

# Angela Kelly Smith

Brand Love: What It Is and How to Use It with Dr. Aaron Ahuvia

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Podcast Transcript

**Kelly Smith:** In my interview today, I'm chatting with Dr. Aaron Ahuvia about his new book, *The Things We Love: How Our Passions Connect Us and Make Us Who We Are*. It's about the psychology, biology, and evolution of why we love things. I'm so excited about this interview because I adore all things psychology, biology, and evolution. And Dr. Ahuvia is the world's leading expert on brand love, which is the practical application of this book.

As a brief introduction to the interview, I wanted to share a few comments I got on Facebook. I asked my connections if they have a thing in their life that they love, almost like a person, because that's what this book explores, how we do love some things and some brands almost the way we love people.

Here's what my Facebook people had to say. One person said that they love the antiques in their life by using them. Now, they note that this is a use-it-or-lose-it thing less than a love thing. Dr. Ahuvia discusses a concept like this in his book, which I bring up in the interview, about a woman who stopped loving her iPod after she stopped using it. So, absence didn't make the heart grow fonder. Absence killed her love.

Someone else comments that they love their Jeep because it represents the best qualities in their life and in them. This goes to the idea that we tend to buy things that represent who we are. We love things that are part of our self-concept. This is a key part of Dr. Ahuvia's book.

One person wrote that love is based on our idealized concept of a person or a thing. They wrote that we fall in love with the idea of the thing more than with the actual thing. This is also something that comes up in Dr. Ahuvia's book when he notes that people tend to stay happily married when they maintain an idealized version of their partner rather than a more realistic view that includes their flaws.

One person noted that they love everything about music, writing it, performing it, listening to it. To them, it seems like their love of music is greater than their love of people. Though they acknowledge not really because people are challenging as in people find fault with them, put demands on them and can just be annoying in a way that music isn't. Yet again this is something in Dr. Ahuvia's book when he discusses the unconditional love that we seem to get from things and animals.

Finally, two people note on my Facebook post that the English language lacks the nuance that some other languages have concerning different words to signify different types of love. This is so true. We throw around the word love when often we may actually mean like. So, has love lost a deeper meaning in English?

I highly recommend Dr. Ahuvia's book. Link in the show notes. And I hope you love listening to this interview as much as I loved conducting it.

I can't tell y'all what a thrill it is to have on today's guest, Dr. Aaron Ahuvia the author of *The Things We Love: How Our Passions Connect Us and Make Us Who We Are*. It's branding. It's psychology. It's biology. Y'all absolutely must read it.

Aaron Ahuvia PhD is a professor of marketing at the University of Michigan-Dearborn College of Business, and the most widely published and cited academic expert on non-interpersonal love. He's published more than 100 academic papers and conference presentations. And his research has been quoted in *Time*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Glamour*, and major publications in Europe and Japan. Dr. Ahuvia has also appeared on public radio talk shows as well as popular television shows such as the *Oprah Winfrey Show*.

Welcome, Dr. Ahuvia. I am so happy you're here today.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Thanks. It's great to be here.

**Kelly Smith:** For the past 30 years, your work has been focused on what you call brand love. In fact, you're the leading expert on brand love. So what is brand love?

**Aaron Ahuvia:** So there's lots of different kinds of love. We've got romantic love and then we've got familial love, you know, for your family or parental love for your kids.

Brand love is, it's love real love, but it's love that people feel for brands or products or services or other things that marketers are interested in. You mentioned non-interpersonal love, which is a little bit of a mouthful. I have tried for years to come up with some good name for this, but that's just, you know, love for things.

Every, anything that isn't a person basically, and brand love isn't scientifically different from that. I mean, there's not a big difference between loving a, a product and loving some other object. But when you talk to marketers, it helps a lot to say brand love because then they understand. So how connects to what they're doing.

**Kelly Smith:** Yeah. If you just say, I think love of things to a marketer, especially considering in your book, you talk about like a sunset or animals. That's not gonna resonate quite as much with marketers as brand love.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Yeah, they don't always, people don't always make the connection. I always, at a design conference some years ago, speaking at a design conference, and a, a guy who one of the cocktail parties came up, recognizes me from the poster is one of the speakers and says, oh, you know, what are you gonna be speaking on?

And I said, well, I'm gonna be talking about the psychology of love. And he thought I was joking. So he said, really, oh, okay. I get it. Peace, love, and happiness. And I thought, well, you know, what I saw I've been researching for my whole life is peace, love, and happiness. So, he was, he was said it jokingly, but it was really, it actually happened to be kind of spot on.

It is true that people don't always make the connection, although the, the connection is really there. Because it's the difference. One of the differences between the way, a very old school, not a new economist. Economists didn't are a lot more sophisticated, but your sort of stereotype of the old school economist of like people buy a pencil because it writes and that's all you need to know.

It's the difference between that and the way marketers look at things. Cause marketers have never seen things that way. Marketers have had to deal with real consumers all the time. And so marketers have always been a lot more sophisticated to look at other kinds of things that, that affect whether the consumers buy your product or not. And so brand love is, is one, a way of getting at both the functional benefits, but also the other kinds that other stuff that that's so important.

