Handmade clothing consumption as a means of self-expression

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines handmade clothing consumption as a means of self-expression by exploring the interrelationships between consumers' self-expression, brand love and word of mouth.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a descriptive research design, data were collected from 295 respondents in South Africa who posted about fashion on social media and who had bought handmade clothing in the 6 months prior to data collection. Structural equation modelling was used to examine the interrelationships between consumers' self-expression, brand love and word of mouth.

Findings – Brand love intervenes between consumers' self-brand connections and word of mouth about handmade clothing. More specifically, brand love strengthens positive word of mouth online and mitigates negative word-of-mouth intentions following a handmade clothing product failure scenario.

Research limitations/implications – The study enlightens scholarly understanding of consumers' self-expression motivations for using ready-made handmade clothing that results in brand love and positive word of mouth.

Practical implications – Handmade clothing marketers who tap into consumers' self-expression and who can establish brand love among consumers can similarly create beneficial consumer–brand relationships.

Originality/value – Consumers often use handmade clothing for the purpose of self-expression, which provides subsequent spin-offs for brands in the form of brand love and positive word of mouth. Objective self-awareness theory provides a parsimonious lens to reveal the important role that brand love plays as a mechanism to explain the linkage of consumers' self-brand connections to word of mouth about handmade clothing.

Keywords Self-expression, Brand love, Word of mouth, Objective self-awareness, Handmade clothing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Globally, there is a revival in the consumption of handmade products. This trend is evident in the number of craft markets that frequently pop up. The increase in these markets is seemingly associated with a response to consumers being critical of a "mass-produced, mass-consumption culture" (Brewer, 2017). Echoed in these consumer sentiments are the phenomena of "mindful" clothing consumption behaviour, referred to as "sustainable" consumption (Martindale and McKinney, 2018; Mohammad *et al.*, 2021); consumer outcries against the aggressive expansion of multinational corporations because of the strain such expansion places on the planet's natural resources and the crowding out of artisanship and creativity as a result of homogeneous, mass-produced products dominating

the market (Chatterjee, 2016; Hatcher and Tu, 2017; Zhang, 2018). Handmade fashion is a rising trend, with more consumers choosing to buy handmade-inspired clothing as opposed to standardized clothing that is mass-produced in large factories (Bateman, 2021). Competition in handmade markets is thus likely to intensify in response to this surging demand (Cheng, 2018; imarc, 2020). Sound marketing strategies will therefore become imperative to the success of handmade clothing brands which, in turn, rest upon a clear understanding of consumers' motivations to choose handmade clothing.

To date, however, the majority of studies offer a crafter's perspective on the consumption of handmade products (Campbell, 2005) as opposed to a consumer's perspective. Moreover, the few studies that have examined handmade product consumption from a consumer's perspective are limited to gift-giving contexts (Fuchs et al., 2015) or the effects that labelling products as "artisanal" have on consumers' perceptions of the products' value (Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2017). Consumers' need for self-expression has not been considered by scholars, which is surprising because consumers enhance their self-concepts by using object symbolism (Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967). Given the symbolism embedded in handmade products (such as uniqueness, being valuable and "made with love") (Fuchs et al., 2015; Hatcher and Tu, 2017), the use of handmade clothing is deemed suitable for consumers' self-expressive purposes. However, the use of handmade clothing's embedded symbolism for self-expression purposes remains underexplored beyond craft consumption. Previous research considered self-expression with regard to co-creation (Campbell, 2005; Elliot, 2016; Zhang et al., 2021), making clothing (Martindale and McKinney, 2018), as well as eudaimonia and satisfaction derived from the aforementioned activities (Zheng et al., 2016), amongst others. Instead, we focus on ready-made handmade clothing made or crafted by someone else, referred to as "handmade clothing consumption" in this study.

