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Brand anthropomorphism, love and defense: does attitude towards social distancing matter?

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ABSTRACT
Several hospitality brands changed their logos to reinforce the importance of social distancing in reducing the risk of virus infection. Since social distancing is a polarizing topic, this research intends to understand consumers’ attitudes towards social distancing and their response to branding change by hospitality brands. Study 1 creates and validates a multiple-item scale to examine consumers’ attitudes towards social distancing, which is then adopted for two subsequent studies. Study 2 tests consumers’ awareness and perceived brand anthropomorphism during a sensitive situation like a global pandemic and the impact of perceived brand anthropomorphism on brand love and brand defense. Study 3 tests the proposed model in study 2 across two customer segments, i.e. those in favor of social distancing and those against it. Results indicate that brand anthropomorphism and brand love have a significantly positive impact on brand defense. Additionally, these relationships differ for consumers who favor or oppose social distancing. Our research contributes to the hospitality branding literature by studying relatively understudied branding constructs in an unprecedented context and offers insights for hospitality branding and marketing managers.

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Introduction

A well-known English expression, ‘may you live in most interesting times,’ is said to be a translation of a traditional Chinese curse. Regardless of how the expression is used in the literature, its implications and meaning are thoughtful and are just as valid in today’s ever-changing world. Within the last 50 years, the world has observed many significant changes and disruptions (Chaston, 2017); from social and demographical issues (changing family structures, aging populations, changing disposable incomes, etc.) to technological changes (internet, smartphone, artificial intelligence, big data, and robotics, etc.) and environmental issues (deteriorating environmental concerns, increasing natural disasters and epidemics and pandemics). While positive environmental trends offer opportunities for organizations to grow, negative trends, uncertainties, and crises put them to test (Koseoglu et al., 2013), which holds even stronger implications for hospitality organizations (Lynn, 2019).

Currently, the entire world is facing the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which is defined as ‘an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus’ (WHO, 2020). The global economy is already feeling the shock. All the major stock exchanges, such as the FTSE, the Nikkei, and Dow Jones Industrial Average, have all seen massive falls since the outbreak began on 31st December (Jones et al., 2020). To limit the spread of this highly transmitting virus, governments and health officials worldwide are issuing a warning for the public to stay at home and practice social distancing and voluntary self-isolating (USS CDC, 2020; WHO, 2020). Self-isolating refers to stay at home and not to leave for any reason (BBC, 2020). Social distance is a measure of the closeness between people in an interaction (Buchan et al., 2006). U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2020), social distance is remaining out of congregate settings and keeping the distance approximately 1–2 meters from other people. These warnings have led to many major industries, including retail, travel, hospitality, higher education, etc. to work remotely or perform online or digitally.

However, larger public segments did not take these warnings seriously, ignoring the warnings (Prosser et al., 2020). In the US, for example, a recent survey reports that up to 85% of customers at local grocery and retail stores do not practice physical distancing (Khoa et al., 2020). To chip in the situation, some global hospitality brands, i.e. McDonald’s and Burger King, acted proactively to bring attention to WHO’s call of social distancing by modifying their logos. While this step garnered attention and praises worldwide, others criticized it, calling it something that strikes a sour note (Valinsky, 2020). Twitter users were quick to blast the brand’s seemingly opportunistic effort. ‘Shame on everyone turning this pandemic into an award brief,’ said one user while another one asked, ‘How about pay your workers a living wage?’ This type of negative coverage in traditional and social media increases the brand’s sensitivity (Einwiller et al., 2006), pushing them to rely on their relationships with their most loyal consumers for support (Dalman et al., 2019). Hospitality brands with higher levels of awareness can
count on consumers’ active support and positive attitude (So et al., 2014) because of their strong influence on consumer behavior (Palusuk et al., 2019). Anthropomorphized hospitality brands – a perception that brands have emotional states, mind, should, and conscious behaviors – are perceived as having a more profound capacity for care and concern (Lee & Oh, 2019; Portal et al., 2018). It is known that anthropomorphism helps build strong and personal relationships (Tuškej & Podnar, 2018). This might occur when consumers have an emotional feeling for brands, such as passion or love. Consumers who are in love with a brand can quickly identify any brand-related asset such as color, slogan, logo, symbol, package, or representative (Cheung et al., 2019; Surucu et al., 2019) and tend to react positively towards the brand activities (Dalman et al., 2019). On the other hand, when the consumers love a brand compared to the others, they start to spread positive word-of-mouth about the brand (Kemp et al., 2012). Sometimes, this positive word-of-mouth might go beyond and become a defense, where consumers act as protectors and defend the brand from any criticism (Javed et al., 2015).

While the existing literature on branding has looked into the concept of brand love, brand anthropomorphism, and brand defense separately, there are no studies that have focused on the relationships between these integral concepts, especially in human-intensive industries like the hospitality industry and insensitive and polarizing contexts where the response to branding activities are polarizing. As such, this study will seek to fill in this gap and answer the following questions: (1) In a sensitive situation like a global pandemic, do customers think of brands to have a propensity to anthropomorphize? (2) if yes, how does this perceived brand anthropomorphism result in customer’s love towards and defend the brand? and (3) if the interrelationships among these variables differ across two customer segments, i.e. those in favor of social distancing and its effectiveness and those against it.

Since there are currently no established scales to measure customer’s attitude towards social distancing, this study first develops and validates a new multi-item scale to capture customer’s attitude towards social distancing and to divide the dataset into two segments, i.e. those in favor of social distancing and its effectiveness and those against it. This study investigates the degree of difference in the strength of relationships among brand anthropomorphism, brand love, and brand defense for both these segments. With the scarcity of research on customers’ attitudes towards social distancing (Sigala, 2020), the current study responds to urgent behavioral and causal research to understand this behavior (Gursoy & Chi, 2020) is among very initial empirical studies to understand this phenomenon.