**Kelly Smith:** I love that you go into both in your book, you do talk about the emotional and the rational. And you're so right. When I went to business school in 1998, my finance and economic classes, they were still talking about the rationality of buyer behavior. And I was arguing with them then about, no, people do not act rationally when they buy things. Absolutely not. And they were like, no. And so I had to answer on my tests and papers using rational theory. And it just, oh my God. No.

So some people argue that you can't love things that you can only love people. And now obviously I disagree with them and I've read your book, but since my listeners might not have, would you share your thoughts on whether we can love things?

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Yeah. So this is one of the first things I wanted to address. So there's no question that people say, you know, I love this, I love that all the time.

So the, the, the question is, do they really mean it, you know, or, or not? And it turns out if I ask people, you know, when you say you love your car, right, do you really mean it? I mean, do you really, in the strongest, most literal sense of the word mean you love this thing, or you just sort of using the word loosely, you know, you get a lot of both, right.

But about 75% roughly of people that I've talked to have at least one thing that isn't a person that in their mind, they see as real true love and the strictest sense of the word. I'm not saying that they can't be wrong. People can, you know, be wrong. People can think they love something and not, or they, you know, I have a friend who told me this story about the first time he fell in love with a woman.

He had met this woman at camp they were both counselors at. He was telling his friends about her and his friends were like, oh, you've really fallen in love with this person. And he's like, no, I haven't. And then he'd look back at and realized, I guess I had. I guess my friends knew, right. They could hear my voice and I wasn't even aware.

So, you know, you can be wrong in your own mind about whether you love something or someone. But, if you're getting 75% of the people who all insist they love something, they're not all wrong. I mean, it it's, it's, it's gotta be happening there someplace. And there's actually something to learn, even from the people who just use the word loosely as, as all of us do sometimes. Because if you, when I look at what do people really mean?

What I find is when people say like, ah, I love your haircut. I love your shoes. What they really mean is that's an excellent haircut. Those are excellent shoes. So they're evaluating the, the quality, you know, the performance of that and what that tells us.

If, if, if people use the word love as a metaphor for performance, it tells us that that is something that's very important to the actual and experience of love when they talk about brands, that sort of performance. So in many ways, if you've got a product or a brand and it's kind of mediocre, it's really gonna be hard to get people to love that. Like step one is having something that people think is excellent because that is so central to what love is when it comes to brands.

That, that sort of the way they use the word when they're just using it loosely. And in fact, when people do studies, there's really interesting series of studies that have been done by a lot of different people where they'll have put people in a MRI scanner to scan their brain and they'll have the person think about and look at a picture of a person that they love.

And then they'll have the same thing, have them look at a product or a brand that they love. And one of the things they find that's different is that the parts of the brain that relate to judgment and evaluation are much more active. When people look at a brand or a product that they love than they are when they look at a person that they love so we can be judgmental. You know, when you're dating, you can be sort of evaluative of this person that you're dating, but in most context with people that you love, you're not so evaluative.

But with the products or the brands, people are evaluative. So that's sort of step one. But then the exciting and interesting stuff is all the other stuff, cuz that'll that only get that gets you like one step in that direction, but it does not take you all the way there. And so it's, it's the rest of the stuff that gets you there that I think is the most interesting.

**Kelly Smith:** That is fascinating. And an example that you used a few times in the book about a brand is one that I was immediately thinking of before you brought them up and that's Apple. Yes. I am an huge apple fan. All things Apple. MacBook Air, iPad Pro, Apple Watch, iPhone 13.

All the things. I use all their software. They own me. And I've even contemplated, what would it take? What would they have to do to lose me? You know, like it

would have to be something massive ethically on their part to lose me. I just love and adore, I'm gonna use that word, how all of their products work together. So seamlessly, the software. It just, everything connects. I do something on one device and it happens on the other. It's love, you know? It's and adoration, and verging on idolatry, which I think go into with them in the book. And like I do judge.

There is some rationality there, but, you know, because when I, I do evaluate, you know. And, and I evaluate them as excellent. But it it's love. Yeah, totally is.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Absolutely. And, and, and, and it gets to a lot of the other aspects mm-hmm, why people, you know, why brands.... Now apple is without question the most loved brand, at least in the United States.

Yes. That I'm, that I'm aware of. When I ask people, you know, Apple comes up, I did a small survey. It was not a representative sample, but a small survey of 600 people asking them just like name three brands that you love. And Apple was loved far more than, you know, the next. It was Apple then Nike then Samsung, I think.

But there was a big gap, actually. What was really interesting from that to, forgive a tangent, it was really interesting from that survey was okay, so we've got this graph. You can sort of imagine the graph. And the higher, the number is the line is that's more people who say they love that thing.

So you've got Apple up here, like with, you know, a couple hundred people saying they love Apple. And then you've got Nike with about, you know, 60% of that. And Samsung with like 40% of that, and then it just falls off and then you've got 700 other brands with one or two people, mostly one person saying they love that.

So with the, so like you get a few brands like Apple, Nike, you know, and some others. Samsung, some others that, that do have a big sort of following mm-hmm and then you've got an enormous number of brands that have just a few people that love them. But that number is not zero. So like for, I, I really come to think that just about every brand out there, there's somebody who loves that brand.

