The role of emotional structures in the relationship between satisfaction and brand loyalty

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Abstract: Satisfaction and loyalty as vital and strategic concepts in marketing literature are highly important to companies and marketers. The review of the existing literature reveals a gap of the role of emotional constructs that can begin in a regular and rational sequence of satisfaction and ultimately lead to the formation of consumer loyalty. Hence, in the current study, we seek to answer the question of whether emotional constructs such as emotional attachment and love play a mediating role in the process of transitioning from satisfaction to loyalty in the correct sequence. A structural equation modeling method is employed in this research based on data collected from 300 post-graduate students in Iran, using convenience sampling. Smartphone and apparel brands are two product categories chosen in this study. The results showed that brand love is the strongest antecedent of brand loyalty. Moreover, the examination of indirect effects revealed that our assumption based on that the emotional structures such as emotional attachment and brand love play a mediating role in the process of transitioning from satisfaction to loyalty in a correct sequence is supported. The study validates the mediating role of emotional brand attachment and brand love in the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty; is one of the first to develop a conceptual model that examines the role of emotional structures in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty; is one of few studies to develop the role of emotional structures in the form of a relational chain of brands in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Brands help define consumers’ lives and play a vital role in people’s consumption behavior. The review of the existing literature reveals a gap of the role of emotional constructs that can begin in a regular and rational sequence of satisfaction and ultimately lead to the formation of consumer loyalty. Hence, in the current study, we seek to answer the question of whether emotional constructs such as emotional attachment and love play a mediating role in the process of transitioning from satisfaction to loyalty in the correct sequence. The study validates the mediating role of emotional brand attachment and brand love in the relationship between brand satisfaction and brand loyalty; is one of the first to develop a conceptual model that examines the role of emotional structures in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty; is one of few studies to develop the role of emotional structures in the form of a relational chain of brands in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty.
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Subjects: Interpersonal Processes & Communication; Self & Social Identity; Attitudes & Persuasion

Keywords: Brand satisfaction; Emotional brand attachment; Brand love; Brand loyalty

1. Introduction

Satisfaction and loyalty as vital and strategic concepts in marketing literature are highly important to companies and marketers. The importance of these concepts can be seen from two perspectives: first, the benefits that these concepts bring to firms, and second, in the different studies and efforts that have concentrated on the relationship between consumer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995; Bloemer & Lemmink, 1992; Bowen & Chen, 2001).

In the traditional perspective, researchers like Cardozo (1965) and Oliver (1999) maintained that satisfaction was an indicator of loyalty and doubtlessly, loyalty was created after satisfaction with a product or service. The question is, however, “Does this perspective still hold true in an age that according to Roberts (2006), intense competition exists among brands and products and the brands and products might trigger a switching behavior by focusing merely on satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the consumer? Surely the answer to this question is negative as nowadays companies and marketers have come to realize that mere consumer satisfaction with a brand is not sufficient to establish a continuous relationship with a brand. Therefore, it is necessary to establish an emotional bond beyond satisfaction to provide consumer loyalty. To establish such emotional bonds, “zero separation” and undivided brand loyalty have to be provided (Unal & Aydın, 2013). It should, therefore, seek to create and build a new form of relationships between satisfaction and loyalty. The review of the existing literature reveals a gap of the role of emotional constructs that can begin in a regular and rational sequence of satisfaction and ultimately lead to the formation of consumer loyalty. For example, Oliver (1999) states that satisfaction and loyalty have an irregular relationship, although loyal customers are often satisfied, but satisfaction does not always result in loyalty. In one of the six scenarios examining the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty, he argues that satisfaction is the first step in a transition sequence that ultimately leads to loyalty (Sixth scenario), where loyalty can be independent of satisfaction. In addition to Oliver (1999), other researchers have emphasized that consumer satisfaction by itself is not a good predictor of brand loyalty so that consumer emotional attachment should also be considered (Kotler, 1997; T. O. Jones & Sasser, 1995). If we consider satisfaction at the lowest level of the consumer-brand relationship chain, it can be realized in a one-time consumer-brand interaction (Guillard & Roux, 2014; Unal & Aydın, 2013). Emotional aspects such as emotional attachment and brand love can be sought at higher levels of satisfaction that are realized in consumers’ interaction with the brand for several times (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Thomson et al., 2005). Certainly, the fact that higher levels of satisfaction can be a basis for the formation of strong emotions (such as emotional attachment and love) to the brand, and in turn lead to brand loyalty, has been proven by several researchers. For example, Kotler (1997) argues that high satisfaction not only creates rational preferences but also creates a kind of emotional attachment to a brand that results from this emotional bond, leading to a high level of consumer loyalty. In addition, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) study empirically demonstrates that emotional and passionate love for a brand is a predictor of brand loyalty; therefore, emotional attachment and brand love (not merely satisfaction) are a drive to loyalty.
Although many studies have been conducted in the past on the relationship between satisfaction and brand loyalty (Dong et al., 2011; Fuentes-Blasco et al., 2014; Kuppelwieser & Sarstedt, 2014; Huy Tuu et al., 2011), but none of the studies has addressed the role that emotional structures can play in the relationship between satisfaction and brand loyalty. However, different research on consumer-brand relationships has shown that emotional constructs such as emotional brand attachment and brand love can play a mediating role in the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty (Correia Loureiro & Kaufmann, 2012; Drennan et al., 2015; Roy et al., 2013; Sarkar, 2011; Unal & Aydin, 2013) and they are antecedent role for loyalty (Alnawas & Altarifi, 2016; Belaid & Temessek Behi, 2011; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Fetscherin et al., 2014; Theng So et al., 2013). Nevertheless, research has not specifically shown that what emotional variables can play a mediating role from consumer satisfaction with a brand to loyalty to that brand. Hence, based on the sixth scenario, we extend Oliver’s (1999) work—satisfaction is the beginning of a transitioning sequence that ultimately results in loyalty—by assuming that emotional structures play a mediating role in the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, we seek to answer the question of whether emotional constructs such as emotional attachment and love play a mediating role in the process of transitioning from satisfaction to loyalty in the correct sequence.