**Literature review**

**Brand anthropomorphism**

Anthropomorphism is defined as ‘the real or imagined behavior of non-human agents with human-like characteristics, motivations, intentions, and emotions’ (Epley et al., 2007, p. 864). Another similar definition for anthropomorphism is ‘the habit of using terms salient for human traits to refer to non-human traits’ (Karlsson, 2012, p. 107). It refers to human attributions, human characteristics, or human behaviors to non-human
objects (Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014; Sreejesh & Anusree, 2017). These attributions, characteristics, or behaviors may include physical appearance, emotional states, inner mental states, or motivations (Epley & Waytz, 2008; Portal et al., 2018). Anthropomorphizing the subject is an automatic psychological process based on three needs of humans: the need to understand the world around, the need to affiliate with others, and the need to maintain a connection and belongingness (Basfirinci & Cilingir, 2015).

Brand anthropomorphism is related to perceiving a brand as a human being (Aaker, 1997). It is defined as ‘brands perceived by consumers as actual human beings with various emotional states, mind, soul and conscious behaviors that can act as prominent members of social ties’ (Puzakova et al., 2009, p. 413). Brand anthropomorphism is recognized as a vital cognitive process that affects consumers and the brands (Tuškej & Podnar, 2018). It may occur in two different ways, i.e. (1) the perception of the external appearance of a product (for example, human body-shaped bottle), and (2) the perception of the self-congruity of a product (Guido & Peluso, 2015). Moreover, Moynihan (1997) pointed out that it was natural to anthropomorphize the brands because people could create a reality of what they observed. That is why, in the context of hospitality and tourism, several brands have used mascots to anthropomorphize their brands. Examples include Algonquin Hotel’s Algonquin Cat, Pandi the Jaguar for The Buenos Aires 2018 Youth Olympic Games, and the famous Mickey Mouse for Disney.

Brands that want to build a strong relationship with the consumers create human-like characters, name the products as if they are human, or make the characters talk like a human being (Puzakova & Aggarwal, 2018). According to Stinnett et al. (2013), the consumers need to anthropomorphize the brands to avoid uncertainty and the brand’s risk. Consequently, anthropomorphized brands attract an engaged consumer base (Hart et al., 2013; Landwehr et al., 2011). While the mainstream marketing literature has observed the impact of brand anthropomorphism on several outcomes such as brand evaluation (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2017), brand perception (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007), and consumer’s emotional connection, hospitality and tourism literature has mainly focused on the interplay between brand anthropomorphism and brand personality of hotels, restaurants, and destinations (Han et al., 2020; Su & Reynolds, 2017). As such, there is a significant gap in understanding the additional consequences of brand anthropomorphism in the context of hospitality and tourism (Han et al., 2020).

Brand anthropomorphism has been studied within branding literature. However, there is a lack of scales available to measure brand anthropomorphism (Sarkar et al., 2019). While some scholars used physical attributes of a human body, i.e. height, gender, body features (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Guido & Peluso, 2015; Sreejesh & Anusree, 2017), others have used intangible attributes such as human name, human voice, personality or emotional and social skills of humans to assess anthropomorphism (Hellén & Sääksjärvi, 2013; Kim & Kramer, 2015; Puzakova & Aggarwal, 2018; Stinnett et al., 2013; Tuškej & Podnar, 2018). In this study, the brand anthropomorphism is conceptualized as a cognitive process in line with the definition provided by Puzakova et al. (2009).

**Brand love**

While many scholars have looked into the consumers’ ‘like-dislike’ attitudes towards brands, recent literature has increasingly focused on consumers’ love for brands (Aro
et al., 2018; Ismail & Spinelli, 2012; Nikhashemi et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019). As per Ismail and Spinelli (2012), the concept of brand love takes its base from Rubin (1973, p. 265) on love, defining it as an ‘attitude held by a person toward a particular another person, involving predispositions to think, feel, and behave in certain ways toward that other person.’ As per Fournier (1998), consumers’ strong relationships with brands can develop a feeling of brand love. Accordingly, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) defined brand love as ‘the degree of passionate, emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular brand name’ (p. 81). Albert et al. (2008) postulated four characteristics of brand love, including brand attachment, brand passion, positive brand evaluation, positive emotions towards the brand, and declaration of love towards the brand. Brand love is like loving an individual that is built through a deep emotional bond (Karjaluoto et al., 2016), including similar values, humor, and development over time (Roy et al., 2013; Wallace et al., 2014). It refers to emotional and passionate feelings towards a brand (Sarkar et al., 2012), developed after consuming a brand’s product or service (Kaufmann et al., 2016). As discussed by Roy et al. (2013), consumers’ brand love is a consequence of consumers’ positive experiences with the brand and/or external communications built by the brand.

Due to its benefits like willingness to pay premium price, positive WOM and purchase intentions, switching resistance and resistance to negative WOM, brand love has recently received some attention in the hospitality literature (Batra et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2019). Hotels like HUA-LUXE use cultural cues (textures and aromas) to develop brand intimacy (love) in order to garner repeat business from Chinese travelers (Wang et al., 2019). As per Shin and Back (2020), brand love as a construct holds significant relevance for the hospitality industry because of the industry’s consistent challenge in retaining customers. While the existing hospitality literature has looked into the interplay between constructs such as self-brand connection, brand authenticity, and brand reputation, there are no studies in hospitality as well as general branding literature—that has to look into the interplay between brand love and other branding constructs that are beyond general behavioral intentions of consumers.