In addition, a consumer's self-concept may include the integration of loved objects into the self-concept (Bagozzi et al., 2017) and love is an established motivation for handmade consumption pertaining to gifts (Fuchs et al., 2015). Although it is likely that brand love will ensue if handmade clothing consumption is used for self-expression, the association between self-expression using handmade clothing consumption and brand love has not been explored. Furthermore, brand love increases communication with others, such as word-of-mouth (WOM) behaviour (Ahuvia, 2005). Given that WOM is seen as more credible and therefore more persuasive than paid commercial advertisements (Haenlein and Libai, 2017) and can thus benefit brands, this study includes WOM. The purpose of this study is therefore to explore the interrelationships between consumers' self-expression with handmade clothing consumption, brand love and WOM.

The research problem is thus that despite claims of handmade production mode used for some clothing, and a surge in purchases of ready-made handmade clothing products, consumers' motivation for buying such clothing remains unclear. Accordingly, producers of handmade clothing may be using a production mode claim (i.e. handmade), without understanding how to use it as a competitive advantage in their relationship marketing strategies, whilst competition is increasing. This study thus fills the gap in the literature by exploring self-expression as one possible motivation for ready-made handmade clothing consumption.

Conceptual background and hypotheses development
A brief overview of the evolution of handmade clothing [1]
Since the beginning of time, mankind has used clothing to protect themselves from the elements. In primitive societies, clothing was mainly constructed from plant and animal fibres. Hereby, spinning, weaving, draping and stitching (initially with animal bones as needles) by hand were the order of the day (Bellis, 2019). Textiles, clothing and fashion have

since become intertwined. When clothing became a vehicle for fashion, clothing became useful for identity projects and to showcase social status (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2015). Fashion has therefore extended the use of clothing from mere protection against the elements to becoming a means for expressing oneself to others.

Before the industrial revolution, as mankind evolved from a subsistence economy to an exchange economy, tailors and seamstresses (Bellis, 2019) as craftsmen and craftswomen (Campbell, 2005) emerged, selling their handmade clothing. After World War II, with the emergence of machinery during the industrial revolution and modernity, ginning, spinning, weaving and stitching of plant, animal and synthetic fibres became relevant. Factory-organized machine production became the norm (Campbell, 2005), where technological improvements in the textile industry influenced the clothing industry (Adler, 2004). Shorter and faster cycles in fashion could be achieved (Garcia, 2021). Accordingly, consumers became brand conscious; consumerism and materialism were fed by the fast fashion available for consumption (Arrigo, 2013; Runfola and Guercini, 2013). There was a turn away from the previous piecework by hand to a more standardized procedural manufacturing process, with reduced labour costs.

Even with the industrial revolution, the role of people did not diminish (envisioning goods and operating machinery) and production mode (machine-made versus handmade) should not be viewed as a dichotomy. While machine-made clothing entails fast fashion assembly lines allowing for automated replicable mass production, handmade clothing can thus be viewed as a production mode where a part of the clothing was made by hand (Bynes New York, not dated). We thus consider handmade clothing to be partly made by hand one at a time, with the aid of machines and not solely by machines. For example, when knitting a sweater by hand, the wool used was likely produced by machine. Following Bynes New York (not dated), further examples of handmade clothing include a hand-stitched hem, an embroidered pocket, or a "single person producing clothing with the aid of a sewing machine".

Handmade clothing consumption as a category brand

Over time, consumers create a set of expectations about a product category (Sujan and Bettman, 1989). Product categories have certain attributes, and associations are thus shared across all brands, creating a larger category brand. Every single brand has "typicality" effects, considered as typical features that are associated with the larger category brand (Ward and Loken, 1986). Moreover, according to the grouping principle of Gestalt psychology, consumers tend to organize perceived stimuli as unified wholes (Collin, 2012). Unique associations of handmade products provide a plethora of standards for consumption (Hatcher and Tu, 2017). Therefore, we examine handmade clothing consumption at a category level by regarding the entire handmade clothing category as a brand, and we drew from the consumer–brand literature stream to assist us with formulating the hypotheses.