2. A review of the literature and theoretical discussion

2.1. Brand satisfaction

Satisfaction has been defined as a type of cognition as well as the result of the experience of a purchase, or of a specific consumption. Additionally, it entails an evaluation process during which the consumer compares the performance expected with what was received (Mano & Oliver, 1993). In another definition, Bloemer and Kasper (1995) define brand satisfaction as the outcome of the subjective evaluation that the chosen alternative (the brand) meets or exceeds the expectations. This definition is in line with the many definitions of satisfaction based on the expectations-disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980) found in the literature. The notion that is prominent in every definition of satisfaction is in fact a comparison between expectations and (brand) performance. In addition, our understanding of satisfaction was enriched by the integration of the emotional dimension into the conceptualization of the term. Thomson et al. (2005) proposed that satisfaction was the basis of emotional attachment, noting that: “A consumer that attached to a brand is generally satisfied with it”. In a theoretical exploration of the consumer’s relationship with the brand, satisfaction assumes a cumulative character that also relates to the consumer experience (Andrew, 2013). Therefore, the effect of satisfaction on loyalty in the long term is implicitly considered in developing attachment to the brand (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). Looking through extant types of satisfaction, research has shared a core idea for satisfaction: a psychological notion about consumers’ emotional evaluation of or the pleasurable degree of the experience associated with specific products or services (Giebelhausen et al., 2016; Mohammed & Rashid, 2018; Oliver, 1999; Saleem & Raja, 2014). In summary, in this study, satisfaction is regarded as the cumulative experience of the brand that has evolved over time and leads to consumers’ emotional evaluation of the brand.

2.2. Emotional brand attachment

The concept of emotional attachment was borrowed from the psychology attachment theory proposed by Bowlby (1982). Emotional brand attachment is a critical construct in the marketing literature as it describes the strength of the bond consumers have with the brand. This bond subsequently affects their behavior and in turn fosters firm profitability and customer lifetime value (Theng So et al., 2013; Thomson et al., 2005). Psychological attachment to a certain brand as displayed in ownership and emotional significance may be important determinants of consumer behaviors such as repeat purchases of the brand, and willingness to spend resources to obtain the brand (e.g., money and effort), and eventually leading to brand loyalty (Lee & Workman, 2015). In consumer behavior, researchers over the years have found evidence that consumers can develop emotional attachments to various marketable entities such as material possessions (Kleine & Baker,
Among the various definitions of emotional brand attachment, Thomson et al. (2005) defined it as the positive emotional outcomes of a strong connection between a consumer and a brand. They were the first to develop emotional brand attachment measures by conceptualizing it as emotional bonding, the degree of affection, passion, and the connection to measure attachment. Later research expounded that brand attachment captured both emotional and cognitive bonding, reflecting the brand and self-connection (Japutra et al., 2014; Park et al., 2010). The scale presented by Park et al. (2010) focuses more on cognitive dimensions such as brand accessibility and integration with consumer identity. In other categories, the relationship between consumer and brand has been defined from the psychological dimension to the two dimensions of existential attachment and functional attachment (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016), which only the existential attachment develops emotional and affective relationships. In defining the concept of existential attachment, Lacoeuilhe (2000, p. 55) defines it as: “A psychological variable explaining an affective relationship in the duration and in alterable (separation is painful) with the brand, and expressing a psychological proximity relationship with it” (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). In this research, emotional attachment is “A relationship-based construct reflecting the emotional bond connecting an individual with a consumption entity (e.g., brand, person, place, or object)” (Park et al., 2006, p. 17). This emotional bond results from the accumulated experiences created over time and the multiple interactions between the consumer and the brand.

2.3. Brand love

Brand love is perceived as a recent marketing concept in the research stream of consumer-brand relationships (Kaufmann et al., 2016; Hegner et al., 2017; Vernuccio et al., 2015). The construct emerges as a crucial outcome for brand managers, playing a strategic role in building long-term sustainable consumer-brand relationships (Kohli et al., 2014; Hegner et al., 2017; Vernuccio et al., 2015).

In the marketing literature, love has been applied in two different perspectives. From the first perspective, researchers have discussed the consumer’s love for the product (Dwayne Ball & Tasaki, 1992; Thomson et al., 2005); which these researchers have assessed consumers’ emotional attachment to products. Moreover, in the second perspective, researchers have evaluated terms, including object-consumer or product-consumer relationships (Shimp & Madden, 1988; Whang et al., 2004). All of these researchers were inspired by the corresponding love-object-consumer model of Sternberg’s (1986) triangular love theory. Finally, all the studies in the first perspective were based on the theory of interpersonal relationships. In addition, in the second perspective, researchers have examined the love of a brand or consumer-brand relationship (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Fetscherin et al., 2014; Hwang & Kandampully, 2012). These groups of researchers have observed that consumers often regard brands as relational patterns.