In terms of conceptualizing the phenomena of love, Sternberg (1986) used the triangular theory to offer three dimensions of love, including intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. Interestingly, Aron and Aron (1986) explained the concept of love as one’s self-expansion. Other scholars proposed a vast array of indicators to measure love, including acceptance, commitment, concern, respect, care, trust, etc. (Albert et al., 2008). However, the brand love construct suffers from a misunderstanding of its clear conceptual structure, leading to inconsistencies with its definition and dimensionality (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Sajtos et al., 2020). For instance, Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen (2010) highlighted brand love and interpersonal love as two distinct constructs, where brand love is unidirectional and interpersonal love is bi-directional. Generally, consumers are not anticipated to have a desire for intimacy with a brand, but likely they are associated with passionate interpersonal love. Batra et al. (2012) explain that consumers’ love towards a brand implies an extensive and long-term consumer–brand emotional relationships, with several interrelated cognitive, affective, and behavioral components, rather than a specific, single, transient love emotion. As a result, brand love generates favoritism and positive perceptions (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Nonetheless, regardless of the criticism, love is a psychological process that can happen toward societies, concepts, events, and objects (Ahuvia, 2005; Aro et al., 2018). Moreover, there seems to be an agreement that
the concept of brand love integrates consumer’s passion and affection toward and their association with their loved brands (Batra et al., 2012; Sajtos et al., 2020). In this study, the concept of brand love is conceptualized as a unidimensional construct based on Carroll and Ahuvia’s (2006) definition.

**Brand defense**

As discussed earlier, brand love is consumers’ passionate, emotional attachment towards a brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), often regarded as the strongest emotional relationships. As per Thomson et al. (2005), passion is an intense positive feeling, leading to positive word of mouth (Lisjak et al., 2012). According to Javed et al. (2015), a strong positive word generates brand advocacy, and the strongest form of positive WOM behavior that goes beyond brand advocacy develops brand defense, refereeing to it as ‘consumer’s protective behavior to defend the brand from any criticism’ (p. 40). Brand defense is a relatively new construct in general marketing literature. Consequently, while some of the hospitality literature has looked into brand evangelism, brand defense has not been studied. Brand defense is defined as ‘a state of positive WOM attributions, in which consumers in close consumer brand relationships or brand love defend the brand from any criticism’ (Dalman et al., 2019, p. 878). Brand defense is a distinct construct within the consumer–brand relationship and is mainly a consequence of consumers’ love for a brand (Dalman et al., 2019; Lisjak et al., 2012; Wilk et al., 2019). Consumers who have a strong attachment and attitude towards a brand tend to defend it (Monga & John, 2008). The consumers who build self-definitional attachments with a brand are the real defenders (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). Brand defense originates from positive word-of-mouth. Consumers satisfied with a brand want to share their good experiences with others to support the brand (Ilhan et al., 2018; Japutra et al., 2014). This support transforms into defense when it comes to an argument, a criticism, an attack, or a threat (Wilk et al., 2019). Often attributed to a higher intensity of human interactions and resulting service failures (Lee & Oh, 2019), brand defense has important implications for the hospitality industry, where consumers can defend the brands. According to Colliander and Hauge Wien (2013), there are six types of defense, including advocating, justifying, trivializing, stalling, vouching, and doubting. Advocating defense refers to consumers’ reactions to negative comments that are perceived as unreasonable. Justifying defense is like advocating defense but has a more balanced tone (Dalman et al., 2019). Trivializing defense has not a strong defensive argument and is characterized by humorous comments. Stalling defense does not imply the complainer’s accusations (Lisjak et al., 2012). Vouching defense refers to unfavorable comments about a brand. Finally, doubting defense is a challenge that makes people question the credibility of the complainer. As mentioned earlier, the brand defense relatively less explores construct and lacks valid established scales to measure the phenomenon. Javed et al. (2015) developed the initial scale to measure brand defense based on word-of-mouth literature and day-to-day consumer responses towards favorite brands. This scale was later used by Dalman et al. (2019). In this study, the concept of brand defense is conceptualized as a state of positive WOM attributions. Consumers in close consumer brand relationships or brand love defend the brand from any criticism.
Hypotheses development

**Brand anthropomorphism, brand love and brand defense**

As per Alvarez & Fournier (2016), anthropomorphism has developed as a crucial component in human relationships’ activities to shift to brands. Accordingly, anthropomorphized brands are defined as ‘brands perceived by consumers as actual human beings with various emotional states, mind, soul, and conscious behaviors that can act as prominent members of social ties’ (Puzakova et al., 2009, p. 413). Numerous brands apply strategies like human endorsers, mascots, human-like logos, etc., that influence consumer perceptions of brands’ human-like characteristics, leading to brand anthropomorphization. As per Chartrand et al. (2008), exposure to anthropomorphized brands can stimulate similar cognitive and emotional responses as that of a human being. Numerous scholars have discussed the significant role of brand anthropomorphism towards consumers’ willingness to cooperate with brands (Aggarwal & McGill, 2012). Moreover, Hegner et al. (2017) explained that consumers’ perceptions of the brand’s human-like features could develop a loving relationship with the brand. Consumers start defending the brand (Sashittal & Jassawalla, 2019). Moreover, when consumers perceive a brand to be human-like, they start loving it (Sarkar et al., 2019) and defending it (Wang et al., 2019). In their empirical investigations, Rauschnabel and Ahuvia (2014) and Ferreira (2020) confirmed a significant impact of brand anthropomorphism on brand love and brand defense, respectively. As such, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1: Brand anthropomorphism has a significant impact on brand love.

H2: Brand anthropomorphism has a significant impact on brand defense.