Objective self-awareness theory

Self-awareness theory holds that the self can be viewed as both subject (being an active participant) and an object (whereby the self becomes the focus of attention) (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011). For the purposes of the current study, the focus falls on the self as an object, which is explained by objective self-awareness theory (the OSA theory). Self-awareness is a psychological state of self-directed attention brought on by situational variables or chronic dispositions or by a combination of both (Fenigstein *et al.*, 1975). OSA theory refers to a "self-standard consistency system"; the self is compared to internalized

standards, whereby an individual attempts to reach consistency between the self and these standards (Silvia and Duval, 2001).

Based on the outcomes of debate concerning OSA theory (Carver and Scheier, 1981; Duval and Wicklund, 1972; Hull and Levy, 1979), OSA theory recognizes multiple hierarchical standards and multiple selves related to positive affect and/or negative affect (depending on whether a discrepancy arises from internalized standards), followed by behavioural outcomes (Gibbons, 1990). OSA theory focusses on the standards that an individual has embedded into their notion of self to choose appropriate affective and behavioural outcomes in order to achieve internal consistency between the self and the standards that the individuals set. Accordingly, affect provides "an internally consistent account of how emotions organize activity" (Silvia and Duval, 2001, p. 237). OSA theory, therefore, provides a rich framework to investigate internal self-motives by integrating both affect and behaviour embedded in consumption situations, be it self-discrepant or non-self-discrepant.

For the purposes of handmade clothing consumption, OSA theory implies that consumers use their internal standards associated with handmade consumption to assist in their self-expression. Self-expression can thus result in positive affect if a consumer's expectations based on their internal standards are met, which will then be followed by positive behavioural outcomes. Conversely, handmade clothing that fails to meet a consumer's internal standards will cause inconsistency, resulting in possible negative behavioural outcomes.

Self-concept variable: self-brand connection

Clothing consumption is visible in all social settings and is thus subject to the scrutiny of others (Graeff, 1997), which may result in more careful management of self-presentation (Ratner and Kahn, 2002). The increased scrutiny associated with all clothing consumption may therefore oblige many consumers to use such consumption for self-expressive purposes, which align with their view of self and to avoid self-threats as far as possible. We thus explore handmade clothing consumption with the handmade symbolism embedded therein (Belk, 1988; Levy, 1959) as a means of self-expression. In other words, self-expression is explored as the degree of integration between an object (handmade clothing) and a consumer's sense of self, which is defined as a self-brand connection (Dwivedi et al., 2014; Escalas and Bettman, 2005). A self-brand connection forms when a specific brand is used to construct a consumer's self-concept; the brand symbolism thus communicates something about the consumer (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). Furthermore, being rich in symbolism, handmade products have been explicitly linked with brand love (Fuchs et al., 2015). For this reason, brand love is considered as the affect variable in this study.

Affect variable: brand love

In a marketing context, brand love is the phrase associated with non-interpersonal love for products, services, brands, experiences or destinations (Ahuvia, 2016a). We, therefore, drew on this consumer–brand relationship literature associated with brand love (Junaid et al., 2020).

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006, p. 81) define brand love as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name". Since its inception, dimensions, antecedents and outcomes of brand love have been conceptualized in different ways (Palusuk et al., 2019). Previously, love-like associations in Fuchs et al.'s (2015) seminal paper considered how the notion of "being made with love" or "embedded with love" increases the perceived attractiveness of handmade products. Brand love is typically stronger for hedonic brands with symbolic benefits than for utilitarian brands (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). As handmade products are usually embedded with several

symbolic benefits (Hatcher and Tu, 2017) and are associated with perceptions that the products were made with love (Fuchs *et al.*, 2015), handmade consumption should therefore evoke brand love. Moreover, consumers' loved objects are integrated into their notions of self over time (Ahuvia, 2016b; Bagozzi *et al.*, 2017). Stated otherwise, this incorporation of an object into the sense of self that aligns with the definition of self-brand connection (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2014) should result in brand love (Ahuvia, 2016b; Bagozzi *et al.*, 2017). It is therefore hypothesized that:

H1. A consumer's self-brand connection is associated with brand love for handmade clothing.