Whatever it is. But it's very few people. And so there's two lessons from that. One is, you know, if, if you're not, you happen to be not Apple, like your Samsung, right, somebody out there does love your brand. It's possible for somebody to love your brand, cuz people are doing it on the other hand.

It's it's not enough right now to make a difference for you financially. The companies that can make it work like Apple and Nike make astonishing amounts of money. But it's, you know, for the rest of you, it's possible to do. But it's not really being done.

There was a, a story I, I saw in the *Wall Street Journal* a couple years ago and it, it, it found that apple globally made 95% of all profits in the smartphone market. Now, Apple does not sell anywhere remotely near 95% of all smartphones. Especially if you get outside of, you know, affluent Americans. You know, a lot of other brands sell a lot more smartphones, but they make 95% of all the profits. And it's because they have a higher markup on their products.

And I ask my students, they're like, but the other brands should put a higher markup on their product. But you know, listeners realize, well, yeah, they could, they could raise the price, but people would stop buying it.

**Kelly Smith:** You know, Apple has that caché and that love.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Right. Exactly. Yeah. So, and that, that is the power of having people love your brand.

**Kelly Smith:** Yeah, absolutely. All right. So this may be a marketing podcast, but I've got degrees in anthropology and biology. So I wanna talk biology and evolution for a moment if we may. One of the things that happens during love with a person is that the biochemical oxytocin gets released. And this happens for example, in romantic love, when we meet our newborn baby, and like particularly with breastfeeding.

So has research found that oxytocin plays a role in brand love?

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Yes, but not as much of a role. Okay, so it's easy. It does play some role. And there are studies that show that that oxytocin does play some role. And I imagine this is not coming from studies. This is just my personal experience. You know, all that sort might take on the research.

I think it depends a lot on the brand. There are some brands that really provide people with a sense of comfort, and I can see oxytocin, I have a hunch playing a warm, you have this sort of warm attraction. That's sort of the oxytocin feeling. I can see that there. And then there are other brands that people love for other

reasons, and maybe it doesn't play such a big role there, but it does, it is measurable that it's playing some role.

However, I think that the core thing that sort of unites our love when we love a person with our love when we love a brand isn't so much the oxytocin, it's more of a cognitive, psychological thing that's going on. And that is you're taking the person. So when you fall in love with someone romantically that you're merging identities with that person to a certain extent, right?

You're obviously you're still yourself. They're still themselves, but you have the sense that the two become as one, right? That there's, there's a merging of the unit that's going on there. And that I think has evolutionary roots.

So if you look back at what love is, one of the things that I've learned that fascinates me is that I thought that people were just about the only species, maybe some other primates, that loved. But actually there's lots of species out there. They don't love, their experience of love is not gonna be identical to ours. But they do things that look and sound a whole lot like love, and that anthropologists, or excuse me, biologists, call bonding, you know, to separate it a little bit, but it's very similar.

And this bonding is completely tied across different species to the way that they have and raise or don't raise their children. So lots of animal species and insect species don't raise their kids. Right? The female, like salmon lays 5,000 eggs. The male salmon comes and fertilizes them and that's it, both their parenting duties are all done at that point, which I gotta admit has a certain appeal to it.

Sometimes it's not the way humans do things. So species that raise that don't raise their children in that way, don't have this kind of bond. Either with each other or with the, the, the offspring, whereas species that do raise their children as lots of species do have this kind of bonding that comes into love.

And so what is that doing? Well, there's gotta be some psychological mechanism that evolved that gets the parent to make sacrifices on behalf of the kids. You get some food, you share it with the kids. Something dangerous is there, you protect the kids from this dangerous thing. So you're making this...

**Kelly Smith:** Only way for the kid to survive and then the species.



**Aaron Ahuvia:** Exactly. And so what, how might that have those behaviors of, of care taking and protecting? How might they have evolved? My personal theory on this is that animals had a set of behaviors for feeding themselves and caring for themselves and protecting themselves. And they've got some mechanism in their brain that says, look, this is you. And the other stuff in the universe is something that's not you. Right?

So you know what you are, you don't eat your own tail for lunch. Right? That's you, you gotta treat it differently. Well, if an animal, for whatever reason had some sort of a change or a mutation that led them, instead of just thinking that their self was their body, it led them to think that, oh, these other kids, my offspring, they're also me.

Then all of those behaviors feeding them, protecting them. What have you would come quite naturally? And so merging of identities is a way that the brain sort of instructs the animal to take care of these other things, these other offspring, or what have you. And so in humans, it's the same thing, right?

You fall in love, you have the sense of merging. And then to the extent that you feel that sense of merging, you're much more altruistic towards the person that you're in love with. You care about them much more. You worry about their interests and their happiness more because they're a part of you in this larger sense.

That's also really true when we fall in love with brands. When you fall in love with Apple, you don't just own Apple. You are an Apple. Becomes a part of your identity. Your identity merges. And you can tell that's happened with a brand. It's super easy to, to tell because if people like insult a brand that you don't care about, you're like, whatever.