Brand love refers to a strong sentimental inclination toward a brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), the sum of cognitive behaviors that are driven by fondness for a brand (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010), and a set of “cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, which consumers organize in a mental prototype” (Batra et al., 2012). Brand love has multiple dimensions (Thomson et al., 2005; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Albert et al., 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Heinrich et al., 2008; Albert & Valette-Florence, 2010), since extant literature has led to divergent views on brand love, but researchers have tended to value Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) operationalization above those of others (Junaid et al., 2019; Huang, 2017; Huber et al., 2015; Vernuccio et al., 2015). Since Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) perceive it as consumers’ emotional response to the brand, which has been formed over time and in multiple interactions. Therefore, in this study, we measure brand love based on the scale of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006).


2.4. Brand loyalty
Loyalty is an important concept particularly when incidents occur that may lead to a rupture in the relationship between the two role-players (Guillard & Roux, 2014; Hur et al., 2011). In the marketing literature, these two role-players can be defined as consumers and brands (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). Oliver (1999) defines loyalty to a brand as a deeply held commitment to repatronize or repurchase that brand consistently in the future, despite the potential of situational influences and marketing efforts to induce switching (Lam & Shankar, 2014). Indeed, Oliver (1999) proposes that an individual's loyalty to any consumption object is developed through a phase by the phase process. According to Oliver (1999), four phases of object loyalty development namely- cognitive, affective, conative and action are developed in the given sequence (Sarkar, 2014). In a more general classification, it is divided into two aspects of attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, which attitudinal dimension consists of three aspects of cognitive, affective, and conative. Thus, throughout the literature, two different aspects of brand loyalty, namely attitudinal and behavioral loyalty are emphasized (Aaker, 1991; Oliver, 1999). Specifically, attitudinal loyalty is defined as the degree to which an individual commits to the brand, and behavioral loyalty refers to the willingness to repurchase the same brand (Hwang & Kandampully, 2012). Aaker (1991) describes a consumer's relationship with a brand on five levels, brand loyalty being the last and the strongest (Fetscherin et al., 2014). In this study, brand loyalty is considered the highest level of consumer-brand relationship, and a mixed approach incorporating behavioral and attitudinal loyalty is used to measure brand loyalty.

2.5. The distinction between emotional brand attachment and brand love
In this research, based on the available evidence in the literature, we hypothesized that in the path of the loyalty of a consumer, the lowest intensity of a relationship between a consumer and its brands was brand satisfaction, which resulted from the consumer's positive experiences with the brand (Busacca & Castaldo, 2003; Fetscherin et al., 2014; Ha & Perks, 2005). As the intensity of the relationship continues over time, satisfied consumers develop not only a rational preference but also an emotional attachment leading to formation of a strong emotional relationship with the brand (Albert et al., 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Kotler, 1997). These emotional attachments are so strong that consumers feel passionate about them, find them irreplaceable, and experience anxiety upon withdrawal (Batra et al., 2012; Sarkar, 2014). As the relationship continues and its intensity increases, passionate affection that an attached consumer has for a particular brand becomes love (Loureiro et al., 2012). As Fetscherin and Heinrich (2014) in the Brand Feeling Matrix showed, brand love evolved from a strong positive feeling about the brand and a strong relationship with the brand over time. Finally, it can be stated that a consumer who loves a brand forms the last level of a relationship with the brand, namely loyalty, and becomes a loyal consumer. As Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) stated, passionate emotional love for a brand is a predictor of brand loyalty.