Love not only serves self-definitional needs, but it also increases the likelihood to communicate with others about loved objects (Ahuvia, 2005; 2016b). As WOM is a popular communication medium among consumers, this study, therefore, considers WOM as the behavioural variable.

Behavioural variable: word of mouth
Per definition, WOM entails sharing opinions on consumption experiences (Dichter, 1966). WOM online, in particular, is usually shared from one to many and is strongly associated with positive attitudes towards consumption and consumer engagement (Mohammad *et al.*, 2021). In a similar vein, brand love is associated with positive WOM (Bairrada *et al.*, 2019; Samala and Singh, 2019), and positive WOM online in particular (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). This relationship is also supported by OSA theory, which postulates that a specific affect (such as brand love) is associated with a related behavioural outcome. Consumers with brand love for handmade clothing may thus opt to share positive WOM online about their handmade clothing consumption. It is therefore hypothesized that:

H2. A consumer's brand love is associated with positive WOM online about handmade clothing.

Furthermore, positive WOM is associated with self-presentation (Chawdhary and Dall'Olmo Riley, 2015; Dichter, 1966). With more recipients possibly reacting to WOM online than to WOM in person, WOM online holds more social risk (e.g. embarrassment) compared to WOM in person (Eisingerich *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, positive WOM online about handmade clothing will only occur once consumers feel that the consumption is truly aligned with their self-brand connection. It can therefore be hypothesized that:

H3. A consumer's self-brand connection is associated with positive WOM online about handmade clothing.

Positive WOM online is often a consequence of brand love (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Moreover, brand love mediates the relationship between self-expression and WOM (Coelho *et al.*, 2019). In addition, OSA theory (Duval and Wicklund, 1972) assumes that the self is associated with behavioural outcomes using affect as a mechanism. It is therefore hypothesized that:

H4. A consumer's brand love mediates the association between self-brand connection and positive WOM online about handmade clothing.

However, WOM can also take a negative tone (Richins, 1983). Therefore, in the current study, negative WOM pertaining to handmade consumption was explored by using a product failure scenario, which typically dissipates the embedded qualities of handmade clothing. Beyond self-expression, negative WOM is tied to venting negative emotions and warning or helping others to avoid potential detrimental consumption choices

(Chawdhary and Dall'Olmo Riley, 2015). A product failure can have a negative impact on behavioural outcomes associated with self-expression based on the assumptions of the interrelationships embedded in OSA theory (Duval and Wicklund, 1972). Negative behavioural outcomes such as negative WOM have extremely deleterious consequences for brands (Williams and Buttle, 2014; Richins, 1983) and require appropriate recovery strategies. A consumer's sense of self is vulnerable to self-threats (Campbell and Sedikides, 1999), and a handmade product failure in cases where the consumer's self-brand connection has already been established would therefore pose a self-threat. This self-threat can lead to a negative behavioural outcome such as negative WOM.

According to OSA theory (Duval and Wicklund, 1972), a self-threat implies that the brand does not meet the consumers' internalized standards associated with the product category. To deal with this discrepancy, consumers will engage in different behavioural responses, such as negative WOM. We, therefore, argue that misalignment with a consumer's internalized standards caused by a product failure should result in a self-threat, increasing the consumer's intention to spread negative WOM. It is therefore hypothesized that:

H5. A consumer's self-brand connection is associated with their intention to spread negative WOM about handmade clothing in case of a product failure.

In addition, OSA theory specifies a direct relationship between affect and behaviour (Duval and Wicklund, 1972). Therefore, brand love for handmade clothing should also be associated with negative WOM in case of a product failure. It is therefore hypothesized that:

H6. A consumer's brand love is associated with the intention to spread negative WOM about a handmade clothing product failure.

