



# A cross cultural comparison of brand love in consumer brand relationships: Is ‘transmissive brand love’ a potential platform for developing brand equity?

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## Abstract

This article examines ‘brand love’ in a cross-cultural sample from New Zealand and China. Rather than interpersonal love, Howden’s model of spiritual love was applied in this research. Two groups of tertiary students, in New Zealand and China, were interviewed on their brand relationships using a semi-structured format and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The results showed that all four components of Howden’s model could be used to describe spiritual relationships, and that three were applicable to brand relationships. The Chinese and New Zealand samples were strongly differentiated on two of these components, which were consistent with individual love in the West and collective love in China. A new unified model of ‘transmissive’ brand love, where the brand acts as a conduit rather than a destination for human love, is developed from these results. This model addresses many of the theoretical issues that arise from brands not being properly responsive partners in ‘love’ relationships. The model is also jointly compatible with interpersonal love as expressed in Western societies, and collective love as expressed within Chinese culture. It therefore offers a significant contribution to our understanding of how brands can actively increase their equity as significant facilitators of human love relationships.

**Keywords** Consumer · Brand · Spiritual · Love · Relationship · Cross cultural

## Introduction

‘Love’ is a term that has been commonly associated with brands, most notably by Kevin Roberts, the then CEO of Saatchi and Saatchi in his eponymous book (Roberts 2005). While a considerable body of literature treats brand love as an analogue of individual interpersonal love (Palusuk et al. 2019), there is little research directed at brand love as an analogue of individual spiritual relationships, despite the fact that there are well understood issues with applying (non-spiritual) interpersonal love to brands (Moussa 2019).

This article examines brand love as an analogue of spirituality, and in particular examines this concept in the

differing spiritual contexts of Western and Chinese culture. It contributes to a stream of brand research in the Journal of Brand Management (Filieri et al. 2019; Kugler 1998; Melewar et al. 2004; Phau and Lau 2001; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia 2014; Salgado-Montejo et al. 2014).

Two of these articles are specifically pertinent to this research: Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014) argued in some detail, using numerous prior literature sources, that brand love is highly analogous to anthropomorphic, individual interpersonal love, and that brand equity may be increased by strategies that stressed this individualistic focus. They then presented empirical evidence in a Western context to support their case. The more recent article by Filieri et al. (2019) argued that one of the reasons why Western brand models struggle in China is that Chinese consumers are more responsive to brand strategies that stress the communal/group aspects of brand connection (Filieri et al. 2019).

The concept of anthropomorphism requires a specific ‘target’ as a start point for the anthropomorphizing process (Levy et al. 2017), so it is unsurprising that the concept struggles in the Chinese context, where the brand is a component in a relationship with a group of people that is not

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itself fully defined and which may consist of individuals many or most of whom are not individually known to the individual who is relating to the brand. The whole concept of 'interpersonal', reciprocal, love requires the involvement of two correspondent individuals that are at the very least known to each other. This condition is not satisfied in the Chinese context according to Filieri et al. (2019).

This well-established requirement for reciprocity in love within the brand literature (Palusuk et al. 2019) is an interesting one, as it is inconsistent with observed human reality. It is an accepted fact that bidirectionality is not a requirement for personal love, to the degree that a specific and well-known term exists for it in the English language—unrequited love.<sup>1</sup> The problem with unrequited interpersonal love is that it is generally not held to be a satisfactory or enduring state for any individual—as a consequence it forms the basis of countless real and fictional dramas, crimes and tragedies dating back to the Iliad (Fagles 1998; Ward 2009). It certainly cannot be used as an analogue for any stable and contented consumer state that might act as the basis of enduring brand equity (Fetscherin 2014; Junaid et al. 2019) John Blackston, an experienced branding practitioner, summarises the issue:

One way, or unrequited, love is generally a most unsatisfactory form of a relationship unless the brand—the object of the consumer's feelings in some way "returns" that love, then the relationship remains unconsummated. While interpersonal love may superficially be a reasonable analogue for consumers' love for the brand, it provides no sustenance at all for describing the other side of the relationship. Blackston (2018, p. xii).

Thus, the results reported by Filieri et al. (2019) suggest that, in the absence of a specific human or anthropomorphised individual correspondent in Chinese brand relationships, an alternative to unrequited interpersonal love has to be found if Chinese-style brand relationships are to be effectively described as love at all.

Two alternatives to two-way interpersonal love with a basis of literature to support them suggest themselves,—religion, a communal social phenomenon (Pichler and Hemetsberger 2008; Sarkar and Sarkar 2016; Fioronin and Titterton 2009), and spiritual love, an individual psychological phenomenon (Spilka and McIntosh 1996; Wulff 1998).

Religion is a communal and social activity. While there is a considerable literature on brands *and* religion (religious marketing) (Stolz and Usunier 2019), and a considerable popular literature on brands *as* religion and objects of religious love (sacralisation) (Obiegbu et al. 2019), there is a

surprisingly small recent literature on brands as analogues of religious relationships, and this is confined to a small group of authors (Sarkar and Sarkar 2016, 2017; Sarkar et al. 2015).

Spirituality, by contrast, is a far more developed concept as a component of brand psychology (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019; Bamossy et al. 2011; Sudhir 2006), with a recent special issue devoted to this one issue in a major marketing journal (*Journal of Marketing Management* 35, 5/6), (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019). Spirituality is defined as a motivation for an individual to individually search for their life meaning and purpose, inner strength, interconnectedness, and transcendent experiences (Howden 1992; Spilka and McIntosh 1996; Wulff 1998). A stream of literature suggests that consumers can construct their ideal self by using brands in a spiritual context (Phau and Lau 2001; Klipfel et al. 2014), and that such consumers view their favored brands as relationship partners that can provide them with intangible resources, perspectives, and identities to help them accomplish their self-expansion. The existence of spirituality in brand relationships increases the closeness and strength of consumers' brand relationships, to the point that it may be described as love (Salgado-Montejo et al. 2014). Spiritual love also fits more closely to the individual, personal and psychological bases of 'one way' and 'parasocial' love outlined by Fetscherin (2014). For this reason, spiritual love was selected as the basis of this research.