The point discussed in this study is the coexistence of two variables of brand emotional attachment and brand love as mediator variables on the path of being satisfied with the brand to being loyal to it, since there is no consensus in the literature about the similarity or differentiation of these two constructs. A number of researchers have emphasized that emotional brand attachment and brand love are similar concepts (Albert et al., 2009; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Moussa, 2015; Thomson et al., 2005). For example, Albert et al. (2009) contend that the proposed scale by Thomson et al. (2005) deals more with the love construct than the attachment construct. In particular, the conceptualization of “attachment” integrates here the dimension of “passion”, and only the type of word used is different. However, there are researchers (e.g., Batra et al., 2012; Chang & Chieng, 2006; Hwang & Kandampully, 2012; Park et al., 2010) suggesting a clear distinction. They state that emotional attachment compared to brand love requires less intensity of an emotional response to an object (Schlobohm et al., 2016). Nevertheless, there are researchers (e.g., Batra et al., 2012; Chang & Chieng, 2006; Hwang & Kandampully, 2012; Loureiro et al., 2012; Shimul et al., 2019; Park et al., 2010) suggesting a clear distinction. They state that emotional attachment compared to brand love requires less intensity of an emotional response to an object (Schlobohm et al., 2016). Batra et al. (2012) in the higher-order model of brand love have...
shown that emotional attachment is one of the three components of positive emotional connection that, together with passion-driven behaviors and self-brand integration, constitute brand love. In fact, emotional attachment is a factor leading to brand love. In addition, Chang and Chieng (2006), in their study of the quality of consumer-brand relationships, show that love and attachment are two separate dimensions. Furthermore, Park et al. (2010) stated that love was the emotion that one may develop pursuant to a strong attraction, while some attachments based on attraction may not develop into love. Thus, brand love would indicate the presence of attraction (Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2011). Another study indicated that emotional brand attachment and brand love were similar constructs that essentially differ mainly in their intensity. In this regard, brand love necessitates the intensity of emotional responses to an object, while emotional attachment does not necessarily require such intensity (Hwang & Kandampully, 2012). Finally, Shimul et al. (2019), based on previous studies, maintain that love and attachment are distinguished for three reasons. First, the conceptualization for brand attachment lies within the psychological theories of human attachment (Bowlby, 1979), whilst brand love is conceptualized with the theories of interpersonal love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) and romantic love (Sarkar et al. 2012). Second, consumer satisfaction as a post-consumption phenomenon is considered a prerequisite for brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Roy et al., 2013). On the contrary, brand attachment does not hinge on the consumption or satisfaction, since consumers may build a psychological connection and emotional proximity with brands (Sreejesh et al., 2016). Third, brand attachment is largely built on consumers’ emotional bond with the brands, whereas brand love encompasses both the cognitive (idealization) and emotional (affective proximity) components of consumers (Albert et al., 2008). According to the above discussions, love and attachment are common concepts showing consumer positive feelings about the brand. However, they vary in their intensity and differ in their occurrence as well as in their experienced length. Therefore, according to these views, in our study, these two dimensions (love and attachment) are considered two separate variables.

3. Research model and hypothesis development
To investigate the role of emotional structures such as emotional brand attachment and brand love in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty, the present research considers the relationships between the constructs of brand satisfaction, emotional brand attachment, brand love and brand loyalty based on the existing theoretical background in the literature.

3.1. Brand satisfaction and emotional brand attachment
Brand satisfaction is regarded as the cumulative experience of the brand, which has been shaped over time and leads to consumers’ emotional evaluation of the brand (Song et al., 2019). As a key managerial variable, satisfaction is a subjective evaluation, cognitive judgment, or an emotional response to consumption. Consumer satisfaction with a brand could evolve into attachment to the brand (Oliver, 1999). Additionally, Thomson et al. (2005) declared that satisfaction might provide a basis for emotional attachment. Nevertheless, satisfaction and attachment are not synonymous, and there are some differences between them. For example, satisfaction can occur immediately and in one-time interaction with the brand, while emotional attachments tend to develop over time with multiple interactions; and or satisfaction is an evaluative judgment and hence different from the emotionally laden attachment construct (Thomson et al., 2005).

The relationship between emotional attachment and satisfaction has been inconclusive. Three major branches of thought have been identified in brand attachment research. The first branch perceives brand attachment as a predictor of consumers’ satisfaction (Belaid & Temessek Behi, 2011; Levy & Hino, 2016), while the second views it as the consequence of satisfaction (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016; Lam & Shankar, 2014). The third branch considers the mediating role of brand attachment between satisfaction and other outcomes, including loyalty. Bahri-Ammari et al. (2016), for instance, found that satisfied consumers became emotionally attached to the restaurant brand, and later developed a sense of loyalty to it. Although emotional brand
attachment has been studied both as the antecedent to, and outcome of, satisfaction, this study regards the emotional brand attachment, an emotional bond generated from the accumulated experience, as an outcome of satisfaction, being consistent with the second branch of study.

Previous research has shown that satisfaction is a strong antecedent to brand attachment (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016; Lam & Shankar, 2014). Bahri-Ammari et al. (2016) have demonstrated that customer satisfaction with luxury restaurants leads to their attachment with restaurant brand. Similarly, Lam and Shankar (2014) believed that consumers who used their mobile devices frequently have had developed attachments to their brands. Therefore, we expect brand satisfaction to have a positive effect on emotional brand attachment. Hence:

H1. Brand satisfaction has a positive impact on emotional brand attachment.

3.2. Emotional brand attachment and brand love
To love a brand, consumers need to be attached to it, that feels that the brand is irreplaceable and miss it when they do not have the brand (Loureiro et al., 2012). Although, attachment is a widely accepted element of brand love among researchers (Thomson et al., 2005; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Albert et al., 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Loureiro et al., 2012), little research has been conducted to show that emotional brand attachment is an antecedent to brand love. For example, Kaufmann et al. (2016) propose that brand attachment promotes brand love. At the same time, based on the model proposed by Loureiro et al. (2012), brand attachment is an antecedent of brand love. Therefore, it can be stated that consumers who are satisfied with the brand, this satisfaction, if continued, will cause emotional attachment to the brand and, after becoming attached to the brand, they will develop a deeper emotional bond with the brand in the path of brand loyalty that is brand love. Hence, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H2. Emotional brand attachment has a positive impact on brand love.