Also, brand love, as a form of affect, should mediate a consumer's internal route to process their behaviour following a product failure (Umashankar *et al.*, 2016). Based on OSA theory (Duval and Wicklund, 1972), a regulated behavioural outcome is to be expected to address the self-discrepancy arising from the product failure scenario. We thus expect the consumer's intention to spread negative WOM about a handmade clothing product failure. However, such behaviour could be mediated by brand love for handmade consumption as affect intervenes between self-expression and behavioural outcomes (Duval and Wicklund, 1972). More specifically, brand love is associated with brand resistance toward negative brand information (Bairrada *et al.*, 2019), such as a handmade clothing product failure. It is therefore hypothesized that:

H7. A consumer's brand love mediates the association between self-brand connection and negative WOM about a handmade clothing product failure.

Research methodology
Sample, design and measures
This study used a descriptive, cross-sectional research design. The target population was defined as young adults (between the ages of 18 to 25 years) who expressed themselves by means of fashion, who had bought handmade clothing during the 6 months prior to data collection, who had shopped at local markets associated with handmade goods and fashion and who had posted messages and content about fashion online. Young adults between the ages of 18 to 25 years were selected as this study's target population because they are likely to buy handmade products and fashion to express themselves (Danziger, 2018). From these definitions, qualifying questions were formulated to assess whether prospective respondents were part of the target population. Further, we provided respondents with

a definition of handmade clothing (i.e. clothing that is made one at a time by hand with the aid of machines and not solely by machines).

In the absence of a sample frame, non-probability convenience sampling was used. Data were collected from respondents at two craft markets in South Africa's Tshwane Metropolitan area, which are associated with the buying and selling of handmade clothing. After obtaining permission from the craft market organizers, fieldworkers approached prospective respondents and asked whether they would be willing to participate in the study. After asking the qualifying questions, fieldworkers administered the questionnaire to respondents. Fieldworkers were supervised by a field manager, and all questionnaires were checked for possible errors and completeness.

An a-priory sample size calculator for structural equation modelling (SEM) (Soper, 2022) suggested a minimum sample size of 166 respondents based on the desired effect size (0.5) and statistical power level (0.8), the number of latent variables (4) and observed variables (23) in the estimated model, and the probability level (0.05). However, a sample of 295 was deemed appropriate to account for the non-normality of data distribution associated with the social sciences, model complexity and adequate parameter estimation (Hair *et al.*, 2014, p. 573). A total of 300 questionnaires were completed. Due to extreme missing values, five questionnaires were removed, leaving a total of 295 usable questionnaires for analysis, which is consistent with previous studies that explored handmade consumption, love and WOM (Fuchs *et al.*, 2015).

Measures
The constructs were measured using Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items were adapted from previous studies to measure self-brand connection (Escalas and Bettman, 2003), brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), positive WOM online (Eisingerich *et al.*, 2015) and a written product failure scenario asking respondents to imagine their favourite handmade clothing item gradually lose colour (fade) with use, before measuring their intention to spread negative WOM (adapted from Xie *et al.*, 2015). Because handmade products are perceived to be embedded with love, handmade products have higher attractiveness than machine-made products and are often bought as gifts for loved ones (Fuchs *et al.*, 2015). Accordingly, we controlled for possible confounding effects of handmade clothing as being made with love and buying it as gifts for loved ones.

Common method variance
Several procedural remedies were taken as proposed by MacKenzie and Podsakoff (2012) to improve respondents' ability and motivation to answer accurately. First, the questionnaire was pre-tested among 30 qualifying respondents for item ambiguity, double-barrel questions and complex questions. The pretest revealed that respondents clearly understood all questions. Second, the questionnaire included a cover letter that explained the study's purpose and assured respondents of anonymity and confidentiality. Third, screening questions were included to ensure that only respondents who had the necessary experience with handmade clothing were selected to participate in the study. Fourth, the questionnaire was carefully designed to promote clarity and decrease repetitiveness. Finally, after the completion of data, we empirically investigated common method variance by performing Harman's (1967) single-factor test. Results showed that the single-factor solution accounted for 39.2 per cent (threshold value <50 per cent) of the total variance. Therefore, some evidence exists that common method variance was not a concern in this study.