The article is structured as follows: First, we present a summary of background literature on spiritual relationships, consumer motivation, brand relationships, and culture. Second, we apply a phenomenology research method to a split sample of Western and Chinese consumers to compare their spiritual relationships, values and behaviours in their brand relationships, in order to build on earlier researchers' work in this area (Filieri et al. 2019). Third, we conclude with an analysis of the results obtained, and the implications and future lines of progress for this area of research.

## Literature review

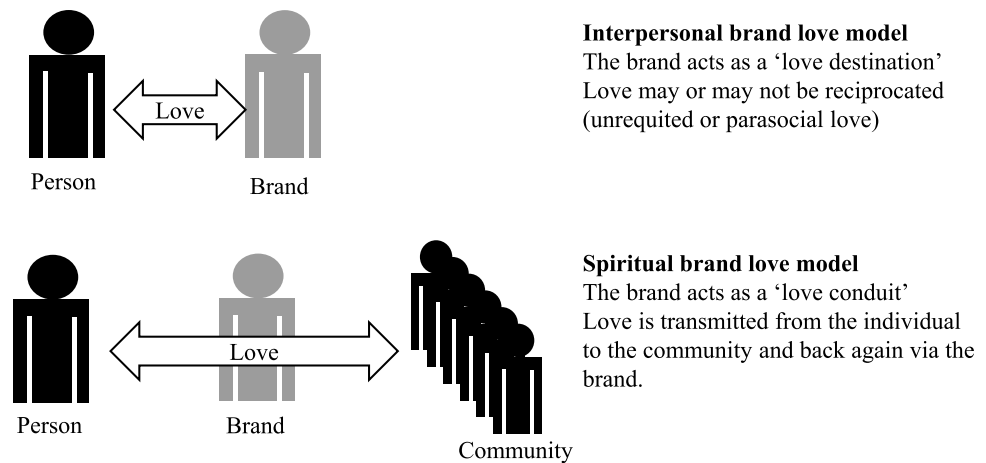
### Spiritual relationships

Spiritual relationships provide individual self-insights via a process of intimate, powerful, soul-searching, and mystical features (Carper 1999). Spiritual relationships are a combination of experiences in the spiritual, transcendent, numinous, and mystical contexts, which start from interpersonal relationships and are found in the deep psychology of human beings, and in their life journeys (Burkhardt 1989, 2002; Carper 1999; Elkins 1995; MacDonald 2000). Spiritual relationships help people to appreciate the meaning and purpose of their lives. They highlight individuals' inner

<sup>1</sup> Unrequited (adjective) (of love) not returned by the person that you love, *Oxford English Dictionary*.



**Fig. 1** Interpersonal and spiritual brand love



strength, and introspection (Burkhardt 1989; Howden 1992). An individual's spiritual relationships represent their values, beliefs and emotions that direct their behaviours (Moore and Casper 2006).

Spirituality is best understood as an underlying set of individual personal beliefs, narratives and motivations that can influence more visible behaviours, such as reactions and responses to brands. For example, Suddaby (2019), discusses American consumers' reactions to modern brands in the context of three broad spiritual beliefs (myths) that have their foundations in the history of the United States, and which can drive brand-related behaviours. So the 'American Adam' myth relating to the communal myth of the rugged independent American pioneer can drive brands relating to individual expression. New Zealand, which has a similar 'Antipodean Adam' myth offers a much more specific example of Speights® beer, which was built into a powerful national brand on the basis of an extended and evolving advertising campaign featuring two 'Southern Men' who were deliberate embodiments of this myth (Venuto 2018). Recent research has started to refer to such communally held spiritual myths as 'cultural capital' (Kobayashi et al. 2018). The discussion within these sources suggests an intriguing overlap of such cultural capital with brand equity—both will be increased if the spiritual relationship can be elevated to the point of spiritual love.

Filieri et al. (2019) develop this underlying spiritual aspect of branding as do Merrilees et al. (2018) with their examination of city branding in Hong Kong. Both sources note the differing spiritual emphases in the Chinese context, with the observation that Chinese spiritual motivations have communal rather than individual ideals and aspirations. The same observation is made by Schroeder et al. (2017) in their discussion of culture and global brands, although these authors note the potential for multiple feedback loops and contextual differences in a spiritual perspective.

The authors would thus argue that spirituality can be used as a basis for understanding brand love relationships where there is no identified individual correspondent to form the basis of an ongoing interpersonal brand love relationship with the consumer. In such situations the brand is not represented to the consumer as an individual (possibly anthropomorphised) entity, but as one or more spiritual values, which the consumer shares with their community via social, cultural and religious links. The consumer can thus use the brand to express these individual spiritual values more effectively within their community and vice-versa. A brand acting in this transmissive role is not an end target for the consumer's love, but is rather a conduit through which that spiritual love flows more effectively to its intended communal recipients (Fig. 1).

When investigating the role of spirituality in brand related behaviours, a well-developed, accepted and non-religious model of spirituality is required. The researchers selected Howden's (1992) concept of spirituality as the basis of this research. Howden's model originated in nursing and has found its widest application in medicine and psychology. It has a clear four-part structure (unifying interconnectedness, purpose and meaning in life, inner strength and transcendence).