But if you love Apple and somebody goes like insults Apple, you feel personally offended. You get angry. Why would you feel angry and offended? It's because Apple is a part of your identity and you feel that you have been at some level attacked by these criticisms. And so when brands wonder, what's the difference?

Why is it when, when somebody says something bad about a certain brand people who own that brand rush to social media to defend it right. Whereas in other cases, you know, someone will bad mouth a brand and nobody will say anything. Well, well, that's the difference between having people, consumers who love your brand

mm-hmm and see it as part of their identity versus consumers who just use your brand, because it has some practical benefits.

**Kelly Smith:** That's great. I love that, that theory, that concept. Similarly, HBO Max merging with Discovery Plus. At my other podcast, Geek Girl Soup, we are a little bit offended at the changes happening at HBO Max. Yeah, because it's our favorite streaming service and we promote them all the time and we're taking it a little bit personally that they're dumping all of these shows and it's like, wait a minute. But that's a reflection of, of us, of our podcast, of our personal identities. What are you doing? What are you doing to us?

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Yeah, absolutely. And you know what you said there, usually having people love your brand is a very, very good thing. They spend more money, they want to pay higher prices. They tell other people how much they love it and they're evangelists for your brand.

But there are times it's like the, they don't mean just say, say, make a sexist reference, but the phrase, you know, hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. Right, right. But hell hath no fury like a consumer who really was in love with this thing who then feels betrayed.

**Kelly Smith:** So I'd like to show a, actually I'd *love* to show a figure from your book that's called “aspects of the love of things.” And if you're listening to this, you can look at the figure in the video on this episode's page on my website or in Dr. Ahuvia's book. So we'll describe it though, as we go. So let me pull that up here.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** This started with several qualitative, very extensive qualitative studies that I conducted where I interview people, asking them if they love anything or any brands. And if so, what are they? And then we just talk about them for hours sometimes. And I, then I go through and I figure out what are the sort of consistent themes that I'm hearing between a lot of people, you know, basically just a lot of people saying the same thing. What are they talking about?

So I came up with a list of sort of the common elements that people have in their experiences of loving brands or products or other kinds of stuff. And then I also worked with two colleagues, Rajeev Batra and Rick Bogozzi. They're both at the university of Michigan Ross School of Business marketing faculty.

And together we created a measure, a scale. If there's a group of questions that you can ask someone and, based on their answers, determine whether they love something, and if they do how much they love that thing. And actually, if you're, if you're curious about the scale, there's one in the book, there's a version, you can take a little self test there.

And I do, when I do consulting, a lot of times, what I'm doing with companies is I'm taking this scale that I developed and then customizing it to make it particularly appropriate for their brands to really get exactly at how they can measure, log for their products and their brands cause there's always a little bit at tweaking you need to do to this thing.

But this is the general model. And if people say, you know, love is complicated, I have to agree. Love is complicated. It's got, this is a complicated model. It's got a lot of parts and I wish I could tell you love was simple. It's just these two things or three things, but, no, I, I don't get to make up the data. It really is a little bit more to it, so we can go through these.

**Kelly Smith:** Yeah. So this is, it's a heart-shaped figure and, I mean, we shouldn't spend too much time on it cuz I have a few more questions for you. But I guess what I'm most interested in, because we were just talking about self-concept, and so that's right in the middle, the four aspects of self integration, where the four things are current identity, desired identity, life, meaning and intrinsic rewards, and frequent thoughts.

And then on the outside you have at the top, the three aspects of positive emotional connection. The three things there. The three aspects of passion involvement. Beneath those, you have on one side excellence and on the other side long-term relationship. And at the very bottom tragic if lost. So again, yeah, like you just said, this is very complicated, so I'm not asking you to simplify, but.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** I could easily walk through this. I'll give an example.

We were talking about Apple earlier. A lot of people love that. Let's just use Apple as an example, as we go through this. So the first starting point, as I mentioned, for most people is excellence. You know, they think this brand or product is really good. So that's one of the features, and these are just gonna, this is just a list of the attributes that people have in their mind that together create the sense of loving a, a product or a brand.

And all of this, you can trade off. Like if you're a little higher on one, you can be a little lower on a different one to get the sort of overall average. Cause they don't all exactly apply to, to every product or every brand, but it starts with excellence.

And then from there you get these, sort of positive, emotional connection to the product or the brand. And that comes through having positive feelings about it. And this sort of just intuitive sense that it's right for you. Like you start using, it just feels right. And from there you start to get more involved with the product or our brand.

So we've got the different aspects of the sort of passionate involvement. It's not like someone is forcing you to be with this thing. You want to be with this thing. And so you have this passionate desire for it and you're willing to invest resources. So a lot of times when people love products, they'll say, you know, I bought it and then I modified it in a certain way. I changed this. I customized it. I made it better for myself. And so there's a willingness to sort of work with it and invest in it.

And then that causes the sort of long-term relationship. And so this isn't always true. Sometimes you'll love something, it'll be something you just discovered and you don't have any history with it.

But on average, statistically, a, a lot of times when people talk about brands or products that they love, they are things that they've had a long history with and they intend to have a long future with it as well. And part of what that long-term relationship does is it helps make it, increase the sense that, that it's a part of who you are, that it's integrated into your identity.

