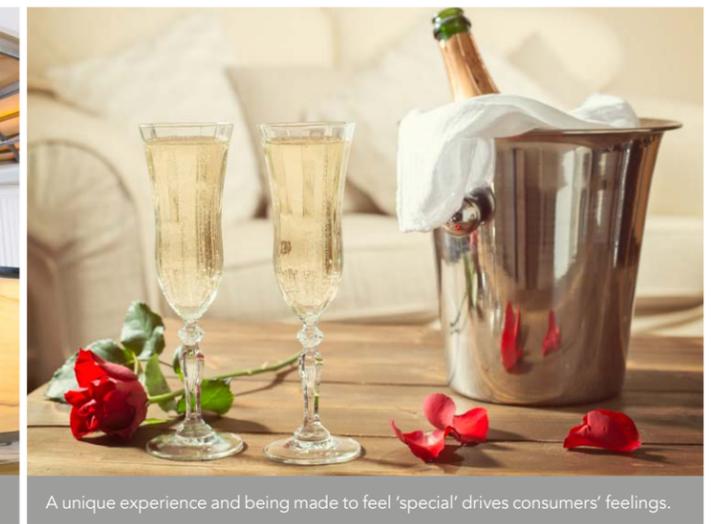


ROMANTIC BRAND LOVE IN THE LUXURY HOTEL SECTOR



Uniqueness and hedonic values both play a part in creating feelings of romantic brand love.



‘When I fall in love... it will be forever.’ It’s one of the best-known lines in the Great American Song Book, but romantic love is now an increasingly familiar concept in marketing. It’s said that people can form a deep and meaningful emotional connection with their favorite brands, just as they can with a life partner. New research from Rosen College of Hospitality Management’s Dr. Juhee Kang looks at what this means for luxury hotels and what they can do to stay in tune with modern consumers.

Timeless elegance, exclusive facilities and experiences, staff who remember our children’s names – we have our own expectations of luxury hotels and the things that make us feel special.

In a highly competitive and developing market, luxury hotels are continuously looking at how they can attract new consumers and retain existing guests. Given the size of the challenge, details count, as hotels welcome guests at the beginning of what they hope will be a lifelong customer journey.

ROMANTIC BRAND LOVE

This is an area of expertise in which Rosen’s College of Hospitality Management

is particularly skilled. In a recent study, Dr. Juhee Kang used the marketing concept of ‘romantic brand love’ to look at the value of luxury hotel experiences and the relationships that consumers develop with luxury brands.

The marketing theory of romantic brand love is based on the premise that we develop emotional relationships with products in the same way that we fall in love with people.

We meet, decide whether there’s an attraction, and if there is, pursue a courtship which we hope leads to a lifelong relationship. It’s an emotional connection that is the ultimate in pleasure and has mutual benefits – a connection that makes us feel safe and secure and helps to define who we are.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Dr. Kang is Associate Professor at the Rosen College of Hospitality Management and her research into the significance of romantic brand love for the luxury hotel sector is published in the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*.

The study focuses on two of the concepts proposed by Sternberg in his theory of brand love, namely ‘brand intimacy’ and ‘brand passion’.

The research sets out to identify what leads to, and what derives from, romantic brand love by looking at two key questions: Which aspects of luxury value influence the feelings of brand intimacy and brand passion toward hotel brands? And does romantic love generate desirable post-consumption behaviors such as advocacy and willingness to pay a premium price?

Dr. Kang said: “Very few studies have empirically investigated the multidimensional values of luxury hotel guests. This study

fills the research gap by examining the role of luxury value in the evaluation of luxury hotel experiences.”

The research began with a review of the literature on brand love in the luxury hotel sector. From this, Dr. Kang developed a set of hypotheses which she tested by means of a survey of guests who had stayed in a luxury hotel in the past year.

The hypotheses were based on the premise that romantic brand love is determined by three dimensions of luxury, namely its uniqueness, associated status and the hedonic (pleasure-creating) feelings it generates.

The aim was to examine how these values influenced brand passion and brand intimacy, and how this affected consumers’ future decision-making and behavior.