Howden's model has formed the basis of a considerable research literature on spirituality and human behaviour (Weathers et al. 2016). The review provided by Husemann, and Eckhardt (2019) in the *Journal of Marketing Management's* special issue on consumer spirituality indicated that there is no model of spirituality in marketing that currently has this level of structure and development.

### Spiritual relationships and brands

Transferring spirituality to the commercial world of marketing and brands requires some tightening of focus. While human spiritual behaviour takes a wide variety of forms and



**Table 1** Howden's components of spirituality applied to consumer spirituality and branding

Howden's components and attributes of spirituality as applied to nursing	Example of an equivalent expression of brand-driven consumer spirituality
<p><b>Purpose and meaning in life</b></p> <p>Expresses that life has meaning or purpose</p> <p>Expresses reason for living</p> <p>Expresses life is meaningful</p> <p>Expresses goals &amp; aims</p>	Life insurance brands. Advertising for branded life insurance is strongly purpose (provide for your loved ones) driven (e.g. AIG life). Similarly, tertiary education (universities) are often heavily personal purpose orientated. Commercial branded religion (televangelism) has this as its main positioning
<p><b>Innerness or inner resources</b></p> <p>Relies on inner strength &amp; inner resources in times of crisis</p> <p>Expresses inner harmony or peace (balance)</p> <p>Knows (can identify) inner strengths (awareness)</p> <p>Expresses inner calmness or serenity</p>	Many cosmetics brands are positioned on the capacity to deliver confidence and inner strength. For some brands, such as Karma and Luck® this is the core positioning. <i>"Go within every day and find the inner strength so that the world will not blow your candle out.—Katherine Dunham"</i>
<p><b>Unifying interconnectedness</b></p> <p>Feeling of connection to all of life</p> <p>Feeling of kinship with others</p> <p>Desire to be of service to others</p> <p>Seeks forgiveness and reconciliation</p>	Almost any brand with a primary objective to benefit third parties. Examples include: Greenpeace®, Trade Aid®, Fairtrade®. Often conflated with purpose. Mainline brands are also positioning along these lines to a degree that allows 'purpose' rankings to be developed (Chahal 2015)
<p><b>Transcendence indicators</b></p> <p>Ability to achieve new perspectives</p> <p>Experiences of rising above body changes or loss</p> <p>Capacity to extend self beyond usual contexts</p> <p>Experiences of rising above or going beyond psychological or physical conditions</p>	Weight loss brands e.g. Jenny Craig®. Published personal testimonials constantly refer to any of all four of the indicators noted by Howden e.g. <i>"Jenny Craig gave me my confidence back, gave me my personality back, gave me my life back,"</i> Jenny Craig 2019)

can generate a variety of rewards, its application to marketing and brands tightens the focus to acts of brand-driven consumption, the cost to the consumer of these transactions, and the means by which the consumer evaluates the corresponding benefits of these transactions in non-material 'spiritual' terms. This process occurs within the narrower context of 'consumer spirituality' and this is defined by Husemann and Eckhardt (2019) in the introduction to the Journal of Marketing Management's special issue on consumer spirituality:

We define consumer spirituality as the interrelated practices and processes engaged in when consuming market offerings (products, services, places) that yield 'spiritual utility'. The market offerings are purposely designed to quench consumers' thirst for meaningful encounters with one's inner self or a higher external power. (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019, p. 391).

"Howden's model contains four major components, that can each be expressed in four specific ways (Table 1). It can be applied to many instances of consumer spirituality as defined by Husemann and Eckhardt (2019), and the brands that seek to add value to themselves by specifically targeting consumer spirituality outcomes along these dimensions. Some examples of spiritual brands operating within these definitions are given in Table 1.

## Research propositions

The research had two broad exploratory objectives. As Howden's model of spirituality has not been deployed in a marketing context up to this point, the first was to establish if attitudes and behaviours that were consistent with the four dimensions in Howden's model of spirituality could be observed in consumer brand relationships. This objective was addressed by the two propositions below. RP1 looked at whether attitudes relating to Howden's model could be observed, firstly in any context, and then in the context of brands. RP2 then examined whether these behaviours could be associated with consumer attitudes and behaviours towards brands.

**RP1** Consumers engaged in relationships with brands are positively influenced by the spiritual dimensions of: unifying interconnectedness; transcendence experiences; innerness or inner resources; purpose and meaning in life.

**RP2** The more closely consumers identify with a brand's spiritual resources, perspectives, identities, the more consumers will act on its behalf.

The second research objective was to establish if differences between these behaviours, and the nature of the spirituality behind them, could be observed in equivalent samples of Chinese and Western consumers. The expectation, expressed by RP3 and based on the existing literature, is that spirituality would play a broader and more powerful



(to the point of love) role in the brand interactions of the Chinese sample.

**RP3** Young New Zealand consumers and young Chinese consumers have different spiritual perspectives in their brand love relationships.

## Methods

### Research design

As the research objectives were exploratory, a qualitative, interpretive approach was applied in this study. A semi-structured interview method was adopted similar to that used in similar brand love/hate research (Zarantonello et al. 2018; Langner et al. 2016). This approach allowed the research propositions above to be systematically addressed while also allowing for extra depth to be pursued in response to responses that suggested insights of particular interest (Belk et al. 2012). The recommendations in industrial research sources such as Eppinger and Ulrich (2015) is that the maximum number of points (themes) that can be covered by such interviews was six an hour. Thus, as this research aimed to address three research propositions, each interview was scheduled for 30 min to one hour—most lasted between 35 and 45 min.

