Original Research Article

More Than a Product: An Exploratory Correlational Study of Emotional Brand Constructs and Purchase Intention Among Gen-Z

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ABSTRACT

Emotional marketing has become a central strategy in contemporary branding, with companies increasingly building emotional connections to their brand rather than relying solely on rational product claims. This exploratory, cross-sectional study examined associations between three emotional brand constructs (consumer-brand identification, brand love, and brand attachment) and purchase intention among Gen-Z consumers. Thirty participants (ages 15-19, M = 16.8), recruited through convenience sampling from the researcher's personal and school network, completed a 16-item, 7-point Likert-scale survey measuring the four constructs in relation to a brand they personally like. Participants were located primarily in New York City, Paris, and London. Internal consistency reliability was acceptable to good for three constructs (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74\text{-}0.85$) but below conventional thresholds for purchase intention ($\alpha = 0.61$). Brand attachment showed the strongest observed correlation with purchase intention, $r(28) = .41$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.67], followed by brand love, $r(28) = 0.25$, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.56], and consumer-brand identification, $r(28) = 0.21$, 95% CI [-0.17, 0.53]; none of these associations remained statistically significant 0after Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. These findings should be interpreted as preliminary and exploratory given the small, non-random sample, and do not support causal or predictive claims about emotional marketing's effects on consumer behavior.

Keywords: Emotional marketing; brand attachment; Gen-Z; consumer behavior; purchase intention; brand love; adolescent decision-making; marketing ethics

INTRODUCTION

Nearly all American teenagers now carry a smartphone, and almost half describe themselves as online "almost constantly" (1). For a generation this digitally embedded, brands are not occasional interruptions; they are a near-constant backdrop to daily life. What determines whether any of it leaves a lasting impression is rarely the specific product or price point. It is how a brand made them feel.

This is not a coincidence. Over the past decade, advances in neuroscience, behavioral economics, and artificial intelligence have fundamentally changed the way brands understand and target human emotion. Research on decision-making increasingly points to the role of fast, unconscious emotional processes rather than purely rational evaluation (2, 3). Brands have taken notice. Rather than competing on price or product features alone, the most successful companies today compete on feeling, on how deeply a consumer is emotionally connected to what a brand represents. This

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strategy is known as emotional marketing, and among no group is it more powerful, or more consequential, than young consumers.

Gen-Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is the first generation to have grown up entirely within the digital era. They are simultaneously the most marketed-to generation in history and the most skeptical of marketing. They are also economically influential, shaping purchasing decisions not only for themselves, but within their households, with collective spending projected to reach $12.6 trillion globally by 2030 (4). Crucially, they are at a stage of neurological and psychological development where the brain's emotional systems are fully active while the prefrontal cortex, responsible for critical thinking and impulse control, is still developing. This makes them uniquely responsive to emotional appeals, and uniquely vulnerable to them.

This paper reports an exploratory, correlational study investigating whether four constructs widely used in marketing research - consumer-brand identification, brand love, brand attachment, and purchase intention - are associated with one another in a sample of Gen-Z consumers, and which construct shows the strongest observed association with purchase intention. Using a quantitative survey distributed to 30 Gen-Z respondents, this study examines correlations between these emotional dimensions and purchase intention; it does not test causal or predictive relationships, and the sample is not intended to be representative of Gen-Z consumers as a whole.

The paper is structured as follows. The literature review defines emotional marketing and examines its particular relevance for young consumers, drawing on research in psychology, neuroscience, and consumer behavior. The methodology section describes the survey design and measurement instruments used. The results section presents the descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The discussion then interprets these findings in relation to existing literature, draws practical implications for both brands and young consumers, and raises the ethical questions that this kind of research cannot afford to ignore.

Despite extensive literature on emotional marketing in adult consumers, comparatively little empirical work has examined how multiple emotional-brand constructs - consumer-brand identification, brand love, and brand attachment - relate to one another and to purchase intention specifically within a Gen-Z sample. This study addresses that gap through an exploratory, correlational analysis. Based on prior literature linking self-brand connection to loyalty and purchase behavior, positive associations were expected between all three constructs and purchase intention; given its closer theoretical ties to identity and self-concept, brand attachment was expected to show a comparatively stronger association than brand love or consumer-brand identification, though this study does not test directional causal hypotheses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, researchers have increasingly questioned the idea that consumer decisions are made mainly through logic and rational thinking. Marketing professionals have responded by shifting focus toward emotional appeals, particularly among younger consumers; emotional connections to a brand have been associated with future consumer choices more strongly than traditional measures such as satisfaction or brand awareness (5). This shift has accelerated since the mid-2010s as social media and digital platforms have increased daily exposure to emotionally driven advertising (6), while advances in neuroscience have allowed companies to target emotional responses more deliberately. The following sections define emotional marketing and examine its particular relevance to young consumers.

