Figure 2 shows the theoretical validation of the model. Table 4 outlines the proposed hypothesis results.

Figure 2 (Theoretical Model)



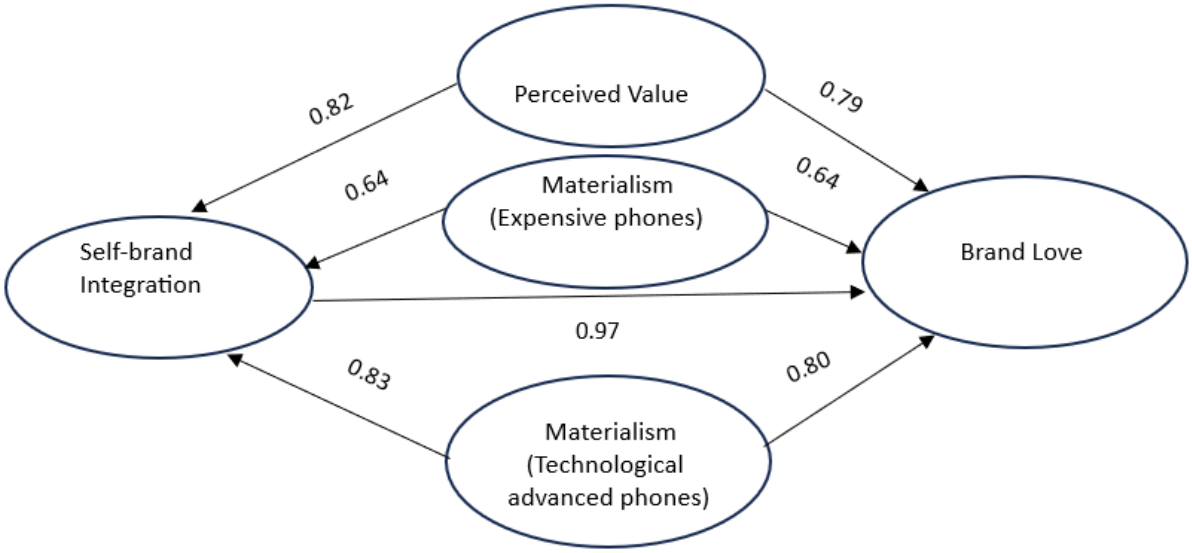
The proposed theoretical model was tested using the established hypothesis and following results were obtained. Table 4 depicts the same.

Table 4 (Hypothesis Testing)

Hypothesis	Relationship	R^2	p-value	Standard path coefficients	Hypothesis status
H1a	Materialism (expensive) → Brand love	0.94	0.006	0.64	Rejected
H1b	Materialism (technological advancement) → Brand love	0.87	0.018	0.8	Rejected
H2a	Materialism (expensive) → Self-brand integration	0.89	0.014	0.64	Rejected
H2b	Materialism (technological advancement) → Self-brand integration	0.84	0.026	0.83	Rejected
H3a	Perceived value → Self-brand integration	0.92	0.009	0.82	Rejected
H3b	Perceived value → Brand love	0.9	0.012	0.79	Rejected
H4	Self-brand integration → Brand love	0.99	0.003	0.97	Rejected

On the basis of the above hypothesis results, the proposed theoretical model was then validated as under. Figure 3 depicts the same.

Figure 3 (Validated Model)



5. Discussion

It was observed that "materialism" as to purchasing expensive brand has a very strong impact on brand love. This is understood by an R^2 of 0.94, and path co-efficient of 0.62. The statistical implication can be said as materialism as to buying expensive phones does impact the subsequent brand love of consumer towards that particular phone. This could be further understood by the common phenomenon of the Indian society in today's context. The middle-class segment in India has a wider disposable income as compared to few years back and a number of consumers have even rose from being middle class to being upper middle class. These are the consumers who prefer expensive brands in smart phones to exhibit their status or to nurture their self-esteem. The same self-esteem is then reflected in those consumers' self-brand integration also. These are the segments of consumers who have a high tendency of relating their self-image with the brand image which in turn, again, rhymes with their need of self-esteem and wider self-recognition in the society.

It was also observed that "materialism" as to purchasing technologically advanced smart phones also have a strong positive impact on brand love. This is explained by an R^2 of 0.87 and a path co-efficient of 0.80. Statistically it can be said that consumer materialism exhibited through buying a technologically advanced phone leads to a stronger brand love. Theoretically it can be understood that consumers who tend to buy a technologically advanced phone largely buy it to exhibit to their society or reference group that they fall ahead of the rest. Due to rapid and unprecedented growth in the economy of India, the entire middle and upper middle-class segment has seen an upward shift in their disposable income. Middle aged adults, whose childhood and early teens could have gone in scarcity or crisis are suddenly seeing a large part of their income as disposable which they do not mind in spending on items like a technologically advanced phone which gives them the feeling of satisfaction.

It was also observed that "materialism" as to purchasing technologically advanced smart phones also have a strong positive impact on self-brand integration as well as brand love. This can be explained by the recent busyness in the market of smart phones in India. There is a wide range of players competing in the market. However, most of the competition is in the budget segment. Hence, an upper middle-class individual in this market might prefer a slightly technologically advanced phone coupled with it being expensive to demonstrate to the rest of the society that he/she is uber and upscaled. The above notion, coupled with an increased disposable income would justify the statistical results.