3.3. Brand love and brand loyalty
Satisfied consumers’ brand love is expected to increase both understanding and prediction of their post-consumption behavior (Hsu & Chen, 2018). More specifically, this research hypothesizes the positive direct effect of brand love on brand loyalty in a population of satisfied and attached consumers. Some studies (e.g., Aro et al., 2018; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Correia Loureiro & Kaufmann, 2012; Drennan et al., 2015; Fetscherin et al., 2014; Hwang & Kandampully, 2012) have demonstrated that satisfied consumers have a tendency to be more loyal to a brand. In line with previous research, we expect that brand love can also play an antecedent role in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty in addition to mediation role. Therefore:

H3. Brand love has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

3.4. Brand satisfaction and brand love
Satisfaction is one of the cores of marketing theories, and it has been considered the key objective of the marketing strategy for more than 60 years (Al-Haddad, 2019; Hsu & Chen, 2018). As we stated, satisfaction developed owing to the accumulation of consumer experiences with the brand over time (Drennan et al., 2015). Satisfaction has been considered one of the most important constructs, and one of the main goals in marketing. As the main outcome of marketing activities, satisfaction transforms the accumulated experiences long-term relational behaviors such as emotional brand attachment (Thomson et al., 2005), brand
love (Correia Loureiro & Kaufmann, 2012; Drennan et al., 2015) and brand loyalty (Belaid & Temessek Behi, 2011; Song et al., 2019). However, previous findings suggested that purely satisfying consumers might not be enough to maintain success in the competitive marketplace nowadays (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Research has shown that brand love predicts consumer behavior better than traditional models related to satisfaction (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Brand love is a relatively new marketing construct helping to explain and predict variation in long-term relational behaviors among satisfied consumers (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Carroll and Ahuvia (2006, p. 81) defined brand love as “the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name”.

As Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) discussed, brand love differs from the satisfaction construct. Consistent with the idea of Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), we conceptualized brand love as consumers’ emotional response to the brand, which has been formed over time and in multiple interactions. Brand love is different from the satisfaction construct in several parts. First, satisfaction is a cognitive judgment, while brand love has a much stronger affective focus. Second, satisfaction is perceived as a transaction-specific outcome, but brand love is the consequence of a consumer’s long-term relationship with the brand. Third, satisfaction is often related to the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm, but brand love requires neither expectancy nor disconfirmation (e.g., the consumer experiences this emotional response to the brand in the absence of cognition; the consumer knows what to expect from the brand, so little, if any, disconfirmation occurs). Finally, brand love contains a willingness to express love (e.g., “I love this brand!”) and involves the integration of the brand into the consumer’s identity, neither of which is requisite in satisfaction (Hsu & Chen, 2018).

As we review the literature, we find that satisfaction is considered a pre-requisite for brand love (Al-Haddad, 2019; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Correia Loureiro & Kaufmann, 2012; Drennan et al., 2015; Roy et al., 2013). Although, not all satisfied consumers feel brand love, and only a percentage of satisfied customers tend to love a brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Roy et al., 2013). Hence, we propose that a kind of satisfaction leads to brand love that is the result of satisfying accumulated experiences and can generate positive emotional responses from the consumer, over a period of time and multiple interactions. Previous studies (e.g., Albert & Merunka, 2013; Al-Haddad, 2019; Aro et al., 2018; Correia Loureiro & Kaufmann, 2012; Drennan et al., 2015; Roy et al., 2013) showed that consumer satisfaction had a positive effect on brand love. As such, consumers are expected to increase their brand love when the extent of their satisfaction is higher. Based on this literature review, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H4.** Brand satisfaction has a positive impact on brand love. Figure 1 is the conceptual model shows the research that has been developed based on literature.
4. Methodology

4.1. Instrument
A research questionnaire was developed with two sections. The first section includes the 4 constructs (brand satisfaction, emotional brand attachment, brand love, and brand loyalty) in this research. The second section contains the respondents' demographics (gender, education, and age). The developed questionnaire was pre-tested on 40 respondents and the result showed that the instructions and questions were well understood.

A 23-item scale measurement was adopted from previous studies and modified to suit the context of this research. All English items were translated into Persian, and then back-translated by a second bilingual person to ensure consistency of meaning. Respondents rated all measures on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Completely Disagree) to 5 (Completely Agree). The 5-point Likert scale was chosen because most studies conducted on research variables had used this format (Correia Loureiro & Kaufmann, 2012; Fetscherin et al., 2014; Loureiro et al., 2012). To aid respondents in understanding how to complete the questionnaire, the purpose of the research, the structure of the questions, and how to answer each question based on the Likert scale were explained to them.

Brand satisfaction was measured by a six-item Likert scale adopted Lam and Shankar (2014) and Lau and Lee (1999). The emotional brand attachment was measured by a five-item Likert scale adopted from Thomson et al. (2005) and Malär et al. (2011). Brand love was measured with an eight-item scale adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Finally, brand loyalty was measured with a four-item Likert scale adapted from Fetscherin et al. (2014).

4.2. Sample and product selection
The study population most of the research that has been done in the field of emotional bonds with brands has been universities (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Correia Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2012; Hwang & Kandampully, 2012; Lee & Workman, 2015). Selection criteria in these populations are also continuous use of the brand and non-switching over a long period of time (considering that the consumer has the ability to switching the brand) or the consumers' emotional declarations about the brand, and in some studies, access to individuals has been the criterion of choice. Therefore, the same approach was used in this study to select the target population and the students were selected as the target population. Using convenience sampling, 300 post-graduate students of North Tehran Branch of Islamic Azad University who had not switched their preferred brand for a long time despite the ability to switch were selected. The descriptive characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

This study chose smartphone and apparel as two product categories based on interviews of experts and studies of Hwang and Kandampully (2012) and Fetscherin et al. (2014). Because past research has shown that these products intensify the bonds and emotional responses to brands (emotional brand attachment and brand love). Since the scales were exactly borrowed from previous studies and represented the concept about which generalizations were to be made, their content validity was assured (Esmaeilipour, 2015) (Table 2).