Emotional Marketing

Emotional marketing refers to a strategy in which brands intentionally use emotions, rather than logical factors such as price or product features, to shape how consumers think about, feel about, and choose products (6). Brands have long used emotional appeals, but what has changed in recent years is the growing scientific recognition, now supported by psychology and neuroscience, that emotions significantly guide consumer behavior (6).

Kahneman (2) explains that much of human decision-making occurs through fast, intuitive processes rather than slow, deliberate thinking, while Zaltman (3) argues that many consumer decisions happen at an unconscious level, with emotional reactions shaping choices before individuals are fully aware of them. Neuroscience research supports this: emotional centers in the brain, such as the amygdala, activate rapidly in response to stimuli and can guide behavior before the brain's rational systems fully evaluate a situation (7). These findings help explain why emotionally charged branding, whether through storytelling, imagery, or social meaning, can strongly shape how consumers perceive and remember brands.

Magids, Zorfas, and Leemon (5) found that customers who feel emotionally connected to a brand tend to be more valuable and more likely to continue purchasing than those who are simply satisfied, associating emotional connection with loyalty more strongly than satisfaction alone. For the purpose of this paper, emotional marketing refers to the intentional use of emotional appeals to shape brand perception, consumer preference, and everyday purchasing decisions.

Different emotions activate distinct psychological mechanisms that lead to different consumer behaviors. Fear appeals, such as emphasizing health risks or financial insecurity, motivate avoidance behavior and protective purchasing (8). Guilt activates a sense of personal responsibility, making guilt-based advertising particularly effective at encouraging prosocial behaviors such as buying ethically sourced products or choosing environmentally friendly options (9). Happiness and nostalgia tend to increase general brand liking and reduce critical evaluation of product information, encouraging more spontaneous purchasing (10), while pride appeals motivate purchases associated with achievement or social identity, reinforcing loyalty and willingness to pay a premium. Because effectiveness depends on matching the emotion to the desired behavior, this paper pays particular attention to how different emotional appeals are used in marketing directed at young consumers.

Young Consumers

While emotional marketing can influence consumers broadly, its effects are particularly strong among young consumers. In this paper, young consumers refer primarily to members of "Gen-Z" (born between 1997 and 2012 (1)), especially teenagers who have grown up entirely within the digital era and, as noted above, are almost constantly online. Advertising is therefore not something they encounter occasionally; it is embedded in their everyday life, and this constant exposure increases the likelihood that emotionally driven content shapes how they view and relate to brands.

Young consumers are also economically important: capturing a consumer early in life significantly increases their customer lifetime value, the total revenue a brand can expect over a long-term relationship (11), and Gen-Z also shapes household purchasing decisions beyond their own spending. Their importance extends beyond spending, however. Adolescence is a period of identity formation, during which individuals actively define who they are and how they want to be perceived by others. Brands often function during this stage as symbols of belonging, individuality, or social status, making brand choice part of expressing identity rather than simply selecting a product.

Neuroscience further suggests emotional marketing may resonate more strongly with teenagers: adolescent emotional and reward systems mature earlier than the prefrontal cortex responsible for impulse control, potentially making emotional appeals that emphasize belonging or recognition leave stronger impressions during adolescence than adulthood (7).

Gen-Z is also highly aware of marketing strategies and quick to reject content that feels inauthentic. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report (12), younger consumers place significantly higher value on authenticity and transparent communication than older generations and are more likely to disengage from brands perceived as deceptive, suggesting emotional marketing is effective among young consumers primarily when it appears genuine. This combination of neurological sensitivity, digital immersion, and economic influence makes young consumers a critical group for examining associations between emotional marketing and purchasing behavior.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Study Design and Participants

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine associations between emotional brand constructs and purchase intention among Gen-Z consumers. The research design focuses on four constructs widely used in marketing literature to measure emotional connections and behavioral outcomes: consumer-brand identification, brand love, brand attachment, and purchase intention.

Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method, drawn primarily from the author's personal and school network, with the survey link further circulated by email to reach additional peers within a similar age range. No monetary or material incentives were offered for participation. Because participants were part of the same school community, eligibility (approximately 15 to 19 years old) was inferred from shared school enrollment rather than confirmed through a formal age-screening question; actual reported ages are summarized in the Sample Characteristics section below.