**Brand love and brand defense**

According to Dick and Basu (1994), positive word of mouth is generated because of consumers’ strong relationship with the brand. As per the earlier discussion, brand love is one of the strongest emotional relationship and refers to consumers’ passionate emotions towards a brand. Love for a brand leads to loyal behavior, including consistent purchasing, speaking well, and defending it (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Coelho et al., 2019). Similarly, Javed et al. (2015) also supported the impact of brand love on brand defense, which is conceptualized as extremely positive word of mouth. Dalman et al. (2019) also tested and confirmed the significant impact of brand love on brand defense. As such, this study proposed the following hypothesis. (Figure 1). Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework developed for this study.

H3: Brand Love has a significant impact on brand defense.

**Social distancing and branding**

Social distancing, also called physical distancing, means keeping space with other people. It involves the desire to avoid contact with a group of people (Jorm & Oh, 2009). Social distance is also defined as ‘the relative willingness of one person to participate in relationships of varying degrees of intimacy with a person who has a stigmatized identity’ (Lauber
et al., 2004, p. 266). Social distancing can be a must during crises that threaten the public’s health (Finsterwalder, 2020). In this context, epidemics and pandemics are two major health crises (Van Assche et al., 2020). Closing the main roads, restricting domestic and international travels, and community-level quarantines are the main precautions during epidemics and pandemics. Social distancing practices are suggested by health authorities as well to prevent transmission of the disease and to reduce the severity of an epidemic of a pandemic (Regula, 2010). Glass et al. (2006) suggested a social distance model for Pandemic Influenza, where the first step is to close the schools, second step is to order stay-home for children and youth. This model showed how vital social distance practice could be to avoid pandemic influenza among the public.

Similarly, Caley et al.’s estimation model (2008) showed that social distancing practices helped save more than a hundred thousand people during a Pandemic Influenza in Australia. Kelso et al. (2009) simulated a model to show the importance of social distancing practice during Influenza’s strain. They suggested that social distancing would play a critical role in controlling a potential pandemic. Currently, the world is experiencing a pandemic called COVID-19, and a call for social distancing is heard around the world to reduce interactions between people to prevent the transmission (Knowles et al., 2020; Patil & Patil, 2020; Simonov et al., 2020; Tucker & Yu, 2020). This social distancing includes the closure of schools or office buildings and suspension of shopping malls, travel restrictions, and gatherings (Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020).

However, the apparent measures to secure public health come with varying public (Xu et al., 2020). While many agree with these measures, others think of limiting personal freedoms and putting people’s financial situation in jeopardy (Gostin, 2006; Schuklenk &

Figure 1. Theoretical framework.
Gartland, 2006). Because of the affiliation of the political leaders and vested interests of different news outlets, the public is exposed to differing social distancing opinions. Therefore, the public’s reaction to social distancing also varies from ‘excessive fear of contagion to beliefs that it is just the ‘flu and the government’s reaction is overblown’ (Baum et al., 2009, p. 10). Based on the preceding discussion, it is evident that social distancing measures during a pandemic can result in two broad consumer segments, i.e. those for social distancing and those against it. While social distancing intends to prevent transmission of the disease and reduce the severity of an epidemic of a pandemic, varying attitudes of consumers towards it is surprising. This distinction in consumers attitudes can somewhat be explained by regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998) and construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003). The former theory suggests that people self-regulate their behavior to pursue their goals based on their regulatory focus, i.e. promotion and prevention. While promotion-focused individuals engage in actions with positive outcomes, prevention-focused individuals engage in actions that can avoid negative outcomes (Das, 2015; Tran et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018).

Furthermore, this regulatory focus can be investigated as a situationally induced focus (Khoa et al., 2020; Park & Morton, 2015). Moreover, construal level theory suggests that individuals process the same event or information at different levels when contemplating an action (Theodorakis & Painesis, 2018). A low construal level requires feasibility considerations (how to perform a given action), whereas a high construal level highlights the desirability aspects (why action would be meaningful) (Cai & Leung, 2020). Previous literature from services industries has indicated that both these mindsets have significant downstream consequences for consumers’ evaluation, judgment, and decision making (Line et al., 2016; Pera et al., 2019). It implies that consumers attitudes towards social distancing are because of their situationally induced focus (promotion or prevention). Moreover, the difference in attitude towards social distancing may also be because of the difference in consumers’ construal levels.

This study intends to understand if these two segments (for social distancing and against social distancing) differ in their perceptions and attitudes towards brands. Despite some fragmented overlap in the theories mentioned above, to the authors’ best knowledge, there is no literature available to understand if the difference in reaction to social distancing has any impact on people’s perceptions and attitudes towards branding initiatives by different organizations amidst pandemics. However, a limited amount of prior literature discussed if regional or national bans impact consumer behavior in spillovers and substitutions (Mullick et al., 2017; Nelson, 2003; Seiler et al., 2019). As such, we assume that while brands exercise different brand strategies to appeal to their customer base, the general public’s attitude towards social distancing will impact their perceptions towards brands and their strategies (Tucker & Yu, 2020). As such, this study will apply multi-group analysis to examine the interplay between brand anthropomorphism, brand love, brand defense across two groups of consumers, i.e. for social distancing and against social distancing. As such, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H4: For consumers with positive and negative attitude towards social distancing, there is a difference in the impact of (a) brand anthropomorphism on brand love, (b) brand anthropomorphism on brand defense, and (c) brand love on brand defense.
Study 1: attitudes towards social distancing – scale development

In the current literature, there are no scales to measure consumer’s attitudes towards social distancing practices. Hence, Study 1 aims to develop and validate such a scale. To generate an initial pool of items, 173 user comments posted on social media platforms on social distancing related news 13–17th March were captured. This data was cleaned and thematically analyzed to identify the common themes, which resulted in seven statements representing the importance of social distance and the necessity of social distance practices. As per Yusoff (2019) recommendations, these statements were then subjected to content validity by five subject experts, including the third and fourth authors, who were not involved in the data collection and analysis process. Content validity for the scale was also computed by calculating the S-CVI/UA (scale-level content validity index based on the universal agreement method) and S-CVI/Ave (scale-level content validity index based on the average method). Both these indexes’ values were 0.82 and 0.86, respectively, satisfying the cut-off values and indicating the scale’s satisfactory content validity (Yusoff, 2019).