Semi-structured interviews are a commonly cited research tool, but they incorporate a wide number of approaches ranging from almost totally unstructured to a structured interview that resembles a verbal questionnaire with some limited scope for free comment (Belk et al. 2012). As (Evans 2018, p. 2) notes: “the interview should resemble a ‘flowing conversation’”. This is hard to achieve if the interview guide has a number of ‘hard’ question points in its structure, as these can interrupt the flow of response. In this case the researchers avoided this by using the three research propositions as the structural objectives, but allowing the interviewer complete discretion as to how the conversation was developed to cover them. In this case the interviewer only had to ‘drive’ the respondent over the first two research propositions, the third proposition could then be addressed by comparison of the Chinese and Western sample groups’ responses to RP1 and RP2. This freedom allowed response to RP1 and RP2 to be fully developed in the time available.

### Sampling and data collection

This research used similar sample size to other published exploratory studies into brand love and brand hate (Zarantonello et al. 2018; Langner et al. 2016). The researchers’ aim was to recruit a sample that included two groups (Western and Chinese) that were in other respects homogenous

and equivalent to one another, thus facilitating the comparisons that were necessary for RP3. The researchers thus chose to recruit students from two campus sites in New Zealand and China.

The New Zealand interview process was undertaken in the City of Dunedin, from April 2017 to July 2017. The researchers interviewed 23 respondents from the University of Otago. The New Zealand respondents were recruited from the University library, the café, or classrooms. The researchers collected data in China from July 2017 to September 2017. The researchers interviewed 37 respondents from the Yunnan University of Finance and Economics. The Chinese respondents were recruited from the same campus areas as the New Zealand sample.

The respondents were between 18 and 25 years of age, with a mean of 21.5 years of age. The respondents represented a range of academic majors including commerce, engineering, information science, farming, arts, and humanities. There were four Maori<sup>2</sup> respondents and 19 Caucasian respondents within the New Zealand respondent group. The 37 Chinese respondents were all Han-Chinese. The sample of New Zealand respondents included 19 undergraduate students and 4 postgraduate students. The sample of Chinese respondents included 34 undergraduate students and 3 postgraduate students. The two samples were thus relatively homogenous and similar in terms of age, socio-economic background and education.

All the interviews in both countries were undertaken by the lead author, who is bilingual in English and Mandarin, thus eliminating the need for and risks of multiple interviewers and translators.

### Data analysis

Each interview generated data of three forms. A recording, a transcription of that recording and a set of notes written up by the interviewer immediately after each interview.<sup>3</sup> These notes were written up under each of the three research propositions (themes) and ran to some two to three pages per interview. These notes included the interviewer’s immediate record of any non-verbal content of the interview, and their observations/reflections upon the interview that related to the three propositions. Quotes that were particularly relevant to each theme were tagged on to these notes at that point so that they could be recovered from the bulk of the interview

<sup>2</sup> Maori form a discrete cultural subgroup within New Zealand. However, it was decided to include these respondents as such minorities are now a characteristic of nearly all Western cultures.

<sup>3</sup> Immediately meant immediately in this case – the moment the interview was completed these notes were written up.





recordings/transcripts to support the notes as the analysis proceeded.

As thematic analysis was used as the primary analytical approach, rather than content analysis, the notes, amounting to some 150 pages plus about 100 pages of tagged quotations formed the 'data of record' for this work. The recording and transcripts were only used to clear up ambiguities in the data of record.

Thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998) is a procedure that has been greatly popularised in the social sciences by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke required the researcher to address a body of data and to examine it closely and identify any patterns (themes) that arose from it with no prior theory to direct them. From the outset this approach ran into issues with the primacy of theory—most notably that patterns cannot be identified without a 'template' of pre-existing theory that recognises them as such (Popper 1959; Hamlin 2003). In response to this issue Braun and Clarke (2019) have developed the theory of 'reflexive' thematic analysis:

"Reflexive TA needs to be implemented with theoretical knowingness and transparency; the researcher strives to be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing their use of TA; and these are consistently, coherently and transparently enacted throughout the analytic process and reporting of the research. They are aware of the need to make decisions around analysis, and they knowingly engage and make them" Braun and Clarke (2019, p.594).

The passage above describes the approach taken in this research very closely. The researchers took the three existing research propositions and used them as reflexive themes around which to structure their analysis of the research. This process began within seconds of the interview ending, with the preparation of the interview notes under the three theme headings. The process continued as the sixty sets of notes were further consolidated, cross referenced and compressed under each of the three themes to generate the results and observations in the next section. Analysis of the empirical data followed a fixed coding approach, whereby collectively exhaustive and mutually exclusive first order concept categories were developed using Howden's four dimensions of spirituality. Using the approach recommended by Gioia et al. (2013), prior studies that provide scale items to measure each of the component parts of Howden's dimensions were reviewed to provide a framework for the development of initial coding categories under each dimension (e.g. Ko et al. 2017; Dyson et al. 1997; Delaney 2005). Once the four dimensions were conceptualised as a set of possible responses, with clear boundaries defined between the groups of response types, a first run of exhaustive coding was

performed. Once all data was coded, groups of responses were collapsed into the four representative Howden categories of unifying interconnectedness; transcendence experiences; innerness or inner resources; and purpose and meaning in life.

As both Goia et al. (2013) and Braun and Clarke (2019) note (see quote above), this requires researchers to make certain *a priori* decisions as to what is and what is not part of a theme—while this creates a risk of conscious (knowing) researcher bias finding its way into the results, it also concomitantly reduces the chance of its unconscious equivalent contributing in a similar manner. This matter is further assisted by the relatively specific nature of the research propositions, which reduced thematic coding to a binary exercise in most cases, and the large number of interviews in the sample, which allowed the outcomes to be represented numerically (but not quantitatively) in the following findings and discussion section.