THE STUDY

Conducted in 2016, the survey was distributed by an online survey company in the USA and targeted guests who had in the last year stayed

at hotels belonging to the luxury brands Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons, JW Marriott, Grand Hyatt, Fairmont, Conrad and/or Waldorf Astoria. After screening, replies from 412 guests – 53% male and 47% female – were accepted for the research. All had an annual household income of \$55,000 and above, and 16% had an annual household income of more than \$150,000.

The largest group of interviewees was aged between 25 and 44, and around three-quarters

Questions tested the nature of people’s passion for the brand, for example whether it fascinated them, prompted their emotional support and made them feel close. In addition, they asked such things as whether guests would recommend the hotel to family and friends, and whether they would pay more for their hotel over other luxury brands.

THE FINDINGS

The survey data was analyzed using a statistical technique suited to the variable nature

THE STUDY CONFIRMS THE ROLE OF UNIQUENESS IN CREATING ROMANTIC BRAND LOVE, SUGGESTING THAT CONSUMER’S LOVE TOWARDS A HOTEL BRAND IS STRONGLY AFFECTED BY FEELING SPECIAL.

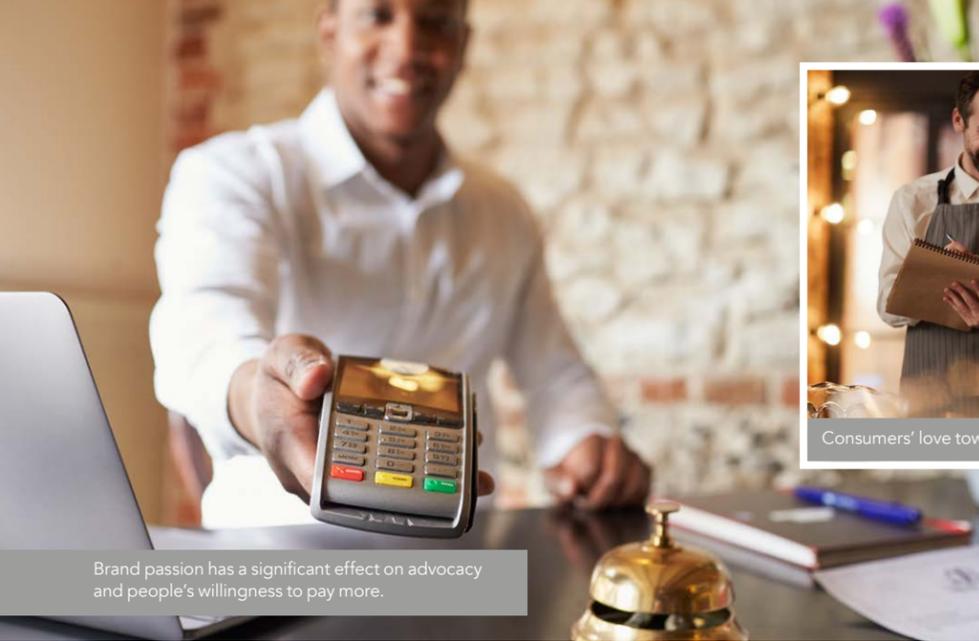
were Caucasian. Some 70% had one or more university degrees.

The survey covered a range of qualitative statements about perceived value in luxury hotels which guests were asked to measure on a seven-point scale according to whether they agreed or disagreed. The methodology was tested before the survey was carried out.

As well as general questions about hotel décor, ambience and service, people were asked whether their experience made them feel like individuals and different from everyone else. They were also asked whether their stay reflected their wealth and place in society.

of people’s answers (‘structural equation modeling’). This allowed Dr. Kang to measure how perceived luxury value (i.e., uniqueness, status and hedonic values) affected romantic brand love (i.e., brand passion and brand intimacy) and future consumer behavior.

The results show that the main factor affecting romantic brand love in the luxury hotel sector is uniqueness, and that being made to feel ‘special’ is what drives consumers’ feelings most of all. In more detail, Dr. Kang found that uniqueness and hedonic values both play a part in creating feelings of romantic brand love. Uniqueness is especially important in making people feel passionate about the brand, and things that lead



Brand passion has a significant effect on advocacy and people's willingness to pay more.

people to experience pleasure are especially important in creating brand intimacy.

In turn, Dr. Kang found that brand passion has a significant effect on advocacy and people's willingness to pay more. However, though brand intimacy affects advocacy, it does not directly lead to consumers being willing to pay a premium price.