Data analyses
Covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) was used to test the study's hypotheses. CB-SEM was deemed appropriate for use in this study for several reasons. First, CB-SEM is a multivariate technique that combines factor analysis and multiple regression (Hair *et al.*, 2014, p. 546). This combination allows for robust estimation of, and interrelationships between, constructs. Second, CB-SEM accounts for measurement error (Geiser, 2013, p. 26). Lastly, CB-SEM can simultaneously estimate interrelationships between several constructs, thus making it possible for researchers to integrate and comprehensively test different theories (Byrne, 2012, p. 3).

CB-SEM was conducted in two phases using Mplus version 8.7. In phase 1, a measurement model was estimated to assess the psychometric properties of the study's measurement scales (Byrne, 2012, p. 14; Hair *et al.*, 2014, p. 605). Construct validity was evaluated by examining model fit indices and convergent and discriminant validity (Hair *et al.*, 2014, pp. 618–622). To assess convergent validity, composite reliability (CR) scores, standardized factor loadings and the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct were inspected (Hair *et al.*, 2014, pp. 618–622). For discriminant validity, the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion was used in which the square root of the AVE is compared with the correlations between each construct pair. In phase 2, a structural model was estimated based on the hypothesized interrelationships. For hypotheses testing, standardized estimates were inspected for magnitude and statistical significance at a 95 per cent confidence interval (Byrne, 2012, p. 157). Mediation was assessed using bootstrap resampling ($n = 5,000$) procedures (Muthén and Muthén, 1998-2017, p. 20) and the 95 per cent bias-corrected confidence interval of the indirect effects (Zhao *et al.*, 2010, p. 202).

Results
Sample profile
Just more than half of the respondents were female (50.8 per cent). On average, respondents were 22 years old. Most respondents indicated that they had bought handmade clothing as gifts for loved ones (62.4 per cent). Most respondents bought handmade clothing at least once every 3 months (26.4 per cent), followed by those who bought at least once a month (22.7 per cent). Regarding the frequency of posting messages on social media about fashion and clothing, the respondents indicated that they had posted either more than once a month (25.1 per cent), at least once a month (24.4 per cent) or at least once every 3 months (21.4 per cent).

Structural equation modelling
To assess the psychometric properties of the measurement model, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted (Hair *et al.*, 2014, p. 620; Muthén and Muthén, 1998-2017, p. 533). The measurement model showed acceptable model fit [chi-square = 438.712, (df) = 220, chi-square/df = 1.994, RMSEA 0.058, CFI = 0.939, TLI = 0.930, SRMR = 0.061]. The measurement scales showed acceptable internal consistency reliability because all CR and Cronbach's alpha coefficients were >0.7. In addition, convergent validity was evident given that all factor loadings were significant and >0.6, and the AVE of all constructs was >0.5, except for the control construct "embedded with love", which was marginally below 0.5 (see Table I). The results indicate that the absolute correlations among factors were lower than the square root of the AVE, providing evidence of discriminant validity (see Table II).

Next, the structural model was estimated based on the hypothesized relationships. Two co-variates namely "buying handmade clothing as gifts for loved ones" (categorical exogenous variable) and "embedded with love" (continuous exogenous variable) were included in the structural model. Based on the structural model's fit indices (chi-square =