It's not just something you own. It's something that you are that reflects you in some way. And so there, there we get to the four parts of, of a person's identity. So the current identity is just how you see yourself now. Your desired identity, obviously, how you would like to be in the future. Then we get the two that are a little more surprising.

One is frequent thoughts. And this is something is very interesting to me that we used a mathematical, a statistical approach called factor analysis. And it takes a lot of these different sort of aspects of love, and it puts them into groups, statistically. And it was interesting that this thing that people say, oh, I know I love it because I think about it, it keeps popping into my head, like all the time, mm-hmm, went together with these identity issues. And the reason it does, I believe is that's one of

the ways your brain takes something like, okay, the brand Apple or your cell phone, and in order to make it a part of your identity, your brain has to do work.

And all that thinking about it is this is really the work your brain is doing as it takes that brand and makes it a part of your own sense of identity.

So another aspect of having a brand or a product be part of your identity is the sense that it makes your life a little bit more meaningful in some way. That might sound like a pretty high bar. Like this brand makes my life meaningful. It isn't gonna be the most important thing, right? Your children, your spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend, maybe your job, you know, if you have other sorts of religious or political commitments, those, you know, are gonna be the big things. But products do in, in a smaller way, help people feel that their life is more meaningful, in certain ways.

And love is a deep experience. Love is profound and many times, even if a product is excellent, people will feel they don't love the product because it doesn't connect with them on a deeper level. It just seems superficial. Many brands are trying to create those deeper connections and they do it by saying our brand represents certain values that people hold very strongly.

And so for a lot of brands, like Nike, often those turn out to be progressive political values. For some brands, like Chick-fil-A, they're conservative political values. It's questionable, you know, at a practical matter, whether aligning your brand with political values is necessarily smart, cuz it always, it turns off a lot of people.

On the other hand, I do understand why they do it because if you want people to love your brand, connecting to their deeper values is an important part of that. And that's what I think these brands are, are trying to do there. The last thing there is intrinsic rewards and this is really important.

Intrinsic rewards basically means that people enjoy the experience of your brand or your products. It's not just like, well, using this thing is a, is unpleasant, but the result I get later is wonderful. If people feel that way, they may value this a lot, because that result that's wonderful is terrific for them, but they won't love it.

In order to love something, they have to find the experience a positive experience. That's what I mean by intrinsic rewards. When you put all that together, you get the last part, which is tragic if lost. This is one of the things I hear most frequently in

my interviews. I'll say, well, tell me about something you love. And they'll say, you know, I guess I don't really love that because, you know, I could live without. It wouldn't be so bad. Yeah. If it went away, it doesn't really matter to me that much.

And the I can't live without it is a, is a funny phrase. I remember one person I interviewed saying, you know, I really love these games that I play with my friends, cuz I couldn't live without them.

But food isn't that important. I could live without it. Really? No, I think that's backwards. What it tells me is that they don't mean I couldn't literally live without it. It's really important to me, and it's important to my sense of identity. If they didn't have that thing that they love, they would be a different person.

So the person they are could not exist without that because it part it's part of what makes them who they are. I think that's really what they're getting at with the, with the sort of tragic if lost aspect.

**Kelly Smith:** That's great. Thank you so much. And yeah, this is really helpful for brands. I mean, it, I think this, this works for people, but it's really great for understanding brand love and how we can use this in creating brands that would lead to love of our brands as well. So thank you so much.

So you mentioned something in the book called relationship warmers. Would you explain what you mean by that please?

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Yeah. Sure. So let's go back to a question you started with, which was, can people really love things other than people? And my initial answer, which is correct is yes they can, but it's also true that no, they can't mm-hmm. And so that obviously sounds like a contradiction and it is something of a contradiction, but it's one of the most interesting things I think I found in my research.

And so what I mean by no people can't love things other than people is that love did evolve specifically for people, right? Yeah. Every time that a behavior evolves in an animal or a person, let's say a fear response, mm-hmm, part of the fear response is like, what happens? Your heartbeats faster. And you know, all these things.

But part of it also is what's gonna trigger that, like what's gonna make you afraid. Right? And those triggers are never perfectly accurate because they're just through

random mutation, right? So some years ago I was in Israel and I was walking through the desert at night and I saw a giant spider, really huge.

And I got really scared, but I had to walk that way. It was on the road. But then as I got closer, I realized it wasn't a giant spider. It was a potato chip bag that had gotten stuck under a rock and was kind of blowing and in the wind a little bit and moving around in a certain way. So I had this, I had this fear response, but it was not to the right thing.

It was not properly calibrated exactly there. Yeah. And so as love evolved, it really did evolve just for people. But in the same way, I got, you know, scared of a potato chip bag. We fall in love with things that aren't actually people. But our brain is sort of equating them with people in some ways.

**Kelly Smith:** We're primed to love just like we're primed to fear because as we're evolving in the savanna or in caves, we needed to be hyper-aware of those scary things that could kill us. And today we get scared too easily because there are, we don't have those triggers, any those real triggers anymore.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Right. Right. And in that same time that we were evolving, well, there were certainly threats, you know, from spiders or other kinds of things out there. The biggest rewards for us and the biggest threats to us were the people that we lived with. They could help us or hurt us more than anything else out there in the environment.