4.3. Normality check
The normality of the data was assessed by estimating the skewness and kurtosis of each measurement item. The values of skewness ranged from −0.362 to 0.138, and the kurtosis values ranged from −0.016 to 0.276. As values for skewness and kurtosis within the range of −2 and 2 are regarded to be acceptable in order to prove normal distribution (Bentler, 2006), our data set included no serious skewness and kurtosis problem.
| Gender | %  | Age  | %   | Education | %   |
|--------|----|------|-----|-----------|-----|
| Male   | 54 | 25–30| 65.3| MA        | 62.3|
| Female | 46 | 31–35| 30  | PH.D      | 37.7|
|        |    | >35  | 4.7 |           |     |
5. Data analysis

Data analysis consisted of two steps. Firstly, the measurement tool was validated through confirmatory factor analysis. Secondly, the structural model was estimated. During both steps, we used structural equation modeling (SEM), the LISREL 8.8 software.

5.1. Convergent and discriminant validity of the measures

A confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL 8.8 was used to confirm the factor loadings of the four constructs in this study and assess the model fit. Hence, we examined the factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE = convergent validity) and discriminant validity. First, the measurement model was tested for convergent validity, which was assessed through factor loadings, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) (Hair et al., 2013). Table 2, shows that all item loadings exceeded the recommended value of 0.6 (Chin et al., 2008). CR and Cronbach’s alpha values, which depict the degree to which the construct indicators

| Measurement items | Standardized factor loadings |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| Brand Satisfaction: M = 4/22, SD = 0/61, α = 0.90, CR = 0.91, AVE = 0.62 | |
| I am satisfied with my decision to buy this brand. | 0.80* |
| I have truly enjoyed this brand. | 0.76* |
| Using this brand has been a good experience. | 0.72* |
| I am sure it was the right thing to buy this brand. | 0.86* |
| This brand meets my expectations. | 0.77* |
| Overall, I am satisfied with this brand. | 0.81* |
| Emotional Brand Attachment: M = 3/18, SD = 0/94, α = 0.91, CR = 0.92, AVE = 0.71 | |
| I have a unique relationship with this brand. | 0.89* |
| I identify with what this brand stands for. | 0.90* |
| I feel a sense of belonging in regard to this brand. | 0.91* |
| I am proud to be a consumer of this brand. | 0.81* |
| This brand fits my personality. | 0.67* |
| Brand Love: M = 3/71, SD = 0/73, α = 0.92, CR = 0.92, AVE = 0.59 | |
| This is a wonderful brand. | 0.73* |
| This brand makes me feel good. | 0.76* |
| This brand is totally awesome. | 0.78* |
| This brand makes me very happy. | 0.76* |
| I love this brand. | 0.81* |
| This brand is a pure delight. | 0.77* |
| I am passionate about this brand. | 0.79* |
| I'm very attached to this brand. | 0.78* |
| Brand Loyalty: M = 3/73, SD = 0/90, α = 0.91, CR = 0.92, AVE = 0.73 | |
| I am committed to this brand. | 0.87* |
| I pay more attention to this brand than to other brands. | 0.89* |
| I am more interested in this particular brand than in other brands. | 0.84* |
| It is very important for me to buy this brand rather than another brand. | 0.83* |

* p < 0.001.
indicate the latent construct, exceeded the recommended value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2013), while AVE, which reflects the overall variance in the indicators accounted for by the latent construct, exceeded the recommended value of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2013).

Discriminant validity refers to the extent to which the measures are not a reflection of some other variables and it is indicated by low correlations between the measure of interest and the measures of other constructs. Table 3 shows that the square root of the AVE (diagonal values) of each construct is larger than its corresponding correlation coefficients, pointing towards adequate discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The measurement model showed adequate convergent validity and discriminant validity.

5.2. The results of the measurement model
The measurement model was considered acceptable according to the standards recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999). Also, the $\chi^2$/df (622.60/224) ratio of less than three (2.77) was used as the common decision rule of an acceptable model fit. Other indicators of goodness of fit (RMSEA = 0.076, CFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.85, IFI = 0.98, NFI = 0.97, AGFI = 0.82) revealed that the hypothesized model fitted the empirical data, as recommended by Kline (1998).

5.3. The results of the structural model
The overall fit measures of the full model using the SEM (LISREL 8.8) indicated that the fit of the model was acceptable ($\chi^2$/df = 2.83, RMSEA = 0.077, CFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.85, IFI = 0.98, NFI = 0.97, AGFI = 0.81). Figure 2 shows results for the hypotheses.