The final sample consisted of 30 respondents. Demographic data, including age, gender, and location, were also collected to allow for a better understanding of the sample composition.

Survey Instrument and Data Collection

An online survey was created using Google Forms and distributed to participants. Respondents were first instructed to think about a brand they personally like, follow, or frequently purchase from, and to keep this brand in mind while answering all questions. All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree), allowing for nuanced measurement of attitudes and emotional intensity.

Each of the four constructs was operationalized as follows: Consumer-Brand Identification refers to the extent to which consumers perceive a brand as reflecting their identity and values, capturing feelings of belonging and self-congruence with the brand (13,14). Brand Love is defined as the degree of emotional affection, passion, and attachment a consumer feels toward a brand, reflecting a deeper emotional bond beyond simple satisfaction (15, 16). Brand Attachment describes the strength of the emotional connection between a consumer and a brand, including feelings of loss if the brand were to disappear and its importance in the consumer's life (17, 18). Purchase Intention measures the likelihood that a consumer will buy, recommend, or remain loyal to a brand, including willingness to pay a premium price (19-21).

The survey items were adapted from previously validated academic scales measuring these four constructs (Table 1). Minor wording modifications were made to ensure consistency in terminology (e.g., replacing "company" with "brand") and to improve readability for a high-school-aged sample; these edits did not alter the underlying meaning of the original items. Items were grouped in the questionnaire

Table 1. Emotional marketing survey items and sources. *Survey instruction: For the following questions, please think of your favorite brand: a brand that you personally like, follow on social media, or regularly purchase from. Keep this brand in mind when answering all questions below.*

Survey Question	Source
Section 1: Consumer-Brand Identification	
I identify strongly with this brand.	(14)
This brand's image overlaps with how I see myself.	(14)
When someone criticizes this brand, it feels like a personal insult.	(28)
I feel a sense of belonging when I use this brand.	(28)
The values of this brand are similar to my own values.	(14)
Section 2: Brand Love	
I feel affection for this brand.	(23)
I feel a natural connection to this brand.	(16)
I am passionate about this brand.	(16)
Section 3: Brand Attachment	
I feel emotionally connected to this brand.	(18)
This brand is part of who I am.	(18)
I would feel a loss if this brand no longer existed.	(23)
This brand has a special place in my life.	(29)
Section 4: Purchase Intention	
The likelihood that I would purchase this brand's products is high.	(20)
I intend to continue buying from this brand in the future.	(21)
I would recommend this brand to friends and family.	(21)
I would be willing to pay a premium price for this brand over competitors.	(20)

by construct rather than by their original source publication, allowing the study to examine relationships among the four constructs within a single survey instrument while using established measures from the marketing literature. No items were reverse-coded, as all survey statements were positively worded. The survey required a response to every item before submission, so there was no missing data. For each construct, a composite score was calculated by averaging participants' responses across all items belonging to that construct; because all items used the same seven-point Likert scale, averaging preserved the original scale and allowed direct comparison across constructs, with higher scores indicating stronger levels of the corresponding construct. All survey items used in this study are presented in Table 1.

Ethical Considerations

This study did not undergo formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) review, as it was conducted as an independent high school research project rather than through a university or institutional research program. The project was supervised by Apollo D., PhD (University of Massachusetts), who served as research mentor and advisor for the study design and methodology, with additional oversight from Laure K. Benchimol, Dean of High School at the Lycée Français de New York, the researcher's school.

Because most participants were minors and no institutional review process was available, several protective measures were used in place of formal parental consent. Participation was entirely voluntary: before beginning the survey, participants were informed that taking part was optional and that they could discontinue at any point before submitting responses without penalty. Once a participant continued, the survey required a response to every item before submission, so partial responses could not be submitted. The survey was limited to anonymous, non-sensitive questions about brand preferences, and no personally identifying information (such as names, email addresses, or contact information) was collected, so responses could not be traced back to individual respondents. Survey responses were stored electronically in a password-protected Google Forms/Google Drive account accessible only to the researcher and were used solely for the purposes of this study; only aggregated, anonymous data were analyzed and reported. Given the anonymous, voluntary, and minimal-risk nature of the survey, separate parental or guardian consent was not obtained; this is acknowledged as a limitation of the study's ethical procedures.

Statistical Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using Python (version 3), with the pandas, NumPy, and SciPy libraries. Internal consistency reliability for each construct was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, calculated from the variances of individual items and the variance of their summed total. Corrected item-total correlations were computed for each item as the Pearson correlation between that item and the sum of the remaining items within the same construct, with the item itself excluded to avoid inflating the estimate.