A significant find was observed that perceived value of the brand affects positively to the self-brand integration too. With an R2 of 0.92 and path co-efficient of 0.82, it can be statistically implied that there is a large impact of perceived value of a smart phone brand over consumer's self-brand integration. The effect that brand creates on the consumers in terms of their willingness to buy is defined as Brand Resonance and this can be further categorized as the phenomenon of anti-morphism. When a brand gets features like a living being or when consumers start attaching their features according to a brand is called anti-morphism. It can be observed in the Indian society that often consumers buy brands which either reflect their own characteristics or consumers want to buy a brand to demonstrate to the society that their own features are same as the brand's attributes. Consumers make a very strong perceived value of the brands, especially the brands of products like smart phones which are considered as high involvement product and then integrate those value in cohesion with their own self-brand integration which in turn converts into a special emotional admiration for the brand which is brand love.

Similarly, if we see the calculations of impact of perceived value on Brand love, then the R^2 is 0.90 and path co-efficient is 0.70 which again leads to statistically imply that there is a strong positive impact of perceived value on brand love. This again can be understood in the context of self-brand integration. The higher the consumer's self-brand integration the higher he will be inclined to have positive affection to that brand.

6. Managerial implications

This suggestion ought to be a component of a comprehensive strategy plan that aims to boost brand loyalty, and in which self-brand integration is important—though not only for everyone. Taking into account that the examined. Managers shouldn't overlook aspects associated with materialism, such as the importance of dressing stylishly and purchasing pricey items, since these also contribute to brand love and self-brand integration. It is recommended that firms use their "technologically advanced" and premium-price viewpoint into their communication strategies to further establish their brand awareness among middle and upper middle-class segments. Given that not every prospective consumer would find both attributes equally relevant, distinct activities should be taken to promote each characteristic.

The management of smart phone manufacturers in the Indian market can benefit from the research's conclusions, and brand love ought to be a top priority. It is important for the supervisors to understand that there could be a lot of prospects that acquire information of their brand, some may even purchase it but brand love is a concept that couldn't directly be related to purchases or repeat purchases, it could still be fostered through depicting cohesion between customer's self-identity with the value proposition of the brand. This is a major driver for the increment of brand equity in high involvement products. (Creevey et al., 2022)

To increase the brand love, the supervisors and managers should focus on understanding the perceived value of the brands in the minds of consumer and try to inculcate the same in the key deliverables of the brand. The value proposition of the brand should match the perceived value bracket of the consumers which would then replicate in the self-brand integration and ultimately will result into brand love. This suggestion ought to be a component of a comprehensive strategy plan that aims to boost brand loyalty, and in which self-brand integration is important—though not only so. Managers shouldn't overlook the analyzed aspects of materialism, such as the importance of consumers purchasing an expensive or technologically advanced smart phone since those elements contribute a lot to self-brand integration and brand love.

As the principle of forming consumer attitude is says, there are 3 elements of consumer attitude formation. The cognitive element, the affective element and the conative element. Here through the research, it is observed that brand love is directly impacted by the self-brand integration and self-brand integration is largely a product of materialism and perceived value. Materialism is a cognitive component that consumers have learned in the Indian context and perceived value largely is an affective component. India has considerably been an emotional market and consumers do tend to have very affectionate perceived values for different brands. For e.g., a lot of Indian consumers have nostalgic affections towards Maggie as a brand and hence tend to rate its perceived value very high. Given this explanation, it is important for the marketers of the smart phones to understand that hitting the affective component might lead to a favorable perceived value for their brands and that could lead the positive chain reaction of consumers having a favorable self-brand integration that will ultimately lead to a stronger brand love.

When applying strategy, marketing managers should be conscious of the significance of providing quality in defining consumer perceived value as well as the influence of these two aspects of their perceived quality on customer satisfaction. Technological developments can be leveraged by marketing executives to enhance the quality of customer connections and the value proposition of their company, especially in social media brand communities.

Ultimately, the goal of this study is to better understand the variables that influence brand love and purchase intent on social media. More research might look at how any previous luxury brand purchases could potentially mitigate the suggested associations, given that shopping experiences can influence consumers' intentions to make later purchases.

7. Limitations and future research directions

Owing to the limitation of resources and time, the research was made with a sample size of 273 respondents leaving a scope for further research on the same topic with larger sample size to test and validate the phenomenon. A larger sample size will definitely help to understand the large scale canvas of the defined phenomenon in this research. Conceptually too, a larger sample size might have room to accommodate emotional attributes of materialism, other than the two which is addressed in this research.

The research was conducted only in the 4 major cities of Gujarat State of India. However, smart phones being widely purchased in semi-urban and rural regions of India also, a further attempt of including middle and low income customers' research can be made by covering respondents so that the findings does not stay as regional centric. Given the cultural context of India, it is largely considered as an emotional market and hence if similar research is conducted covering more cities, the findings might lead to uncovering of certain latent phenomenon which are yet to be addressed.

A major future direction of this research is to make an attempt in associating brand love with other measurable and quantifiable metrics. These associations could then answer questions like whether brand love

is related to brand equity?, does brand love also leads to repeat purchases?, does brand love has any other mediating factors apart from perceived value and materialism?. The answers to these questions can be seeked through taking up larger scale researches trying to search the impact of brand love on brand equity, consumer loyalty, consumer loyalty types etc.

8. Conclusion

Humans and emotions are two sides of the same coin that have always existed together. But it wasn't until after the pandemic that this concept became quite apparent, having a beneficial effect on both the personal and professional spheres. It is true that customers' minds and hearts truly own brands; they are emotional spaces. Here, the product becomes more relevant and unique in the eyes of the potential customer by wrapping an ambiguous good or service with an ambiguous layer. The current research reinforces that the Indian consumers, when comes to purchase intention of smart phones, are highly involved in buying a smart phone which coincides with their self-identity and perceived value.

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