Following the confirmation of content validity, the next step was to explore the factorial structure empirically. Data was collected through a self-administered online questionnaire using Qualtrics and distributed via Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk). A total of 312 individuals participated in the study. Several scholars (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Goodman et al., 2013; Stritch et al., 2017) have indicated that collecting data via MTurk is as reliable as those obtained through traditional data collection methods and is widely used in hospitality research (Ali et al., 2020). After the deletion of outliers and missing data, 268 responses (Male = 149; Female = 119) were used to conduct an EFA (Exploratory Factor Analysis). All the respondents passed the attention check question and had an approval rate of at least 95% with at least a completion of 100 previously done assignments. Respondents were shown some neutral news about social distancing randomly and then asked to respond to those six statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

Considering the procedure for developing a multiple-item scale by Parasuraman et al. (2005), the correlated item-total correlations were assessed using reliability analysis. One item with the lowest correlated item-total correlation of $-0.011$ (social distance does not make sense) was deleted, resulting in an improved coefficient alpha (0.70–0.91). This was followed by an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal component analysis. KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) and Bartlett’s test of sphericity were also used to evaluate the factor analysis’s appropriateness. The KMO test ensured the overall measure of sampling adequacy, which was 0.799 (>0.50). Bartlett’s test of sphericity supported the instrument; it was $835.446$, $df = 21$, significant at $p < 0.01$. Results indicated a one-factor structure with eigenvalue above one and factor loadings ranging from 0.57 to 0.89, accounting for an explained variance of 71.72%.

To assess the reliability and validity of the social distancing attitude scale, it was subjected to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Results indicated satisfactory and significant values for all the standardized loading estimates. Moreover, the average variance extraction (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) values were 0.62 and 0.87, respectively, exceeding the cut-off values. As such, statistical tests confirm the six-item scale’s reliability and validity to measure attitudes towards social distancing practices.
Study 2: brand anthropomorphism, brand love and brand defense

The purpose of study 2 is two-fold, including (1) to understand if consumers think of brand to have a propensity to anthropomorphize during a sensitive situation like a global pandemic, and (2) how does this perceived brand anthropomorphism result in customer’s love towards and defense of the brand?

Measurements and common-method variance

Brand Anthropomorphism was measured using five statements and adapted from Sarkar et al. (2019). Brand Love was investigated using seven statements and adapted from Ismail and Spinelli (2012). Brand Defense was evaluated using three statements and adapted from Dalman et al. (2019). All the items were rated using a five-point Likert-type scale (from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree). Items were also checked by four subject experts for content validity, and based on their comments, some minor adjustments were made.

Moreover, multiple methodological and statistical tools were used to account for the common method variance – first, the questionnaire only included 28 items. Therefore, it was short enough to avoid tiredness and confusion, which could negatively impact the respondents’ cognitive effort to accurately answer the items. Second, the items’ language was kept simple, specific, and conscious, and by conducting an expert review, the adequacy of the research instruments was verified (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Harman’s single-factor test was conducted, and results revealed that one factor was not accounted for the majority (33%) of the variance. Hence, common method bias was not likely to have affected this study in a significant way.

Study design and data collection

Various hospitality brands have redesigned their logos to support social distancing practices (Valinsky, 2020). It was decided to randomly expose respondents to one of the three hospitality brands selected for this study (McDonald’s, Burger King, and Starbucks), implying that each respondent was only exposed to one logo. First, respondents were shown the regular brand logo. They were asked three questions related to brand awareness (‘I am aware of this brand,’ ‘I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of this brand,’ and ‘I can recognize this brand’), adapted from Molinillo et al. (2017). Respondents who responded negatively to these questions were dropped from the survey. Others were then proceeded to the next section in the survey and were exposed to the socially distant logo for the same brand they were exposed to earlier (See Appendix-I). Following the logo’s display, respondents were asked to answer the questions related to constructs for this study.

Data were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire developed using Qualtrics. The survey was distributed via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). A total of 421 individuals participated in the study, and after the deletion of missing data, 402 responses were used for further analysis. Automatic filters were applied to remove the respondents who did not complete the survey or failed to pass the attention checks. This study’s sample size is consistent with the requirements for Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) (i.e. a minimum of 10 respondents for each item in the survey). This sample size also
fulfills the necessary sample size of 270 respondents, considering the 90% confidence level, a standard deviation of 0.5, and a ±5% margin of error.

**Findings and analysis**

To answer the first research question in the study, i.e. to understand if consumers think of a brand to have a propensity to anthropomorphize during a sensitive situation like a global pandemic, we conducted a simple descriptive analysis to assess brand awareness and then brand anthropomorphism. As shown in Figure 2, the mean score for brand awareness is 4.363, which is high on a 5-point Likert scale. Interestingly, the mean score for brand anthropomorphism is 3.065, which is relatively low on a 5-point Likert scale. It indicates the respondent’s disagreement with brand anthropomorphism (change in logos) as a response to social distancing calls (Figure 2).

The second research question for study 2 is to understand how customers’ perceived brand anthropomorphism lead towards their love and defense of the brand? To answer this question, study 2 used the previous literature to hypothesize relationships among brand anthropomorphism, brand love, and brand defense? To test the research model, Partial Least Squares based (PLS-SEM) was used by employing smartPLS 3.0. This technique does not require assumptions on the data’s multivariate normality and works efficiently with small sample sizes and complex models (Ali et al., 2018). As an initial step, a multivariate normality test was performed using Mardia’s coefficients. Results indicated that the data did not follow a multivariate normal distribution, despite some individual variables following a univariate normal distribution. Due to the study’s exploratory nature and the non-normal distribution of the data, PLS-SEM was considered the preferred method to test the research model.