5.4. Hypotheses testing
The four hypotheses presented in this research were tested using the structural equation modeling approach. The path significance of each hypothesized association in the research model was examined. In this research, a two-tailed t-test was used because the independent variables may either show a positive effect or a negative effect on the dependent variables (Helm et al., 2010). According to the two-tailed t-test (df = 300), the 0.05 significance level, or $p < 0.05$, requires a t-value > 1.96, and the 0.01 significance level, or $p < 0.01$, requires a t-value > 2.63. The 0.001 significance level, or $p < 0.001$, requires the corresponding t-value > 3.40.

| Table 3. Discriminant validity results based on Fornell—Larcker criterion |
|-----------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 1. Brand satisfaction | 0.78 |
| 2. Emotional brand attachment | 0.63 | 0.84 |
| 3. Brand love | 0.66 | 0.77 | 0.76 |
| 4. Brand loyalty | 0.60 | 0.66 | 0.75 | 0.85 |

Italic diagonal elements are the square root of AVE for each construct. Off-diagonal elements are the correlations between constructs.
As seen in Figure 2 and Table 4, hypotheses 1–4 states that brand satisfaction will have a positive effect on emotional brand attachment and brand love. The result shows that brand satisfaction have a positive effects on emotional brand attachment ($\beta = 0.69$, $t = 12.21$, $p: 0.000$) and brand love ($\beta = 0.29$, $t = 5.39$, $p: 0.000$). The result shows that emotional brand attachment ($\beta = 0.64$, $t = 10.14$, $p: 0.000$) has a positive impact on brand love, supporting H2. Finally, Hypotheses H3 address that brand love will have a positive impact on brand loyalty. As expected, brand love ($\beta = 0.89$, $t = 13.79$, $p: 0.000$) have positive impact on brand loyalty. Therefore, H3 is supported.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The present study was conducted to present an empirical model based on the sixth scenario of Oliver (1999) -satisfaction is the beginning of a transitioning sequence that ultimately results in loyalty- and by assuming that emotional constructs such as emotional attachment and brand love play a mediating role in the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. Specifically, we sought to answer the question of whether emotional structures such as emotional attachment and love play a mediating role in the process of transitioning from satisfaction to loyalty in the correct sequence.

The result of the first hypothesis indicated that brand satisfaction led to formation of emotional brand attachment. This result suggests that satisfaction is an explanatory variable for emotional brand attachment and develops a kind of emotional brand attachment if the consumer's satisfaction with a brand continues. This issue is also considered by Thomson et al. (2005), noting that satisfaction is the basis of emotional brand attachment. This result also concurs with the analysis of Bahri-Ammari et al., (2016), acknowledging that a satisfied consumer is more likely to be emotionally attached to a brand contrary to an unsatisfied consumer who will have difficulty sticking to a brand. In their “relational chain” of brands, Aurier et al. (2001) as well as Guillard and Roux (2014) consider that “Satisfaction is a direct antecedent of the attachment”.

The result of the second and fourth hypotheses of the study indicated that consumer satisfaction with the brand directly and indirectly through emotional attachment had a positive effect on brand love. Post-consumption satisfaction with the brand if continued will most likely result in a strong emotional attachment to that brand. Thus, considering that one of the most important fields of creating brand love is a strong emotional attachment to the brand, brand satisfaction can play a determining role in brand love directly and indirectly through emotional attachment. In addition, the results obtained from the second and fourth hypotheses are supported by Al-Haddad (2019) and Correia Loureiro and Kaufmann (2012).

The result of hypothesis third shows that brand love is the strongest antecedent of brand loyalty. This result in a way proves that consumers “love for a brand in their relational chain with brands plays the most important role in shaping consumers” loyalty. In other words, if consumers fall in love with a brand, they will develop a strong, passionate emotional relationship with that brand. This type of relationship creates very strong emotional responses to the brand, which guarantees the repurchase of that brand and poses a major obstacle to competing brands. Therefore, the consumer who loves a brand will tend to have become loyal to it (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

Table 4. Hypothesis testing

| Hypotheses | Path | Path Coefficient | t-Statistics | Decision |
|------------|------|------------------|-------------|----------|
| H1         | BS → EBA | 0.69           | 12.21**     | Supported |
| H2         | EBA → BL  | 0.64           | 10.14**     | Supported |
| H3         | BL → BLα  | 0.89           | 13.79**     | Supported |
| H4         | BS → BL   | 0.29           | 5.39**      | Supported |

* $|t| \geq 1.96$ is significant at $p: 0.05$ level; ** $|t| \geq 2.58$ is significant at $p: 0.01$. 

As seen in Figure 2 and Table 4, hypotheses 1–4 states that brand satisfaction will have a positive effect on emotional brand attachment and brand love. The result shows that brand satisfaction have a positive effects on emotional brand attachment ($\beta = 0.69$, $t = 12.21$, $p: 0.000$) and brand love ($\beta = 0.29$, $t = 5.39$, $p: 0.000$). The result shows that emotional brand attachment ($\beta = 0.64$, $t = 10.14$, $p: 0.000$) has a positive impact on brand love, supporting H2. Finally, Hypotheses H3 address that brand love will have a positive impact on brand loyalty. As expected, brand love ($\beta = 0.89$, $t = 13.79$, $p: 0.000$) have positive impact on brand loyalty. Therefore, H3 is supported.