Construct items	Factor loadings	AVE	CR	Cronbach's alpha
Self-brand connection (SelfB)		0.660	0.913	0.930
Handmade clothing reflects who I am	0.812			
I can identify with handmade clothing	0.774			
I feel a personal connection to handmade clothing	0.827			
I use handmade clothing to communicate who I am to other people	0.862			
I think handmade clothing helps me become the type of person I want to be	0.881			
I consider handmade clothing to be "me" (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others)	0.857			
Handmade clothing suits me well	0.651			
Embedded with love (Emlove)		0.489	0.736	0.715
Handmade clothing can figuratively be described as warm	0.517			
Handmade clothing can figuratively be described as full of love	0.800			
Handmade clothing can figuratively be described as full of passion	0.749			
Product category brand love (Category)		0.561	0.885	0.883
Handmade clothing is wonderful	0.748			
Handmade clothing makes me feel good	0.798			
Handmade clothing is totally awesome	0.753			
Handmade clothing makes me happy	0.761			
I love handmade clothing	0.729			
I am passionate about handmade clothing	0.703			
Positive word-of-mouth online (Online WOM)		0.662	0.886	0.884
I say positive things about handmade clothing on social sites such as Instagram and Facebook	0.811			
I use social sites to encourage friends to buy handmade clothing	0.874			
I recommend handmade clothing on social sites such as Instagram and Facebook	0.880			
I would become a fan of handmade clothing makers on social sites such as Instagram and Facebook	0.670			
Negative word of mouth (NWOM)		0.698	0.871	0.818
I intend to say negative things about handmade clothing items to friends, relatives and other people in person	0.867			
I intend to say negative things about handmade clothing items to friends, relatives and other people on social sites such as Facebook	0.963			
I intend to recommend that my friends, relatives and other people don't consider handmade clothing items for use	0.643			

Table I.
Measurement model
results

Constructs	SelfB	Emlove	Category	Positive online WOM	NWOM
SelfB	0.812[a]				
Emlove	0.401	0.700[a]			
Category	0.594	0.648	0.749[a]		
Positive online WOM	0.669	0.256	0.557	0.808[a]	
NWOM	0.063	−0.239	−0.186	−0.092	0.835[a]

Notes: [a] Square root of the AVE on the diagonal
SelfB = self-brand connection; Emlove = embedded love; Category = product category brand love; NWOM = negative word of mouth online and offline

Table II.
Correlation matrix

487.799, df = 241, chi-square/df = 2.024, RMSEA 0.059, CFI = 0.933, TLI = 0.923, SRMR = 0.068), the structural model offered evidence of adequate fit.

Self-brand connection was found to have a direct and positive relationship with the constructs brand love (β = 0.321; p-value = 0.001), supporting H1; positive WOM online (β = 0.562; p-value = 0.001), supporting H3; and negative WOM (β = 0.266; p-value = 0.001), supporting H5. The results also indicate that brand love had a direct, positive relationship with positive WOM online (β = 0.525; p-value = 0.001), supporting H2. Similarly, brand love also had a direct, negative relationship with negative WOM online (β = −0.267; p-value = 0.031), supporting H6.

Finally, bootstrap resampling (n = 5,000) procedures showed that brand love partially mediated the relationship between self-brand connection and positive WOM online (indirect effect = 0.153; LLCI 0.083 and ULCI 0.289), supporting H4. Brand love also mediates the relationship between self-brand connection and negative WOM online (indirect effect = −0.081; LLCI = −0.209 and ULCI = −0.005), supporting H7. Figure 1 provides a graphical overview of the results.

General discussion and theoretical implications

Our results confirm that positive associations exist between self-brand connection, brand love and positive WOM online (Ahuvia, 2016b; Bagozzi *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, handmade clothing becomes integrated with consumers' sense of self and extends to their self-presentation during communication with others in the form of WOM. Theoretically, these results add to the findings of Fuchs *et al.* (2015) who demonstrated that the presence of the "handmade effect" increases the perceived value and attractiveness of ready-made handmade products. Our findings, however, suggest that the "handmade effect" could also expand to include consumers' self-expression with handmade clothing.