**Measurement model assessment**

Since in this study, all the constructs are based on reflective measures, guidelines provided by Cheah et al. (2018) were applied. The first model fit was assessed by employing

![Figure 2. Mean and standard error scores for brand awareness and brand anthropomorphism.](image-url)
SRMR value. A value of less than 0.08 is considered a good fit (Ali et al., 2018). For this study, the SRMR value for both the saturated and estimated model was 0.038, indicating the proposed model has a good fit to the data. Also, the values for d_ULS and d_G were both 0.111 and 0.110, respectively, and less than 95% bootstrapped quantile. As such, PLS consistent (PLSc) was considered to be the best approach used for this study.

The internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were assessed following the procedure suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). For internal consistency reliability was examined by Cronbach alpha (CA), Composite Reliability (CR), and rho_A. The results shown in Table 1 indicate that it is above 0.70, which is the recommended threshold for these measures (Ali et al., 2018). The AVE exceeds the cut-off point of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore, the model is satisfactory in terms of intrinsic reliability and convergent validity values.

Also, the discriminant validity of the constructs was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Table 2 indicates that all of the AVE’s square roots (values in bold, off-diagonal)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Loadings</th>
<th>CA</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>rho_A</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand Anthropomorphism</td>
<td>BA1</td>
<td>This brand has a free will.</td>
<td>0.880</td>
<td>0.952</td>
<td>0.950</td>
<td>0.959</td>
<td>0.795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA2</td>
<td>This brand experiences emotions.</td>
<td>0.913</td>
<td>0.950</td>
<td>0.956</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA3</td>
<td>This brand has intentions.</td>
<td>0.705</td>
<td>0.956</td>
<td>0.956</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA4</td>
<td>This brand has consciousness.</td>
<td>0.912</td>
<td>0.956</td>
<td>0.956</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA5</td>
<td>This brand has a mind of its own.</td>
<td>0.918</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Love</td>
<td>BL1</td>
<td>This is a wonderful brand.</td>
<td>0.913</td>
<td>0.975</td>
<td>0.975</td>
<td>0.975</td>
<td>0.846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BL2</td>
<td>This brand makes me feel good.</td>
<td>0.910</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BL3</td>
<td>This brand is totally awesome.</td>
<td>0.952</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BL4</td>
<td>This brand makes me very happy.</td>
<td>0.928</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BL5</td>
<td>I love this brand.</td>
<td>0.958</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BL6</td>
<td>This brand is pure delight.</td>
<td>0.904</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BL7</td>
<td>I am very attached to this brand.</td>
<td>0.871</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Defense</td>
<td>BD1</td>
<td>I will defend this brand in a conversation.</td>
<td>0.931</td>
<td>0.924</td>
<td>0.925</td>
<td>0.929</td>
<td>0.806</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BD2</td>
<td>I will shield for this brand in a conversation.</td>
<td>0.929</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BD3</td>
<td>I will tell people to do business with this brand.</td>
<td>0.830</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Distancing</td>
<td>SD1</td>
<td>I am aware of the importance of social distancing because of coronavirus outbreak.</td>
<td>0.634</td>
<td>0.823</td>
<td>0.873</td>
<td>0.832</td>
<td>0.537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD2</td>
<td>Social distancing is a must nowadays.</td>
<td>0.712</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD3</td>
<td>Social distancing make sense.</td>
<td>0.842</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD4</td>
<td>I encourage my family/friends to keep their social distance.</td>
<td>0.847</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD5</td>
<td>The people I care encourage me to keep my social distance.</td>
<td>0.634</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD6</td>
<td>I will keep my social distance whatever it takes.</td>
<td>0.698</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Discriminant validity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>F&amp;L Criterion Constructs</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand Anthropomorphism (1)</td>
<td>0.871</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Defense (2)</td>
<td>0.399</td>
<td>0.832</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Love (3)</td>
<td>0.544</td>
<td>0.509</td>
<td>0.920</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards Social Distancing (4)</td>
<td>0.478</td>
<td>0.404</td>
<td>0.302</td>
<td>0.794</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HTMT Criterion Constructs</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand Anthropomorphism (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Defense (2)</td>
<td>0.399</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Love (3)</td>
<td>0.557</td>
<td>0.536</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards Social Distancing (4)</td>
<td>0.348</td>
<td>0.211</td>
<td>0.264</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
are greater than the correlations in the respective columns and rows. Therefore, the measurement model demonstrated adequate discriminant validity. Also, discriminant validity was assessed by applying the HTMT method (Henseler et al., 2015). Table 2 also shows that all values of HTMT are lower than the threshold of 0.90, fulfilling the condition of HTMT.90 (Kline, 2015) and reinforcing the satisfactory discriminant validity for all constructs in this study.

**Structural model assessment**

The structural model was tested after the overall measurement model was found to be acceptable. Initially, all variance inflation factor (VIF) values were calculated and found to be under the threshold value of 5; hence, no multicollinearity issues in the structural model. Further, R square, path estimates, and corresponding t-values were calculated by employing a consistent bootstrapping procedure with 5000 subsamples.

Figure 3 shows the results of the structural model. It can be seen that brand anthropomorphism has a significantly positive impact on brand love and brand defense. Also, brand love has a positive and significant impact on brand defense. Based on the results, all the hypotheses were supported (Table 3). Moreover, brand anthropomorphism explains that 31.6% of brand love variation, whereas brand anthropomorphism and brand love explain 30.1% of variance in brand defense. In addition to this, results also confirmed a significantly mediating effect of brand love between brand anthropomorphism and brand defense ($\gamma = .234; \ t = 5.691$).