Composite scores for each construct were calculated by averaging within-construct items, and associations between constructs were assessed using Pearson correlations. This approach assumes an approximately linear relationship between variables, interval-level measurement (composite Likert-scale scores were treated as approximately continuous), and no extreme outliers; given the small sample ($n = 30$), these assumptions could not be formally tested, and estimates should be interpreted cautiously. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals were calculated using Fisher's z-transformation. Significance was evaluated at $\alpha = 0.05$ (two-tailed). Because six pairwise correlations were examined among the four constructs, a Bonferroni correction was applied, yielding an adjusted threshold of $\alpha = 0.0083$ (0.05 divided by 6).

Descriptive Statistics

The average scores for each construct on a 7-point Likert scale, along with standard deviations and observed ranges, were as follows: consumer-brand identification ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.32$, range = 1.00–7.00), brand love ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.23$, range = 2.33–7.00), brand attachment ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.25$, range = 2.00–7.00), and purchase intention ($M = 6.31$, $SD = 0.66$, range = 4.75–7.00). Purchase intention received the highest average score and the narrowest spread of responses among the four constructs.

Brand Distribution

Participants reported a wide range of brands, with a concentration in fashion and lifestyle categories.

To examine associations between emotional engagement and purchase intention, correlations between the different constructs and purchase intention were analyzed.

Measurement Reliability and Validity

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each construct (Figure 3). Consumer-brand identification (α = 0.85), brand love (α = 0.80), and brand attachment (α = 0.74) demonstrated acceptable to good internal consistency. Purchase intention showed weaker internal consistency (α = 0.61), below the conventional threshold of 0.70. Item-total correlation analysis (Figure 5) identified the item "I would be willing to pay a premium price for this brand

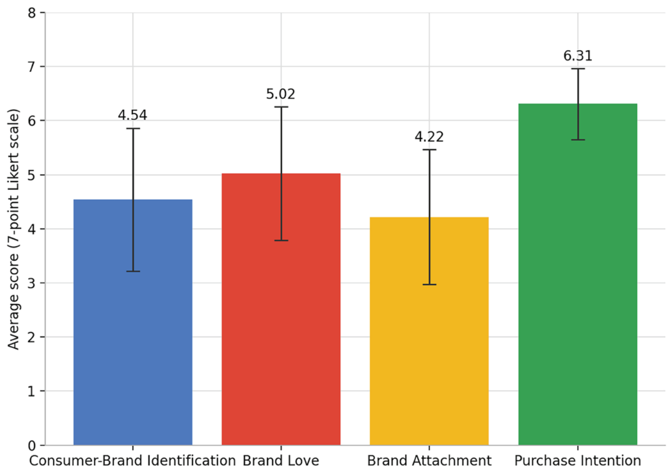

Figure 1. *Mean scores (± 1 SD) for each of the four emotional brand constructs on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree), n = 30. CBI = consumer-brand identification; BL = brand love; BA = brand attachment; PI = purchase intention.*

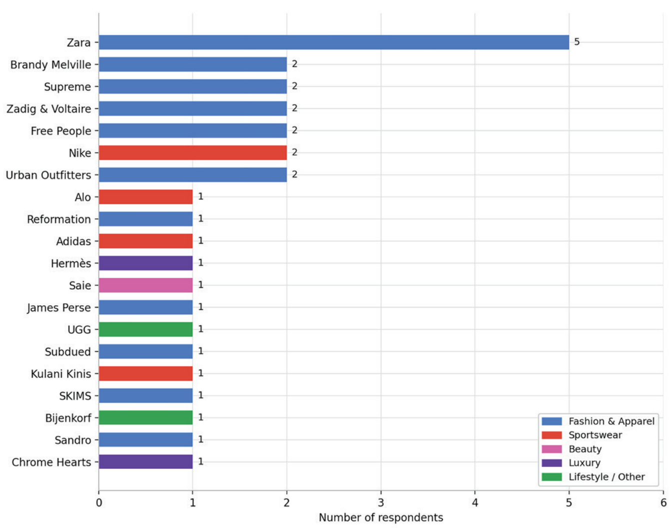

Figure 2. *Number of respondents (n = 30) who selected each brand when asked to identify a brand they personally like, follow, or purchase from. Brands are grouped by category; similar spelling variants (e.g., "Urban Outfitters" and "urban outfitters") were combined under a single brand name. The most frequently mentioned brand was Zara which was mentioned 5 times, followed by several other brands such as Nike, Supreme, and Free People, which were mentioned 2 times each.*