## Findings and discussions

**RP1** Consumers engaged in relationships with brands are positively influenced by the spiritual dimensions of: unifying interconnectedness; transcendence experiences; innerness or inner resources; purpose and meaning in life.

RP1 was addressed in the first part of the interview, which generally started with a conversation on spirituality and the spiritual experiences of the subject. This led on to the subject's interactions with people and objects that occurred in a spiritual context. Prompting as to 'do you have a spiritual relationship with a brand?' was avoided at this point—Brands had to be brought up by the subject in order to enter the discussion. Likewise, specific prompting on the components or dimensions of spirituality, whether brand related or not, were avoided.

The sample's descriptions of spirituality were varied, and there was little distinction in the sample with regard to the nature of these discussions. The four dimensions of Howden's model of spirituality did emerge unprompted from a considerable proportion of the sample, both in China and in New Zealand (Table 2). The third and fourth dimensions showed little distinction between the New Zealand and Chinese samples, but a strong distinction emerged between the samples with regard to the first and second of Howden's dimensions (purpose and meaning in life and innerness or inner resources). The New Zealand sample showed a much higher response with regard to individual inner resource, and the Chinese sample showed a higher response when relating their spirituality to a purpose in life. However, more than 50% of each sample responded, unprompted, in a manner



**Table 2** Participants expressing spirituality in a manner consistent with Howden's dimensions of spirituality

	New Zealand sample #	New Zealand sample %	Chinese sample #	Chinese sample %
1. Purpose and meaning in life	17/23	74	37/37	100
2. Innerness or inner resources	16/23	69	18/37	49
3. Unifying interconnectedness	20/23	87	32/37	86
4. Transcendence experiences	20/23	87	31/37	84

that indicated that Howden's dimensions could be applied to their spirituality.

The sample expressed their spirituality in a variety of ways, but the quotes below are representative:

Unifying interconnectedness: "I think what builds a relationship with sharing experiences, for like you telling a person about your experiences, and they telling you about their experiences, like over course time, I think we can get the level of intimacy with best friend, quite quickly, depending on the person. I think if you far from each other, time definitely matters, cause then you have to make efforts to share the memories, and build intimacy stuff, I think like you can make pen pal, who likes to become a best friend to you, but I think it would take a long time." [1] NZ7.

Transcendence experiences: "I think that the energy of nature is one of the most magnificent things in the entire universe, because it is full of wonder and magic. Nature is able to create such beautiful things because it understands the importance of balance and harmony. Being in a state of balance and harmony is essential for inner peace. I found this because I travelled with my family a lot, and I found that whenever I went to forest, seaside, or lakeside, I would feel inner peace." [2] NZ22.

Innerness and inner resources: "When I travel to the country and surround myself with the energy of nature, I would start to see all the little details in nature that I failed to see. I can notice that my mind is clearer and I don't feel as stressful as when I am in the city. Many people who spend a lot of time out in nature often experience a sense of inner calmness that they can never find in the city. This inner calmness is what we often seek for whenever we feel lost and depressed." [3] NZ22.

Purpose and meaning in life: "...life purpose does not mean just your mainstream work. It's different things that are connected and have a tendency to affect another aspect of your life. It's the system that defines you and the way you live your life" –NZ8 and "I think

that everyone wants to look for truth and purpose of life. Whatever that truth is will eventually become his or her set of rules, beliefs, and in totality, way of life." [4] NZ10.

The comments above were largely drawn from the first general discussion on spirituality, the respondents were then steered towards how their spirituality was expressed via objects—with brands treated and mentioned by respondents incidentally as an object. The relationship of spirituality towards objects was strongly oriented towards human beings, especially family and close friends. Less emphasis was placed on inanimate objects, and in this context 'places', rather than specific objects, featured heavily. A minority of the sample did make comments with regard to brands that could be related to three of the four dimensions of Howden's four components of spirituality. In almost all cases these comments also included humans and/or places as well as the brand and the respondent. One component of Howden's model of spirituality that was not observed in comments related to spiritual links with brands was, 'purpose and meaning in life'. The quotes below are representative of what the researchers observed:

Unifying interconnectedness: "I was influenced by my family that we would never buy Apple or Samsung, and we would never consider Apple or Samsung.....I was influenced by my friends, all my friends are using Huawei, it's quite popular among students...and all my relatives are using Huawei...." [5] C22.

Transcendence experiences: "I love Nike, not only because it's long-lasting. I like the idea that they have the certain unique factors as well. That makes me happy and I feel as if I am special and different from others, in a good way." [6] NZ7.

Innerness and inner resources: "I love Nike...I've got Nike tennis shoes and I am the only person [in my group] that owns that particular type of shoes, I've got them like pretty expensive, but I bought them, specifically because I knew no one else had them, so I like have the unique factors as well. That makes me happy and I feel like I am different from others, in a good way." [7] NZ8.



Around a third of the respondents indicated a spiritual role for brands in their lives that could be associated with Howden's model, but this connection was rarely expressed in isolation. There were very few comments that could be interpreted as a direct spiritual/love connection between a respondent and a brand. There was usually a third point of reference, as the quotes above demonstrate. Sometimes this point of reference was implicit, as with the quote below where the audience that the brand is representing the respondent to is unspecified:

"I really love XIAOMI, I use it for four years, this brand delivered the brand culture of simple, fashion, and fast which can represent my values" [8] C36.