So as our brain was evolving, it evolved to really focus on people. There are actually parts of the brain that are specifically for thinking about people. If you see a chair and you wanna figure out, you know, identify what kind of chair it is, your brain will do that in one part of the brain. And if you see a person's face and you wanna remember who that person is, it will do that in an entirely different part of the brain.

It's designated, you know, like reserved for people, right? And love is the same kind of thing. It's reserved for people, and we know this cause we have this word objectify. What does it mean to objectify a person? It means to think about that person as if they were merely a thing, meaning there is some way that we normally think about things.

And we don't wanna do that with people. We get that wrong. So, but just as we can sometimes objectify a person and think about a person as if they're a thing, we can do the reverse and think about a thing as if it's a person. So this happens partly through anthropomorphism. So sometimes an object will sound or look like a person, right?

Apple has Siri. You talk to her and she responds in this voice, like a person. And so when you have that, it's much easier for people to love that brand or product because it triggers the, you know, I'm a person kind of thing in their brain to do so. Not a hundred percent, but to a meaningful extent. However, there are two other ways, and this is what I call relationship warmers, because if your relationship with products is very cold and practical, mm-hmm, unless it gets sort of warmed up and becomes emotional in some way.

So anthropomorphism warms up the relationship. Another thing that warms up relationships that is very overlooked is what the, the great consumer researcher, Russell Belk called person thing person. So you've got your iPhone. You love your iPhone. There's a relationship between you and your iPhone that's person thing.

But what do you do with the iPhone? You text other people, you call other people. It's a link in a chain that connects you to other people, that's person thing person. And it turns out to a, a surprising and remarkable degree that, when people talk about products that they love and you get into it, the first minute or two is like me and the object. But as you push deeper, it always turns out to be, well, this object connects me to this person or this group of people.

It may do it in a practical way, like a phone does. You can talk to them. And interestingly, I found in, in one study, the more friends people had, the more they loved their phones cause like it connected them to more people. Right? Yeah. So, it could be that practical, but often it's a symbolic connection.

It's like this item of clothing comes from my ethnic heritage. So it connects me to those people in my, you know who share my ethnic heritage in a symbolic way. But it makes some sort of a connection to other people. Yeah. So that's the second one. And what happens there, I should also say is that your brain sees that brand or product sort of like a person because your brain connects it to these other people. And then it sort of gets a free ride. It gets like smuggled in with them into the part, you know, into the qualifies as a person through sort of going, being part of their entourage and going along for person.



And the last one that we've already talked about a little bit is that you see it as part of yourself. So when you see a product or brand as part of your own identity, you're a person, it's a person you love yourself. You can love that brand because it's part of yourself. That also creates a warmer kind of relationship.

So the three ways that people get to have this warm, loving relationship with products that requires this human element is they either think the product is a person through anthropomorphism, they think the product is connected with somebody else, or it's connected with themselves. And very often it's more than one of these, some combination of, of more than one of.

**Kelly Smith:** That makes sense. That's really fascinating and just, just makes sense so that people would love, or so many people would love Apple, and it's less likely they're going to love their broom.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Right. And there's, you know, the broom, especially that gets back to the intrinsic extrinsic thing. If you really like cleaning house, mm-hmm if it's a meaningful activity for you.

You might love your broom. I know people who love their broom. But a lot of people don't like cleaning house that much. They see it just like, I'm doing it. I want the results, but the process isn't something I enjoy. And so they don't feel that they love it. They're just, there's this expression we have with people.

Do you love him or are you just using him or her, right? If you enjoy your time with the person, you love them, but if you just are like trying to get ahead in your career, mm-hmm, you don't like spending time with them, then you're just using. It's the same with the broom. If you enjoy sweeping, you might love your broom.

Otherwise you're just using it in this way. And that that's another aspect for, for companies that want to increase love for their products is to pay attention to the user experience. True.

**Kelly Smith:** Yeah. And like you said earlier in your research where the vast majority of the love went to Apple and Samsung and Nike, but there were all of these other brands where at least one person liked them.

So definitely there are people who, or loved them. There were definitely people who loved their broom, but a, a brand is likely not to ever reach the love that Apple has.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Yeah, there's a number of reasons for that. I mean, playing games on your phone is just more fun than sweeping the [broom].

Another aspect that I find very interesting, it was really surprising. Often I would com ask people to compare two things that they love and just tell me which I love more and why.

The number one reason why people say I love X more than Y isn't I have more fun with X. It isn't, it, you know, connects to my values in a deeper way. All these things that I would've thought would be the top reasons. The number one reason is I spend more hours a day using X than I do using Y. Really? That's so mundane. Why would that be so?

**Kelly Smith:** Well, you tell that story in the book about the woman who used to love her iPod. Yeah. And then when her commute to work shortened, she stopped using her iPod and that led to her not loving it anymore.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** And I felt like when she told me that I was like, the poor iPod did nothing wrong, you know, you know, yet you no longer love it. I sort of felt, but, but it makes sense.