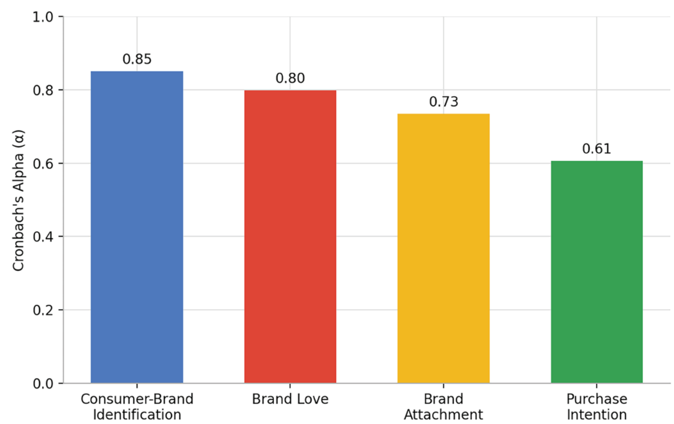

Figure 3. *Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for each of the four emotional brand constructs, based on responses from all 30 participants on the 7-point Likert scale. The conventional acceptable threshold is α = 0.70.*

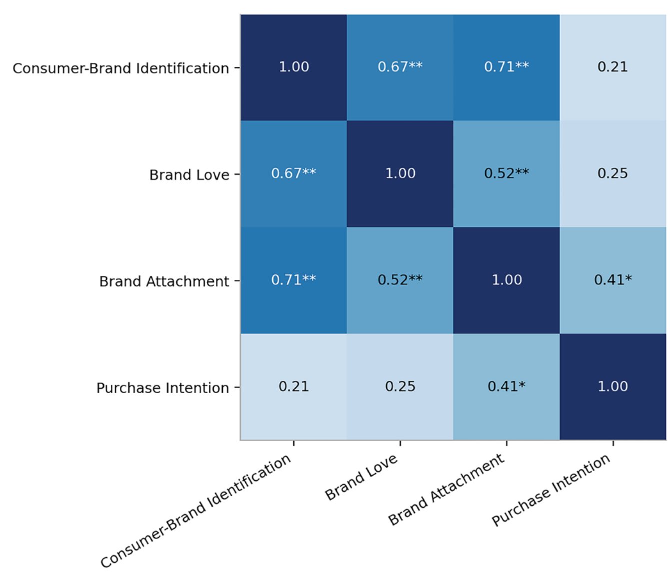

Figure 4. *Intercorrelation matrix (Pearson's r) among the four composite construct scores (consumer-brand identification, brand love, brand attachment, and purchase intention), n = 30. Asterisks indicate statistical significance (*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01).*

over competitors" as the primary source of this weakness (corrected item-total r = 0.22), with notably lower correlations with the other three purchase-intention items than those items had with one another. This suggests that willingness to pay a premium may reflect a distinct dimension of purchase behavior rather than the same underlying construct as purchase likelihood, repurchase intention, and recommendation. All other items across the four constructs exceeded the minimum acceptable item-total correlation of 0.30 (Figure 5).

To examine discriminant validity, intercorrelations among all four constructs were calculated (Figure 4), rather than only their individual correlations with purchase intention. Consumer-brand identification, brand love, and brand attachment, the three constructs theorized to reflect related but distinct emotional dimensions, showed moderate to high intercorrelations (r = 0.52 to 0.71), consistent with the reviewer's observation that these constructs may overlap conceptually. The correlation between consumer-brand identification and brand attachment (r = 0.71) was the strongest of the three, suggesting the least discriminant separation between these two measures. A closer look at the individual purchase-intention items (Figure 6) further supports treating willingness to pay a premium as conceptually distinct from the other three purchase-behavior items.

As illustrated in Figure 7, the results show positive relationships between all emotional variables and purchase intention. Brand attachment showed the strongest correlation with purchase intention, $r(28) = 0.41$, $p = 0.024$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.67], followed by brand love, $r(28) = 0.25$, $p = 0.187$, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.56], and consumer-brand identification, $r(28) = 0.21$, $p = 0.277$, 95% CI [-0.17, 0.53]. Because six pairwise correlations were examined among the four constructs (Figure 4), a Bonferroni-corrected significance threshold of $\alpha = 0.0083$ was applied. Under this correction, none of the three correlations with purchase intention remained statistically significant, though the association with brand attachment was the largest and closest to significance.