![Figure 3. Structural model.](Note: *0.05; **0.0000. Dotted line shows there is a difference in path for both consumer groups i.e., For and against social distancing; Curved line shows mediating effects).]

**Table 3. Hypotheses testing.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paths</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>T Value</th>
<th>Sig</th>
<th>95% BCa Confidence Interval</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1: Brand anthropomorphism -&gt; Brand love</td>
<td>0.562</td>
<td>12.067</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>[0.473: 0.649]</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: Brand anthropomorphism -&gt; Brand defense</td>
<td>0.147</td>
<td>2.181</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>[0.011: 0.272]</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3: Brand love -&gt; Brand defense</td>
<td>0.452</td>
<td>6.878</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>[0.328: 0.584]</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Study 3: multigroup analysis – research model across respondent segments

The purpose of Study 3 is to examine if the interrelationships among brand anthropomorphism, brand love, and brand defense differ across two customer segments, i.e. those in favor of social distancing and its effectiveness and those against it. Based on the median values for attitudes towards social distancing (using sale developed in Study 1 and data collected in Study 2), the dataset was divided into respondents with a positive attitude towards social distancing (n = 198) and respondents with a negative attitude towards social distancing (n = 204) to determine the differences in the strength and significance of the causal effects in the model. Permutation tests examined differences in the relationships among the constructs across both segments, including those with positive and negative attitudes towards social distancing. All three steps in the permutation test were held (original correlation > 5% quantile and \( p \) values > 0.05) true for both variables, establishing that the model results may differ across both segments.

The next step considered the differences in strength of path coefficients for both segments. As shown in Table 4, brand anthropomorphism is a significant positive predictor of brand love for both the segments, and brand love is a significant positive predictor of brand defense. However, while brand anthropomorphism is a significant positive predictor of brand defense for those who have a positive attitude towards social distancing, the impact of brand anthropomorphism on brand defense is non-significant for those who have a negative attitude towards social distancing. As such, partial support to accept H4 as a whole can be provided (H4a and H4c is not supported while H4c is supported).

Discussion

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted and transformed the daily work-life routines of people around the world. Academics have gone virtual and are delivering the content remotely. Restaurants have fundamentally shifted from dine-in to pick-up or delivery mode. Even the most delightful and enticing places on earth, such as Disneyland, Taj Mahal, The Great Wall, Eifel Tower, etc., are temporarily closed. Major sporting and entertainment gatherings have faced the same fate. As the WHO and world aim to ‘flatten the curve,’ an important message consistently being thrown out is that of ‘social distancing.’ The message is quite simple, instructing to maintain adequate distance from people to avoid the coronavirus’s unintentional transmission (Rucker, 2020). The health officials and governments all around the world are issuing social distancing and voluntary self-isolating practices. Since then, the entire world has been experiencing tough times. Hundreds of industries are affected by this situation. While many companies are facing bankruptcy, some hospitality brands have been trying to take the public’s attention to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paths</th>
<th>Social Distancing – Positive</th>
<th>Social Distancing – Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>T Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Anthropomorphism -&gt; Brand Love</td>
<td>0.530</td>
<td>8.418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Anthropomorphism -&gt; Brand Defense</td>
<td>0.307</td>
<td>3.755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Love -&gt; Brand Defense</td>
<td>0.254</td>
<td>3.053</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
send precautions by changing their logos to prevent spreading the disease and encourage social distancing like such Coca Cola, McDonald's, and Burger King split their logos to show solidarity and their support for the cause. The current study is an initial attempt to understand consumers’ perceptions of social distancing practiced by global hospitality brands by empirically testing the relationships between brand anthropomorphism, brand love, and brand defense.

The findings of this study support the significant impact of brand anthropomorphism on brand love. This result supports the research conducted by Delgado-Ballester et al. (2017), Hegner et al. (2017), and Stresewski (2016). This study is in line with the essential theoretical argument that consumer–brand relationships, in some respects, are comparable to interpersonal relationships. This study also observed a significant impact of brand love on brand defense, which is in line with the previous studies (Dalman et al., 2019; Javed et al., 2015). Finally, this study confirmed a significant impact of brand anthropomorphism on brand defense, which is in line with previous studies (Ferreira, 2020; Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014). These findings imply that when consumers anthropomorphize brands as a person, love for the brand may develop, leading to a higher level of loyalty, i.e. defense of the brand. However, it is noteworthy that brand love’s impact on brand defense is much stronger than brand anthropomorphism. It implies that brand anthropomorphism on brand defense is due to the love-like feeling for the brand. Therefore, for consumers to defend a brand, anthropomorphism alone is not enough. Instead, a love-like emotion towards the brand is also integral, which is in line with the study’s main takeaway from Roy et al. (2016). One main reason for these findings may be the current business environment during COVID-19 and consumers’ sensitivity towards brands, highlighting the importance of constructs like brand anthropomorphism, brand love and brand defense for hospitality organizations in understanding consumer–brand relationships.

This study also aimed to investigate if consumers’ general attitudes towards social distancing may result in different attitudes and perceptions towards global hospitality brands and their branding strategies. According to the results, brand anthropomorphism was a significant positive predictor of brand defense for the participants who have a positive attitude towards social distancing; the impact of brand anthropomorphism on brand defense is non-significant who have a negative attitude towards social distancing. Unfortunately, there is no previous study to discuss these results. Brand defense stems from a strong emotional engagement and a powerful attachment between the consumer and the brand. Consumers who support and perform social distancing practice may be emotionally sensitive individuals. Probably, they are emotionally motivated to stay distanced. That is why they are inclined to be engaged with anthropomorphized brands that are more human-like to build emotional relations and tend to defend the brands more than others. Consumers who have a negative attitude towards social distancing may be more individualistic and libertarian. They may not seek emotional bonds with the brand, so the brand’s anthropomorphism may not impact them.