**Kelly Smith:** I felt bad for the iPod. We were anthropomorphizing it.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** I felt bad. Yeah. But the reason it makes sense, what sort of connected for me and helped me figure it out is I was doing research and I needed to find a scale, a series of questions I could ask people that I could use to quantify based on their answers how close of a relationship they have with another person.

So how you know, and obviously people we love, we feel we have a very close relationship with, with those other people. And right there, whenever I found these scales that psychologists developed to measure how close two people's relationships are, the first question is always, how much time do you voluntarily spend with this other person?

And just the amount, the sheer quantity of voluntary time that you spend with the other person has a lot to do with whether you feel you have a close relationship. And that's what I think is going on. When people say I spend more time with product A than I do with product B, it's like I have a closer relationship because I spend this, you know, increased time with them. Yeah. And, and one last point here that I think is interesting.

Apple has done a really nice job of being part of many different aspects of our life. So I've got like the Apple TV that I watch tonight. I've got my phone, but I've got my laptop. Some people have a watch. Right. And because it has these different products and they're all really visibly the same connected with each other all that time.

So Apple gets credit for all of those interactions, not just the phone and not just the TV. Whereas there are other brands that might have. A lot of different products, but they may be under different brand names. You know, from the same company or the connection between the products isn't clear in the consumer's mind.

So the consumer, you know, make value the, you know, I get a good, my stove does well, and my refrigerator does well, and my computer does well, but they never put together that their stove and the refrigerator in their computer are all part of the same company. And should create a stronger relationship with that company..

**Kelly Smith:** Very true. All things Apple will play well together. Beautiful. So getting practical for just a moment, what is the difference between your approach to brand love and the approach of most consulting firms?

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Most consulting firms, I'm sort of a little sad to say, when they develop their definition of brand love, they got their people together and they all talked to each other and they figured out what they think brand love ought to be. And the problem there is that, even if you come up with something that seems to make a lot of sense to you, it often does not overlap with what brand love actually is, what it means for people to actually love a product or a brand. Because love is, is a real psychological phenomenon you can't just decide what you think love is.

Love is going on in people's brains. And it is evolved over millions of years. And it's, it has some features that are, that are there or, or not there. Right?

So there's a company that shall remain nameless cause I'm not out here to like pick a fight or bash, especially with a very large company and well known company like this. It's a large well known survey provider. And they came out a couple years ago with their list of the most loved brands in America based on this survey.

And they did what almost everybody else does is they made up their own idea of love. And then they did this, you know, measured all these different brands and they came up with their top 50 brands and it was horrific. Apple was not anywhere on their list at the top of the most-loved brands. It's, it's what like far and away the most-loved brand.

It just wasn't, didn't even make the top 50. And most of the brands that they said were the most loved brands in America, when I asked 600 people to name three brands that they love, and they came up with this enormous list of brands, those brands weren't on that list. I mean, I had bizarre obscure little brands.

I had 700 different brands that, you know, one person was mentioning. But for, for this list of brands that this other company came up with, not a single person out of these 600, not even one person would mention that brand. So it was with,

**Kelly Smith:** Without going into detail, like what were some of the general ways that they qualified love or defined love?

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Looking at like repeat purchase.

**Kelly Smith:** But that can be based on practical need.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** They were looking at, as they saw it, social responsibility, how socially responsible as they defined it.

**Kelly Smith:** So that doesn't automatically lead to love. Right. It does not. That can lead to respect.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** It can, it can. It's nice. It can help carry a deeper connection, right? Not your, as a company, it's not your definition of social responsibility. It's the consumers belief about yours that matters not your definition and how you measure it. So, it was, it was just wildly off. And you see that a lot.

So yeah, the difference is what, what I've done, both first by myself and then again with Rick Bagozzi and Rajeev Batra when we developed this measure, is I start with actual human beings, consumers, and talk to a lot of them in great depth about the things that they love and figured out, what are people, what what's this actual phenomenon?

What is it out there? And then built measures off of the, that reflected that. And they do the measures work, really, really well, really well. And there was actually a, a study done, published in one of the very top journals, Journal of Consumer Research, that was not by me, was not by sort of a brand love advocate.

It was by folks who were interested in, in sort of other related constructs and other related measures that might predict brand loyalty. And so their question was what's the, what measure, predicts brand loyalty the best. They had a bunch of different alternatives and they determined that brand love was the most strong, the measure that was most strongly connected to brand loyalty, which is nice.

Cause usually whatever, you know, if you study brand love, you think brand love is best. And if you think study satisfaction, you think satisfaction is best or whatever you, of course. But this was nice. You had people who were studying attachment and came out and said, well, actually brand love seems to do a little better than, than what we're talking about.

**Kelly Smith:** So that makes perfect sense to me. So is brand love really relevant for most brands?

**Aaron Ahuvia:** I think it depends on the brand strategy. It depends on the brand strategy. So there's a very viable and often successfully used sort of low-involvement strategy, which is you get your product everywhere so it's really convenient to buy. And you get consumers to have a general positive feeling about your product.