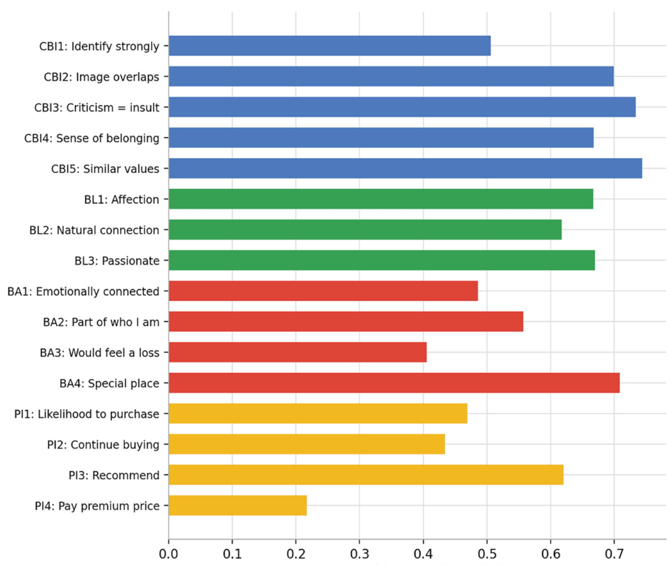

Figure 5. *Corrected item-total correlations for all 16 survey items, grouped by construct, n = 30. The minimum acceptable item-total correlation is r = 0.30.*

Figure 6. *Intercorrelations (Pearson's r) among the four individual purchase-intention items, n = 30.*

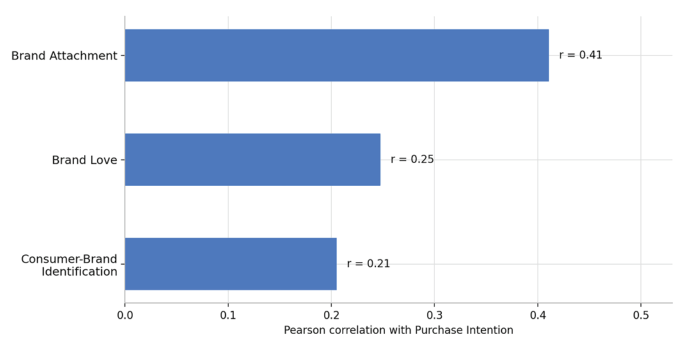

Figure 7. *Pearson correlations between each of three emotional brand constructs and purchase intention, n = 30. CBI = consumer-brand identification; BL = brand love; BA = brand attachment. None of these correlations remained significant after Bonferroni correction.*

Given the small sample size (n = 30) and the number of comparisons tested, these findings should be interpreted as preliminary and exploratory rather than as strong evidence of association, and should not be interpreted as evidence of prediction or causation.

These findings indicate that all three emotional dimensions show positive associations with purchase intention, with brand attachment showing the largest observed correlation, though as noted above this association did not remain significant after correction for multiple comparisons.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study offer meaningful insights into the relationship between emotional marketing and the consumer behavior of young people. Taken together, the data suggest that emotional connections to brands, particularly brand attachment, are associated with purchase intentions among the Gen-Z consumers surveyed in this exploratory sample.

Before interpreting these patterns further, several alternative explanations should be considered. Because participants were instructed to think of a brand they personally liked, followed, or purchased from, the observed scores may partly reflect this favorite-brand selection process rather than the general strength of emotional marketing; participants evaluating a randomly assigned or unfamiliar brand might show weaker associations. The correlations may also be inflated by common-method bias, since all constructs were measured using the same self-report survey administered at a single point in time. Additionally, because consumer-brand identification, brand love, and brand attachment are conceptually related constructs that showed moderate-to-high intercorrelations in this sample (Figure 4), some of the observed patterns may reflect overlapping measurement rather than fully distinct psychological processes. Social desirability may also have shaped responses, particularly for items describing strong emotional bonds to a brand. Finally, participants' varying familiarity with their selected brand, and the fact that participants were recruited through the researcher's personal and school network rather than a random or more diverse sample, may further limit how far these patterns generalize beyond this specific group.

Theoretical Implications

The most important takeaway from this study is the pattern of positive associations among all four emotional brand constructs: consumer-brand identification, brand love, brand attachment, and purchase intention. Brand attachment showed the strongest correlation with purchase intention (r = .41), followed by brand love (r = .25) and consumer-brand identification (r = .21), though none remained significant after correction for multiple comparisons. This ordering is broadly consistent with the brand attachment literature already discussed, which associates strong emotional bonds to a brand with higher trust, commitment, and loyalty.