**Theoretical implications**

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, the current literature lacks a scale to measure attitudes towards social distancing (Sigala, 2020). This study proposed
and empirically developed a valid and reliable scale to assess attitude towards social distancing. The scale developed in study 1 was integral to examining the relationships between brand anthropomorphism, brand love, and brand defense across two consumer segments. Tapping into several behavioral and psychological theories such as the theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behavior, regulatory focus theory and construal level theory etc., future scholars can adapt the scale to examine the impact of attitude towards social distancing on consequent consumer perception, emotions and behaviors within service industries. Recently, Gursoy and Chi (2020) called for urgent causal and behavioral research to understand physical (social) distancing and consumer behavior. This study also contributes to fulfilling the research scarceness and studying branding strategies considering consumers’ attitudes towards social distancing.

Secondly, this study provides a basis to understand the interrelationships between brand anthropomorphism, brand love, and brand defense by studying all these three constructs together. While there is a fair amount of literature on brand anthropomorphism and brand love, studying these two constructs with brand defense is non-existent, especially in the hospitality industry. Moreover, these relationships are studied across two consumer segments, i.e., those with positive and negative attitudes towards social distancing. Findings are relevant to understand the impact of non-brand related attitudes on branding related decisions.

Lastly, past research has mostly used anthropomorphism as a tool to foster pro-environmental actions and mainly used in the context of service robotics and artificial intelligence (Khoa et al., 2020); this current study expands the literature by investigating and examining perceived brand anthropomorphism amidst a polarizing situation and as a response to brand’s abrupt changes in branding strategies. This study proves that branding elements’ changes can develop consumers’ perceived anthropomorphism and alter their behavior towards the brand. Specifically, this study studied brand anthropomorphism as a resultant perception stimulated by brands’ branding relating to capitalizing on a polarizing issue in a sensitive environment.

**Practical implications**

The study also has some practical implications. First, our findings imply that hospitality organizations that intend to develop brand love and brand defense should humanize their brands. This can be done by applying first-person communication such as Redbull’s tagline – ‘Red Bull gives you wings’ or Lindt chocolates’ packaging that talk in the first person (Hello, my name is Nougat Crunch). Marketers can also adopt numerous stimuli in their branding to imitate human characteristics. A decent example of this strategy is KFC’s Colonel Sanders, which consists of a human prefix and a mascot of a man in a dapper white suit with a goatee. Another potential strategy to instill brand anthropomorphism for hospitality brands is to use testimonials or celebrity spokespeople, whose personality may spill over onto the brand (Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014). However, this should be done with a caution of ensuring the congruity between the brand, the spokesperson, and the target market’s personalities. An excellent example of a brand using this strategy is a recent partnership of Under Armour and celebrity Dwayne Johnson to launch a new product line called ‘Project Rock Collection.’ Lastly, all these strategies to humanize/anthropomorphized brands should be consistently
communicated across multiple channels to instill a love-like emotion in consumers, leading to positive behavioral intentions such as positive word of mouth and brand defense.

This study examined consumer–brand relationships in a unique setting, i.e. during COVID-19, where several major hospitality brands have changed their logos to support social distancing. Because of the sensitive nature and political divide towards social distancing, consumers have also taken a polarizing stand towards these brands (SocialMediaLink, 2020). Because of this, while Dalman et al. (2019) stated brand defense of an unethical behavior, it can be very integral for the hospitality brands to have such a loyal consumer base who can actively defend the brand. As such, firms should understand and invest in developing and sustaining their relationship with their consumers. Accordingly, managers can develop specific and tailored communication strategies to target this highly-loyal consumer base, which will enhance the quality and strength of consumer–brand relationships, which over time, can develop brand love (Javed et al., 2015).

Lastly, this study’s findings showed that consumers have reactions towards global hospitality brands, especially actions related to crises like coronavirus pandemic. Even though the reactions are negative, the consumers follow the brand performances, which affect the consumer perceptions and attitudes towards the global hospitality brands. For example, the Brazilians criticized McDonald’s Brazil’s social distancing experience campaign with the new separated logo. A wave of negative appreciation emerged on social media platforms. The campaign has been found opportunistic, not supportive (Mansoor, 2020). Einstein (2020) also claimed that separating or unlinking the logos to promote social distancing did not provide the consumers’ information. That is why following the WHO and local government announcements on coronavirus pandemic carefully may help to re-arrange their marketing and promotional strategies to reach and maintain strong relations with the consumers. While doing that, brands should also consider consumers’ general sentiments and attitudes towards related issues to avoid major branding crisis. These findings also imply that consumers’ attitudes towards global phenomena may result in newer market segments (Akhtar et al., 2020). For instance, many global hospitality brands indulged in branding strategies in response to social distancing, ignoring consumers’ attitudes towards social distancing. Social distancing has changed into a polarizing issue, with many countries observing large mobs and protests to lift the bans and reopen the businesses. As such, brands that side with social distancing have also faced the backlash of anti-social distancing consumers on social media platforms.

**Limitations and future research**

Similar to any other study, this one also has its limitations. The sample size was 402 participants, the proposed model had four variables, and the survey contains only three global brand logos that reflected social distancing. Future studies may investigate the impact of different variables such as brand identification, brand loyalty, brand image, and brand awareness with larger samples. Social media posts and websites of the global hospitality brands may be analyzed in terms of notifications related to social distancing and staying at home practices. Consumer perceptions towards these notifications can also be investigated. The demographic and cultural characteristics of the consumers may also yield some fruitful results.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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References