Thus, all four of Howden's dimensions could be identified in a general discussion of spirituality with a very large majority of this sample, and this observation applied to both locations. This observation was repeated when spirituality was related to objects, especially humans. Brands were only mentioned unprompted by a minority of this sample in a discussion of their spiritual relationships. Where brands were mentioned, they were usually mentioned in relationship to objects and people, not in isolation. Howden's 'meaning of life' dimension was never directly related to brands, and on the few occasions when it was mentioned, it was heavily moderated by intermediaries including the product itself:

"Like my Mac, what I am attached to is the knowledge it can provide to me, my thesis, my degree, it's not just an electronic thing that I can replace. It helps me not only from the functions it also enhances my knowledge, insight, and intrinsically, it provides meaning in my life." [10] NZ6.

It should be noted that Howden's model does not require all four components to be present in a spiritual relationship. One is sufficient.

**RP2** The more closely consumers identify with a brand's spiritual resources, perspectives, identities, the more consumers will act on its behalf.

As the interviews progressed, interviewees were probed with regard to the basis of their behaviour with regard to brands. This further probing was not restricted to those who had expressed a spiritual connection with the brand, nor did it assume or prompt a spiritual motivation for support, as it was perfectly possible for an individual to support a brand to the point of stated 'love' for utterly practical and non-spiritual reasons, even while believing that others followed the brand for other reasons, as the quote below demonstrates:

"I've heard that some people call us I-sheep. It's quite interesting. This name is for some Apple fans that love Apple so much that they love every product Apple

makes and every decision Apple makes, and follow Apple like sheep. I love Apple products because they suit my needs better than other products for the most part. Apple is still the shortest distance between you and what you want to do to. They maximize digital experiences—in the Swiss Army Knife sense." [11] NZ16.

All the responses that indicated spiritually motivated brand support behaviours were drawn from the portion of the sample that had previously indicated some form of spiritual connection with brands (RP1). However, directly reported spiritually connected support for a brand within this group, either by purchase or proselytisation, was strongly related to the non-spiritual and historical performance of the products that carried it—even if the word 'love' and other spiritual terms were used in connection with the brand:

"When I put Adidas on, it was like I was walking on a cloud, it had a perfect fit, proper arch support, it didn't rub anywhere, it was just heaven. This brand perfectly supports and inspires me from different perspectives, just love it" [12] NZ12.

Where a direct spiritual or emotional connection with a brand was reported, it often related to consumer 'forgiveness' of similar non-spiritual failures in product performance:

"I think I have fully trusted the brand I like—Adidas, if they have any problems with their products, I would still support them, after all, it's a big brand. I don't think it would influence me. I believe that every company has scandals, has their own problems, I would fully support the brand I like." [14] C29.

"Since everyone knows that Samsung have made big mistakes.....so, it's probably the battery company's fault rather than Samsung's own fault.....my first [phone] was Samsung, the flip top, and my first smart phone is Samsung, and I still use this brand....." [15] NZ7.

Support for a brand was occasionally related to spiritual motivations, but as in previous observations, this was usually moderated by the prior performance of products associated with the brand, and by people associated with both the respondent and the brand:

"Kindle is my spiritual resource. The more you read the more experiences you would receive. You might not feel anything after reading. However, you may feel you have the same experiences as a result of reading those books. The help from books is useful even though it is invisible" [16] C14.





“My friends suggested I buy VIVO, VIVO is more suitable for the university student. It has a good appearance and good functions. Now, all my family members have all changed to VIVO, they have been influenced by me and VIVO ads” [17] C6.

This strong interconnection was present even when very strong brand emotions were expressed:

“I love NIKE, as because I am fat since I was a middle school student, and sports outfits suit me and they have different styles and I love everything of them, from hat, bag, clothing, and shoes. I connected with this brand since my middle school until now, and I think this relationship will last.” [18] NZ16.

Despite this level of interconnection between brands, products and people, several respondents described behaviour suggesting support for brands that could be related to two of Howden’s four spiritual dimensions: internal resources and unifying interconnectedness:

“That’s probably why I like Apple, because it is Apple. I do like to buy more Apple stuff. I am interested when they have new products coming. I do follow their news. I do love Apple because it’s really easy to use, their devices just work. I love Apple because they make me feel like I am a better person for having the product. (Internal resources) NZ student, respondent [19] NZ14.

“I love MUJI, which I recommend to all of my friends. It makes me really look like their saleswoman who helps them promote brands. If I really like something, I would recommend to my friends first, I want to share with them. I really hope that people around me can have the best I know, and very like to share good things with them. If I bought something very bad, I would tell them too.” (unifying interconnectedness) [20] C35.

The research relating to RP2 thus yielded evidence that consumer behaviours towards brands were influenced and informed by emotions that were identifiable as a spiritual relationship between the respondents and a brand based on two of Howden’s four dimensions. However, when it was expressed, ‘love’ and spiritually related intent to repurchase, proselytise and ‘forgive’ brands was usually related to the non-spiritual process of historical delivery of direct benefits via products and services. Furthermore, in the vast majority of cases the relationship was highly moderated by products, places and people, or a combination of them. Thus, while Howden’s four components of spirituality could be observed in a portion of the sample’s perception of brands (RP1), only two of these four dimensions were present in a significantly

moderated form in this sample’s reported behavior towards them (RP2).

**RP3** Young New Zealand consumers and young Chinese consumers have different spiritual perspectives in their brand love relationships.

This part of the research was not addressed by direct questioning in the interviews, but by analysis of the investigations relating to RP1 and RP2. Table 1 shows the response profiles of the sample with regard to their general spirituality. There is little differentiation between the two samples with regard to the third and fourth of Howden’s dimensions (unifying interconnectedness and transcendence experiences), but, there was a strong differentiation in the first two, with a considerably higher proportion of the New Zealand sample expressing spirituality in a manner consistent with the second dimension (innerness or inner resources), and a much higher percentage of the Chinese sample expressing spirituality consistent with first dimension (purpose and meaning in life).