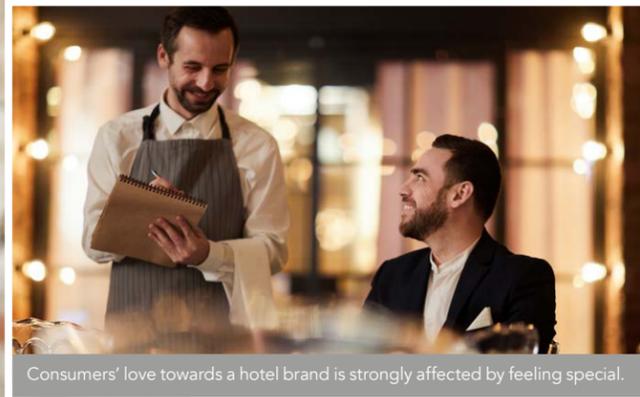
Interestingly, the statistics showed that status is far less important to consumers of luxury hotel brands. Traditionally it has been thought that status is a key contributor to luxury consumption, but the findings of this study suggest that status does not significantly affect brand love.

SIGNIFICANCE

Dr. Kang's study pioneers evaluation of the relationships between luxury value, romantic



Many consumers value privacy above the social expression of wealth.



Consumers' love towards a hotel brand is strongly affected by feeling special.

brand love and consumers' future behavior in the luxury hotel setting.

Dr. Kang said: "These findings provide a better understanding of how consumers form romantic love towards hotel brands and how this influences their behavior. The study confirms the role of uniqueness in creating romantic brand love, suggesting that consumers' love towards a hotel brand is strongly affected by feeling special."

She added: "Once guests perceive the value of staying in luxury hotels, they are likely to feel closeness and passion towards the brand and consequently provide indirect benefits to the success of favorite brands."

Given the finding that status is not important in determining brand love, Dr. Kang commented: "Expressing social identity and economic wealth are not primary reasons for Western consumers to stay at luxury hotels. These consumers are more independent and value privacy rather than social expression of wealth."

IMPLICATIONS

The study has practical implications for those involved in marketing luxury hotels, particularly in helping them to understand the values that influence existing and potential guests. It suggests that hotels should adopt different strategies to meet different consumers' needs and desires.

For those motivated by uniqueness, they should play to the distinctive and authentic

image of their guests, for example by promoting such things as selective private guests' clubs.

For those motivated by pleasure (hedonic value), they should encourage guests to immerse themselves in the hotel experience, for example by creating pleasurable activities with which people can engage.

The study also suggests that hotels should maintain relationships with consumers after their stay. Guests can be recognized for recommending the hotel to others and helping to spread brand messages and updates. They are also likely to be interested in other brand lines and future promotions, and their interest can be rewarded by being offered valued amenities and loyalty programs.

The study's third practical implication relates to people's willingness to pay more for their product. The research suggests that by paying greater attention to benefits that inspire passionate feelings in guests in a love relationship with their brand they can diminish resistance to premium prices.

Finally, the study suggests that marketers of luxury hotel brands should pay greater attention to the potential of consumers who are infrequent visitors.

Dr. Kang concludes: "As brand passion and brand intimacy are the emotional drivers of brand love, marketers should set the goal of marketing campaigns to be converting consumers into loyal customers who frequently and consistently return. For example, advertising and promotion events using consumer passion and intimacy can enhance passionate feelings. The key is the recognition of consumers' emotions and gradually strengthening the emotional bonds over time."

RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Dr. Kang's work aims to better understand the relationships we develop with our favorite brands.

REFERENCES

Key paper

Kang, Juhee. (2018). Finding desirable post-consumption behaviors: an investigation of luxury value and romantic brand love relationships. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* Vol. 30 No. 9 2018 pp.2984-3003. DOI 10.1108/IJCHM-07-2017-0410

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

What do you personally value when you stay in a luxury hotel and why?

“ I look for unique or exclusive experiences that I cannot have elsewhere. To me, it is a getaway from daily life and allows me to explore something new. Such experience remains longer and I realized the recollection of luxury stays induce great pleasure and happiness after all. ”

THE KEY IS THE RECOGNITION OF CONSUMERS' EMOTIONS AND GRADUALLY STRENGTHENING THE EMOTIONAL BONDS OVER TIME.



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Dr. Juhee Kang



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