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The result of the first hypothesis indicated that brand satisfaction led to formation of emotional brand attachment. This result suggests that satisfaction is an explanatory variable for emotional brand attachment and develops a kind of emotional brand attachment if the consumer’s satisfaction with a brand continues. This issue is also considered by Thomson et al. (2005), noting that satisfaction is the basis of emotional brand attachment. This result also concurs with the analysis of Bahri-Ammari et al., (2016), acknowledging that a satisfied consumer is more likely to be emotionally attached to a brand contrary to an unsatisfied consumer who will have difficulty sticking to a brand. In their “relational chain” of brands, Aurier et al. (2001) as well as Guillard and Roux (2014) consider that “Satisfaction is a direct antecedent of the attachment”.

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result of this hypothesis is supported by the research conducted by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and Hwang and Kandampully (2012).

7. Theoretical implications
Theoretically, the current study is one of the first ones to develop a conceptual model investigating the role of emotional structures in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty. To the best of our knowledge, this research is the first one to develop the role of emotional structures in the form of a relational chain of brands in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty (Aurier et al., 2001). Indeed, emotional structures in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty can be considered a “form of insurance” to maintain the relationship with brands.

In addition, the study of indirect effects also offers interesting theoretical applications. In general, in this study, we defined two sequences from satisfaction to loyalty in the concept of the consumer-brand relational chain based on the conceptual model that included: satisfaction → love → … loyalty and satisfaction → … emotional attachment → … love → … loyalty. Meanwhile, both sequences of satisfaction → love → … loyalty and satisfaction → … emotional attachment → … love → … loyalty were significant. The indirect influence of these two sequences shows that the influence of the sequence of satisfaction → … emotional attachment → … love → … loyalty (β = 0.66) is significantly stronger than the sequence of satisfaction → love → … loyalty (β = 0.45). These results show that our assumption based on that the emotional structures such as emotional attachment and brand love play a mediating role in the process of transitioning from satisfaction to loyalty in a correct sequence, is supported. Therefore, it can be claimed that in the path of the loyalty of a consumer, the lowest intensity of a relationship between a consumer and brand is brand satisfaction resulting from the consumer’s positive experiences with the brand (Busacca & Castaldo, 2003; Fetscherin et al., 2014; Ha & Perks, 2005). As the intensity of the relationship continues, over time, satisfied consumers develop not only a rational preference but also an emotional attachment, leading to formation of a strong emotional relationship with the brand (Albert et al., 2008; Batra et al., 2012; Kotler, 1997). These emotional attachments are so strong that consumers feel passionate about them, find them irreplaceable, and experience anxiety upon withdrawal (Batra et al., 2012; Sarkar, 2014). As the relationship continues and its intensity increases, passionate affection that an attached consumer has for a particular brand becomes love (Loureiro et al., 2012).

8. Managerial implications
In terms of managerial implications, the results demonstrate that satisfaction plays an important role in explaining how consumers are attached to brands. It is therefore important for managers to become aware of the strategic role of satisfaction variable and to set up expansions and improvement plans aiming at attracting consumers’ satisfaction. It is also important to know how to better manage relationship marketing by using technological tools like CRM (Customer Relationship Management). Consumers are certainly attached to brands and they become loyal (Guillard & Roux, 2014).

The results show that brand love is a significant state of consumer satisfaction with the brand and is associated with optimal post-consumption behavior. In this way, brand love for marketers provides a strategic and measurable goal that expands the thinking of market experts about the importance of developing an emotional relationship with consumers. Marketers must consider that by increasing functional and operational indicators, marketers have to provide consumers’ satisfaction with the brand, so that satisfaction drives consumers to love the brand.

Additionally, consumers’ emotional attachment to the brand leads to their love for the brand. Therefore, brand managers need to keep in mind that when a consumer buys a brand, they relate their personality to the brand. Thus, the product should be promoted in such a way that it can distinguish its consumers from those of other brands. It is also recommended that marketers identify the factors that can help to form such relationships (emotional attachment and love). For
example, it is suggested more efforts be made at unique product design, attractive packaging, and product quality improvement.

Finally, the results show that brand love is the most important antecedent of consumer brand loyalty. Given this finding, brand managers can strengthen the consumer-brand relationship by designing appropriate loyalty communications and programs as well as paying attention to consumer preferences, thereby preventing consumer brand switching.

9. Limitations and future research

Like all studies, this study has some limitations. First, our study was conducted in Iran and future research should assess other product categories in Iran to provide external validity. Related to the previous point, future studies should also assess the same product categories in other countries to provide cross-cultural validation. Another limitation of this study has to do with how emotional structures (emotional attachment and love) are measured. The study has used a one-dimensional scale of brand love from the Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Future studies could use multi-dimensional brand love scale, such as the higher-order structure of Batra et al. (2012). Also, This study was deductive in nature, and it used a structured questionnaire to measure emotional structures. However, emotional structures are subjective in nature; therefore, our quantitative approach has limitations in terms of its measurement. In-depth interviews or other qualitative tools might be used to overcome this limitation. Finally, in the present study, the role of emotional structures in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty in terms of relationship intensity was examined. Nevertheless, in a relationship, only the intensity of the relationship is not sufficient to provide the correct sequence from satisfaction to loyalty, and it should also focus on the quality of the relationship. Therefore, future research can use the variables of brand trust and commitment as relationship quality to extend the model. Accordingly, trust and commitment can play a mediating role in the relationship between satisfaction—emotional attachment (Aurier et al., 2011; Iglesias et al., 2011), respectively. 

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