Like they, they think it's good product. They have some positive mental associations that they connect with it. And then you give 'em a coupon or you put it on sale. Or maybe you don't, maybe you try and have a little bit more of a premium brand. But in any event it's sort of overall value for money and convenience and high awareness. They hear a lot about you, advertise a lot, right? So that's, that's a, a very viable, low-involvement strategy for companies.

There's also the much more high-involvement strategy, and that is we're going to get consumers to really care about our product. We want them, if it's not available in the store, they're in to go to a different store to get it. We want them to be willing to pay a price premium. We want them to buy it, even if it's not on sale or not on end-of-aisle display or, you know, all those sorts of things. So if you are trying for that more high involvement strategy then brand love, I think is the way to go. Yeah, it is.

It taps into people's real preexisting brain, to structures in their brain, the way the human brain works, that, you know, come millions of years before they were brands, right, are very much embedded there. And it works using in a harmonious way the, the way people, brain, and minds exist already in the way they, they work already to create the kinds of attachments that, that marketers are trying to create with the brand.

I will say that there are a couple of misunderstandings that are really easy for me to know why there's a misunderstanding but that re can be relevant here. And, and one is a lot of times when we use the word love, what we mean is this very, very strong relationship, right?

It's like stronger than liking. It's a different thing. It's a very strong relationship and people do love Apple that way. It does happen for some brands. And I will say for, you know, Samsung, I know people who love Samsung that way and, you know, Lululemon for a while yeah had like crazy people really crazy about it. But for a lot of brands and a lot of industries, that's probably not gonna happen.

And so it is understandable that they might think, well, brand love isn't relevant for me. But what we found in, in our research, this is again with Rajeev Batra and Rick Bagozzi is that it's really all relative. So if you are in an industry where the whole industry, everyone has fairly low levels of the sort of emotional connection, you just need to have more than your competitors.

You don't have to have as much as Apple. You don't have to have as much as Lululemon. You just need to have more than the next guy. It's like that old joke about the, the two, the two folks in the woods who see the bear and, and one starts putting on his shoes. Right. And he is like, you can outrun that, bear with your shoes. But I don't need to outrun the bear. I just need to outrun you.

You don't, you don't need, you know, to outrun Apple. You just gotta be faster than the alternative. You gotta be more loved than the alternative, even if it's a fairly low level for everybody. So it can be relevant in that way to a lot of different companies.

**Kelly Smith:** That's great. So do you have a few tips on how small brands can use brand love to boost their brands?

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Yeah. One option that's available for some brands, although of course not all brands, I talked earlier about how anthropomorphism, right, you with the product. It kind of looks like a person, or it talks like a person, people, the brain sees it as a person.

It makes it easier to love this brand. Well, if anthropomorphism, a brand that can look a little bit like a person or product, if that helps, just imagine what a real person will do. So a lot of brands that are sort of smaller companies that are built on sales, like actual interactions between a human being and another human being, that's gonna be the strongest source of brand love.

It's, you know, the brand gets connected. You're a small company, so they really see you, the owner, the entrepreneur. You are the company for them. Right? Right. And so your personal relationships with people, and I know I'm not the first person telling you this.

If you're got a small company, you should know this already, your personal relationships are the relationships that people have with your company. They are the relationships that people have with your brand. And so being able to find and, and work with those relationships in a good way is gonna create a lot of brand love for smaller companies.

Another aspect that, that works out there is sort of finding, you're a smaller company, finding those people who already love, who are likely to love your brand, finding the people you're really right for. And so a lot of marketing isn't convincing people to love your product. It's finding the people who are going to love your product.

And that's a big job. But it's an important job for a lot of smaller companies. So those are just two. There's more, but I think for smaller companies, those are particularly relevant pieces of advice.

**Kelly Smith:** Absolutely. That's great. Thank you so much.

This was just awesome and so fascinating. All my listeners need to read your book.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Thank you very much. Anybody who feels love, needs to read the book, right? If love isn't something in your life, then, you know, it might not be for you. And so I, I appreciate the plug.

This was a wonderful opportunity. I really enjoyed speaking with you. Excellent questions. And I loved being able to get into really a little bit more depth, more than just the two-second answer because love is important. It's important for businesses as well as the rest of our lives. But, you know, love is complicated and it, and it often takes more than a, you know, a 15-second answer to, to have people understand what's going on.

So I appreciate it.

**Kelly Smith:** Absolutely. Well, I'm thrilled that you took the time to be here. And how can people find you online?

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Last name is Ahuvia. A H U V I A. It would be-huvia to remember Ahuvia. Okay. So that's great. There aren't a lot of other Ahuvias out there. But no, I also have a website, which is [thethingswelove.com](http://thethingswelove.com).

So that's pretty easy.

**Kelly Smith:** Awesome. Well, I will share that link in the show notes and on this episode's page on my website. And thank you so much again for being here.

**Aaron Ahuvia:** Well, thank you so much for having me on.

**Kelly Smith:** Absolutely. And thank y'all for being here today. I would love it if you would leave a positive rating and review. And if you enjoyed this episode, please share it with someone. I'll be back in a few days.

So I'll see you next time on the Marketing Chat Podcast.



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Links mentioned in the episode:

Find Dr. Ahuvia at [thethingswelove.com](http://thethingswelove.com)

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