When spirituality was examined with regard to brands, the first dimension, which had so distinguished the Chinese sample was not reported by any of the New Zealand respondents in relationship to brands. However, there was a strong differentiation between the responses of the two samples based upon the second and third dimensions (innerness or inner resources and unifying interconnectedness) when indicating spiritual connection with brands. This differentiation was linked to and thus expressed by the context of the relationship. This illustrated by quotes 19 and 20 above. The New Zealand respondent indicated how the relationship increased their inner personal resources, while the Chinese respondent indicated how the brand was used to facilitate interconnections within their peer groups. This differentiation was reflected among the respondents of both samples when they indicated a spiritual relationship with brands:

Spalding is crafted from quality rubber that can give toughness...I would like to recommend this brand to someone who loves sports, and I think I have to share good things with other people, or I should share what’s worth sharing with other people. [21] C33 (Compare with quotes 7 and 19).

While it was possible to observe this differentiation, it was not symmetrical. The interconnection aspect of the brand relationship was expressed far more regularly by the Chinese respondents than the inner resources aspect was mentioned by the New Zealand sample.



## Conclusions

This research aimed to explore the nature of spirituality in brand love relationships. It aimed to investigate the limits of the dominant model of brand love as an interpersonal context, as expressed in this journal by Rauchnabe and Ahuvia (2014). It also aimed to discover if the adoption of a spiritual, rather than interpersonal basis, for love could act as a framework for 'brand love' in order to address the concern that the Chinese expression of brand love as a collective context could not be supported by the dominant interpersonal love paradigm (Filieri et al. 2019).

As there is no strongly established model for spiritual love in the brand literature (Husemann, and Eckhardt 2019), the researchers adapted an established model with four components from the medical and nursing literature (Howden 1992). The results indicated that this concept may have potential for application in the consumer/brand relationship. The Howden model returned all four components in an unprompted general discussion of the sample's spirituality, and three in a more targeted discussion of spirituality and brands, with only the fourth component, 'purpose and meaning in life' failing to present in a brand context. However, it must be noted the role of purpose and meaning in life was universally cited by the Chinese part of the sample as a core aspect of their personal spirituality—thus suggesting that brands are specifically not seen as a forum for expressing this otherwise important aspect of their spirituality. The same can be said somewhat less emphatically for the New Zealand sample. Thus RP1 enjoys a level of support from this research in that all four components of Howden's model were observed in a general discussion of spirituality, and that three of these components were observable in a brand/spiritual context. (RP1).

With regard to RP2, the research did not yield a straightforward result. Spiritual relationships were routinely ascribed by both Chinese and New Zealand respondents to a wholly non-spiritual history of product performance. In addition, spiritual relationships with brands were hardly ever described as an isolated phenomenon. If a spiritual connection with a brand was expressed, it was always placed in the context of a parallel relationship with products, places and people. It thus proved to be impossible within the context of this research to unconfound these statements and to come to any conclusions with regard to the strength of the sample's spiritual connection with a brand and the strength of observable action to support it. However, two of Howden's components of spirituality (innerness and inner resources and unifying interconnectedness) were consistently associated with brand behaviour of some sort by the sample. Thus, RP2 is not supported by the research, but neither is it wholly repudiated.

The outcomes of RP1 and RP2 formed a basis for examining RP3. The two components of Howden's model for which brand behaviours were observed in RP2 were significantly differentiated between the two samples. The New Zealand sample predominantly expressed the second component of Howden's model (innerness or inner resources) as a driver for brand behaviours while the Chinese sample predominantly expressed the third component (unifying interconnectedness) rather more strongly thus delivering support for RP3.

As the presence of only one or more of these components is required for a spiritual relationship to exist, Howden's model may be able to describe spiritual love as both an individual and collective phenomenon by employing different components—thus differentiating the two groups in this sample and addressing the concerns about applying interpersonal love to Chinese brand relationships raised by Filieri et al. (2019).

The strongest theme that emerged from this research was not related to any of the research propositions, but emerged from the research unbidden much as Braun and Clarke (2006) recommended it should. This sample were interviewed over eighty hours—the overwhelming theme in the sample's response over this period was that brands were very rarely considered as entities in their own right, but rather as something that were an integral part of the sample's relationships with other entities within their environment—products, places and people.

This is entirely consistent with the basic nature of brands, as a brand cannot exist without products or services as a vehicle to sustain them and without human constituents within which to reside. Even if these conditions are met, brands have no specific 'point of existence'—Nobody has ever 'seen' a brand. What are seen are the cues that trigger brands (e.g. the Coca-Cola and Visa logos) and the products (e.g. cans) and service delivery platforms (e.g. credit cards) that carry those cues—the former is often misidentified as a brand.