Interestingly, our results also show a positive relationship between self-brand connection and negative WOM online following a product failure, thus reinforcing the notion that consumers engage in dissociative behaviour when confronted with self-threats (Gaustad *et al.*, 2018). Theoretically, this finding implies that self-expression using handmade clothing is a double-edged sword. Just as consumers are likely to reward a brand with positive WOM online when the brand's performance aligns with the self, they may also punish a brand with negative WOM
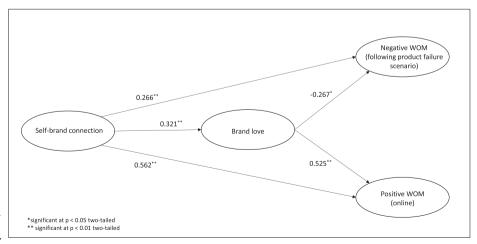

Figure 1.
Summary of structural model results

when a product failure occurs, and there is a misalignment with their established internalized standards. Therefore, in addition to consumers providing negative WOM for self-enhancement, impression management and altruistic motivations (Chawdhary and Dall'Olmo Riley, 2015), our study provides an additional motivation – to protect the self.

Our study further demonstrates that brand love is an important mechanism through which the self is associated with WOM about handmade clothing consumption. More specifically, when a self-discrepancy occurs (i.e. a product failure that threatens the self), brand love mitigates negative WOM intentions. These findings hold important implications for consumer–brand relationships. Accordingly, the foundational interrelationships of OSA theory (Duval and Wicklund, 1972) between the self, affect and behaviour serve brands well by softening undesired brand outcomes such as the intention to spread negative WOM. Desired marketing outcomes (such as positive WOM and tempering negative WOM) can thus be obtained by fostering brand love, which, in turn, can be achieved by appealing to consumers' need for self-expression.

Managerial implications
This study highlights that consumers express themselves with handmade clothing and suggest several ways for marketers to appeal to consumers' need for self-expression. First, make use of storytelling. Storytelling is a powerful communication tool that can enhance the self-brand narrative (Van Laer *et al.*, 2019). Encourage consumers to tell and share their personal handmade clothing stories (e.g. who the consumer is, why they buy handmade clothing and to what extent handmade clothing reflects who they are). Second, place communication cues on the packaging or labels of handmade clothing. While handmade packaging tends to emphasize the love with which a product was made, we suggest altering such cues slightly to remind consumers of the self (e.g. crafted with love, for YOU).

Our study also shows that fostering brand love is key to facilitating positive WOM and mitigating negative WOM following a handmade clothing product failure. To foster brand love, marketers of handmade clothing should focus on strengthening consumer–brand relationships by creating online brand communities (Jibril *et al.*, 2019). Marketers of handmade products could also invest in social listening tools to monitor consumers' conversations about their brands on different social media platforms. By monitoring consumers' conversations, meaningful responses can be crafted that demonstrate an appreciation for the consumer's thoughts, feelings and feedback.

Limitations and future research directions
The study's methodological limitations provide avenues for future research. First, our study does not account for the effect of nuances (such as brand loyalty, brand familiarity and brand preference) that might be present at a micro-brand level. Future studies could therefore focus on micro-brands within the handmade clothing category, thus providing a potentially richer within-category perspective. Second, the study's cross-sectional design and the use of SEM neither offer the rich insight related to qualitative methods nor the cause-and-effect relationships that are associated with experimental designs.

Consumers may play different roles in handmade clothing consumption, such as being a crafter (making handmade clothing themselves), a giver (giving handmade clothing to others) or a receiver (receiving handmade clothing from others). These unique perspectives on self-expression in handmade clothing consumption could be explored by future qualitative studies. In addition, experimental studies could investigate the effects of different handmade packaging/label communication on types of consumer self-expression. Furthermore, both brand love (Bairrada *et al.*, 2019) and handmade products

(Fuchs *et al.*, 2015) are associated with a willingness to pay more. Future research should consider the willingness to pay more for self-expression using handmade clothing as this will further support competitive pricing strategies.

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Note

[1] Please see Dolbec and Fischer (2015) for a timeline of the online fashion world. Our brief overview is not focused on the changes affected by the digital revolution.

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