That brand attachment showed a stronger correlation than brand love with purchase intention is notable: passion and affection might intuitively seem like the strongest correlates of purchase behavior, but the deeper, identity-based bond captured by brand attachment appears more closely associated with it in this sample. This aligns with the theoretical distinction between the two constructs: brand love reflects emotional affect, while brand attachment captures something closer to self-extension, the feeling that a brand is part of who you are (17, 18).

Park et al. (18) argue that because brand attachment ties a brand to the consumer's sense of self, it is associated with stronger behavioral outcomes than emotional affect alone; this may help account for the pattern observed here, though it remains speculative given the exploratory nature of the analysis. The brands in this study are rooted in fashion and lifestyle (e.g. Zara, Nike, Supreme, Free People) and are purchased repeatedly rather than once, which may help explain the pattern observed for brand attachment specifically.

The concentration of fashion brands in the results also aligns with literature on adolescence as a period of identity formation. Badaoui et al. (22) show that during this stage, brands and clothing serve as tools through which teenagers build their self-image and signal their position within peer groups, consistent with the mechanism captured by brand attachment.

Practical Implications For Brands

Because brands target young consumers, these findings carry clear practical recommendations. The most notable pattern is that brand attachment showed a stronger association with purchase intention than brand love or consumer-brand identification did.

Both brand attachment and consumer-brand identification involve the self, but they operate at different depths. Consumer-brand identification is more cognitive: it captures whether someone sees a brand's values as aligned with their own (14). Brand attachment goes further. It captures whether someone would feel a genuine sense of loss if the brand disappeared, whether it has a special place in their life, whether it feels like part of who they are (18,23). Identification reflects a cognitive judgment that a brand's values align with one's own, while attachment reflects a deeper, more affective sense that the brand is part of one's identity. The stronger correlation with purchase intention suggests that identity-based emotional bonds may be more closely associated with purchase behavior than the intellectual recognition of shared values, though this remains an association rather than an established mechanism. You can identify with a brand's values and still switch to a competitor without much friction. However, it is notably much harder to walk away from something that feels like part of your identity.

This distinction matters because the two constructs require completely different marketing strategies to build. Building brand love means making people feel emotionally positive about a brand, which can happen through a single compelling campaign or a viral moment. Building brand attachment takes longer and requires consistent efforts in order to make consumers feel like the brand is part of their identity (17). Brands should therefore invest in strategies that go beyond one-off emotional appeals. Concretely, this means creating spaces where young consumers feel like they belong to something. Examples include Nike's running clubs or Supreme's drop culture that rewards loyal followers, consistently communicating values that actually reflect how the brand operates. Additionally, these specific marketing strategies encourage consumers to post, share, and create content around the brand so that the relationship feels participatory rather than one-directional.

Some brands already use Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to gauge emotional engagement at scale, Coca-Cola and Nike, for instance, use algorithms to scan text, emojis, and images on social media for sentiment and adjust campaigns accordingly (24). These systems improve as they're trained on more data, picking up on slang, sarcasm, and implied meaning that simpler tools miss (25). Whether a tool like this could meaningfully track something like brand attachment specifically, rather than more surface-level sentiment, is a question this study can't answer but it's a reasonable next step for research building on constructs like the ones used here.

Practical Implications For Young Consumers

It's worth asking a question most marketing papers skip: what can young consumers actually do with this information? The starting point is simply awareness. Brand attachment doesn't happen by accident, it's often the product of deliberate choices: specific emotional appeals, community-building cues, identity-based language. Ethical persuasion is grounded in truthfulness, transparency, and respect for the audience; when those are missing, influence starts to look more like manipulation (26). A useful gut-check for teenagers is whether a brand's messaging matches what it actually does, and whether the product would still be wanted absent any social visibility.

None of this means emotional connections to brands are bad. The data here reflects real feelings that real teenagers reported about brands they already like. But there's a meaningful difference between a brand earning that connection and a brand manufacturing it and the more clearly a young consumer can tell the two apart, the better equipped they are to navigate a marketing environment built to blur that line. This study can't say how often each happens; it can only say that the distinction matters.

Ethical Considerations and Future Research Directions

These findings raise a question the data alone can't answer: where does influence end and manipulation begin? There's no clean answer. Existing research on persuasion suggests emotional appeals are ethical when they inform, are transparent, and respect a target's autonomy; the line is really about intent, not technique (26, 27). A campaign about belonging or authenticity might come from a brand that genuinely holds those values, or from one using them strategically because they're known to work on this demographic. From the consumer's side, the outcome looks identical either way; only the ethics differ.