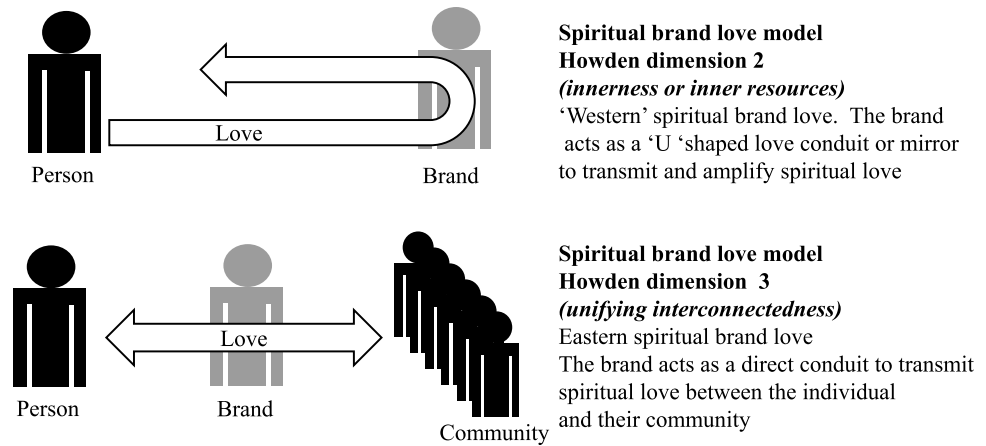
This can be demonstrated by examining a quote and citation from a recent article on brands:

“Popular human brands that display both warmth and competence include Coca-Cola, Hershey's, and Johnson and Johnson. These brands have strong relationships with customers and enjoy high brand loyalty (Fournier 2009; Fournier and Alvarez 2012).” (Portal et al. 2018, p369).

Only an optimist would argue that an aluminium can of sugar water, a bar of chocolate and a plastic bottle of shampoo, or any of the patterns of ink that appear upon these inanimate objects, have 'warmth and competence' and can have a 'strong relationship' with anything. So, if these warm and competent brands are not there—then



**Fig. 2** ‘Transmissive’ brand love in a Western and Chinese context



where are they? The answer is that they are in an unspecified form within the minds of an unspecified group of humans—which means that they are everywhere, nowhere and inseparable from their unspecified human hosts, all at the same time. They have no defined ‘point of existence’.

Concomitant with the theme that brands had no individual ‘point of existence’ was the observation that brands were not considered by the sample to be ‘destinations’ for spiritual feelings or love, but rather as facilitators/conduits for it. While it was strongly expressed by the sample, such a concept is incompatible with any brand love model that is based on interpersonal love with the brand as a correspondent, which requires a specific node at each end of it—regardless of whether that love is unrequited, parasocial or reciprocal.

It is possible to combine this observation with the observations relating to the different components of love identified by the Chinese and New Zealand samples with regard to RP3, and to develop the two separate and potentially incompatible models of ‘interpersonal’ and ‘spiritual’ brand love shown in Fig. 1 into the single concept of ‘transmissive’ brand love shown in Fig. 2, where the two forms of it (Chinese and Western<sup>4</sup>) are distinguished by the component of Howden’s spirituality that is involved.

The major concept here that departs from established positions as expressed by Batra et al. (2012) and the more than one thousand articles that cite this work is that the brand acts as a conduit, rather than a correspondent for love in both cases, but in the Western version, where ‘innerness and inner resources’ is the driving component, the conduit provided by the brand is reflexive—with the brand returning and amplifying the consumer’s own spiritual beliefs motivations and objectives to them.

This is not to say that all Western consumer brand relationships are narcissistic, but it is certainly true that some of them are, and that the observations drawn from the very substantial brand and consumer narcissism literature fit this reflexive conduit model for brand relationships remarkably closely (Awad and Youn 2018).

The removal of the requirement for a fundamentally different ‘love’ thought process also brings theory into line with what is patently observable—namely that both types of brand facilitated love are observable in both cultures, albeit with differing rates of prevalence. For example, ‘L’Oréal’® is a successful Western brand that has been built around a clearly reflexive position with an individual target—‘because you’re worth it’. L’Oréal has successfully transferred this Western brand and its reflexive positioning to China.

By contrast ‘Manchester United’® is a Western brand that is built around a communal transmissive position with large correspondent communities. It has been a highly successful brand for over a century in the United Kingdom, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the brand has seen enormous recent success in China with 253 million reported fans in 2019 (Pilger 2019). This represents nearly 20% of the total population of China and nearly five times the entire population of the brand’s home country. In 2013, the fan base in China was 108 million. This suggests that Western brands of both types can succeed in China—if they can successfully identify the love target and transmission pathway involved.

The concept of ‘transmissive’ brand love, in which the brand acts as a conduit rather than as a destination for this human emotion, is the principal contribution that this research makes. The concept addresses many of the philosophical problems that arise from the fact that a brand is a non-human (tangibly non-existent) entity that is incapable of many of the actions that are identified as essential to the proper expression of ‘love’ as humans understand and practice it. Also, the single concept of transmissive brand love can be used to describe how brands can support narcissistic,

<sup>4</sup> There is no claim here that this model could be applied absolutely to Western and Eastern consumers to predict their behaviour. As in this sample, there would be graduations and exceptions in any group of consumers drawn from either culture.



interpersonal and communal love relationships that occur in both Western and Chinese marketing contexts.

Removing the difficult requirement for brands to act as a correspondent in love relationships, and replacing it with a far more suitable and achievable facilitating role, also makes it easier to understand how brands can add value in these situations. For example, the Gold iPhone phenomenon in China (Elmer-Dewitt 2014) is made more understandable by the use of the transmissive love concept. Those who bought gold iPhones did not *love* their gold iPhones, they *loved* the members of their group *through* their gold iPhones. The same can be said of those Chinese who buy and wear Manchester United premium branded merchandise. Likewise, a Western consumer does not *love* L'Oréal, they *love* themselves *through* their use of L'Oréal products—because they're worth it. As L'Oréal and Manchester United have demonstrated, developing and calibrating brands on the basis of this understanding of their transmissive role in such relationship delivers impressive equity.

While the transmissive brand love model is the major contribution of this research, it is worth noting that this was not its original objective, which was to investigate the differences between Chinese and Western forms of brand love. However, such incidental insights are in the nature of exploratory, qualitative research, and are one of its principal assets.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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