It's also worth being honest about what this study can and can't speak to. Adolescent brain development is often cited as a reason teenagers may be especially responsive to emotional appeals — the emotional and reward systems maturing faster than the prefrontal cortex that governs impulse control (7) — but this study didn't measure neurological responsiveness directly, only self-reported feelings and purchase intention. Similarly, concerns about algorithmic content curation and AI-driven targeting come up often in discussions of marketing to minors, and regulations like GDPR and COPPA already address data collection without really touching the psychological side of emotionally engineered content. That's a real gap in the regulatory landscape. But this study didn't test algorithms, AI, or social media exposure, so these remain open questions for future research rather than conclusions this data can support.

Given how quickly these tools are evolving, that gap seems more likely to widen than close. Where exactly the line between influence and manipulation falls is still one of the more unresolved questions in marketing ethics. This study doesn't answer it, but the pattern shows a real and measurable emotional bond between teenagers and brands, is part of why the question matters.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size was relatively small (n = 30), which limits the generalizability of the results and reduces the statistical power to detect relationships among the variables. Second, participants were recruited through convenience sampling rather than random sampling, meaning the sample may not be representative of the broader Gen-Z population. Additionally, although most participants were located in the United States, the sample also included participants from France, England, and other countries, introducing potential cross-cultural variation that this study was not designed to examine and further limiting how far findings can be generalized to any single national population.

Additionally, participants were instructed to think about a brand they personally liked, followed, or regularly purchased while completing the survey. This may have resulted in higher ratings across the emotional brand constructs and purchase intention than would be observed if participants had evaluated randomly assigned brands or brands with which they had weaker relationships.

The study also relied on self-reported survey responses collected at a single point in time. As a result, the findings may be influenced by common-method bias, social desirability bias, or differences in participants' familiarity with their selected brands. Furthermore, the emotional brand constructs examined in this study-consumer-brand identification, brand love, and brand attachment-are conceptually related and may overlap to some extent, which could contribute to the observed correlations. Purchase intention scores were also concentrated at the high end of the scale (M = 6.31, SD = 0.66, range = 4.75–7.00), suggesting a possible ceiling effect; this restricted range may have attenuated the observed correlations between purchase intention and the other constructs and should be considered when interpreting the strength of these associations.

Finally, because this study used a cross-sectional survey design and correlation analysis, the findings should be interpreted as associations rather than evidence of causal relationships. Future research with larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal or experimental designs could provide stronger evidence regarding the relationships among these constructs.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to examine whether emotional brand constructs are associated with purchase intention among a sample of young consumers, and the findings suggest a preliminary pattern: emotional connection to a brand, particularly identity-based attachment, appears to be associated with purchase intention among the participants surveyed. Across the constructs measured, brand attachment showed the strongest observed correlation with purchase intention, though this association did not remain significant after correction for multiple comparisons and should be treated as exploratory.

Several key takeaways stand out. First, all three emotional dimensions, consumer-brand identification, brand love, and brand attachment, showed positive correlations with purchase intention, suggesting a possible association between emotional brand constructs and consumer behavior among the Gen-Z participants surveyed. Second, the dominance of fashion and lifestyle brands in this study reinforces the idea that emotional branding is especially powerful in identity-driven product categories, where choosing a brand is inseparable from expressing a sense of self. Third, the broader question of how algorithmic targeting and AI-driven personalization interact with emotional marketing (while outside what this study tested) is a pressing area for future research, particularly for a generation that encounters branded content inside algorithmically curated feeds. Because this study used a cross-sectional survey and bivariate correlation analysis, it cannot establish causal relationships or determine whether one construct independently predicts another. Future research using larger samples and multivariable analyses, such as regression or structural equation modeling, could examine these relationships more rigorously.

The implications of this research extend beyond marketing strategy. Understanding how emotional connections to brands are formed during adolescence, a period of heightened emotional sensitivity and active identity construction, matters for consumers, for companies, and for policymakers alike. Whether brands prioritize genuine connection over engineered attachment, and whether young consumers are equipped to recognize the difference, remain open and important questions that this study cannot resolve on its own. As emotional marketing techniques continue to evolve, understanding their effects on adolescent consumers will require continued empirical attention.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this work.

AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

During the preparation of this work, the author used Claude (Anthropic) for statistical analysis of survey data and generation of data visualizations. Following the use of this tool, the author carefully reviewed, verified, and edited the content as necessary and takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the published work.

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