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On Lego, love and friendship

Human relations are a useful way to think about brands

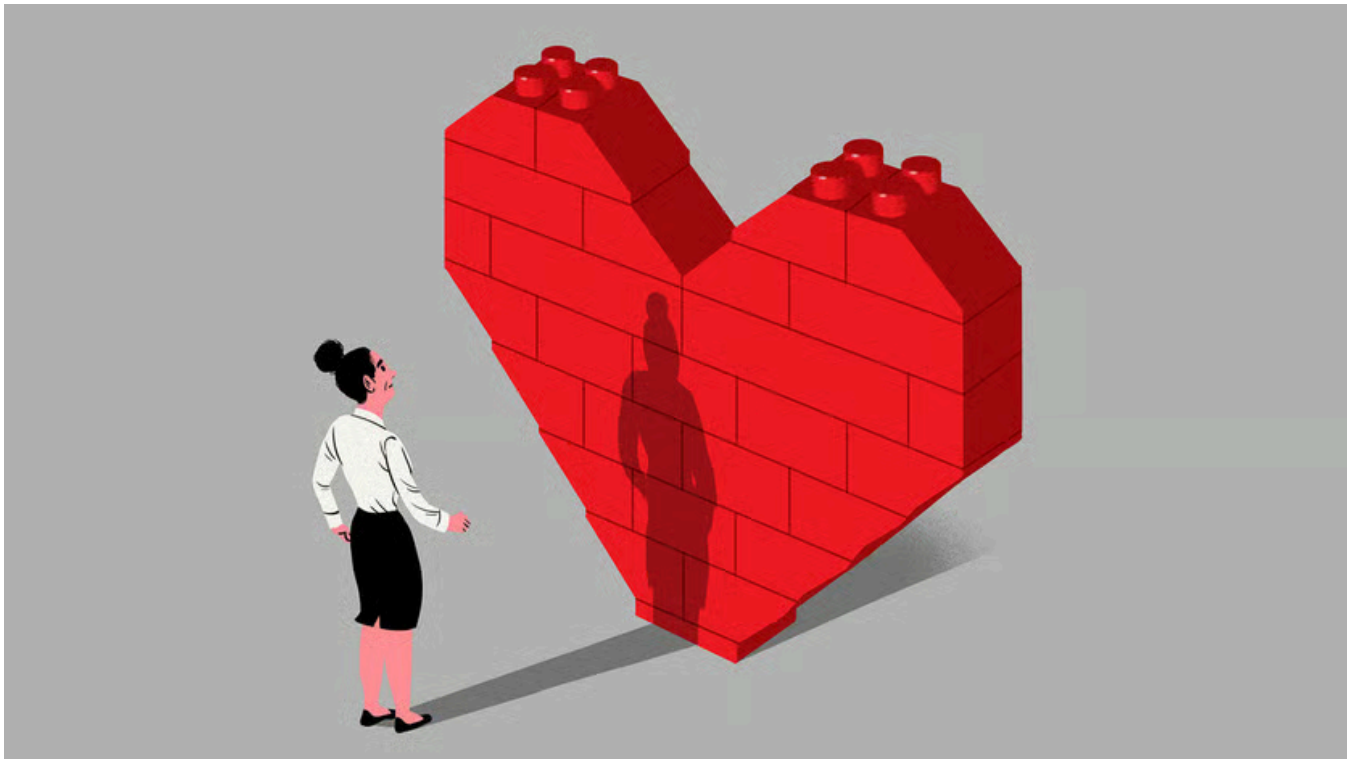

ILLUSTRATION: PAUL BLOW

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THERE IS A locked room in Lego's corporate museum, in Billund in Denmark, which is called the Vault. It is a large space, filled with shelves that are arranged in chronological order, starting in 1958 and stretching towards the present day. Between them, the shelves contain around 10,000 sets of Lego.

The Vault is used by the toymaker's designers as a source of inspiration, but its effect on first-time visitors is what makes the room remarkable. It's impossible not to seek out sets from your own childhood, not to be drawn back to an earlier version of yourself and, for lots of people, not to well up. We thought about having Kleenex as a sponsor, says Signe Wiese, an in-house historian.

Visiting Lego's vault is a chance to experience the emotional power of a much-loved brand (you can hear more in this week's final episode of our Boss Class podcast). Marketing experts have a whole taxonomy to describe the ties that bind consumers and brands. In a recent review of the literature, Claudio Alvarez, Meredith David and Morris George of Baylor University identify five types of connection that have been the subject of concerted study.

The feeling that every marketing manager dreams of eliciting is "brand love". This goes well beyond a belief in the quality of a firm's products to include

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business's name and yours with a love-heart, but it's not far off.

The flipside of brand love is "brand hate", a reaction that might reflect bad experiences with a product, a strong dislike of a brand's values or simply a rivalry with a loved brand. A diverting piece of research by Remi Trudel of Boston University and his co-authors looks at how consumers choose to dispose of products, and finds that people who strongly identify as Coca-Cola drinkers are more likely to recycle a Coke can and throw a Pepsi one in the rubbish; the reverse is true of Pepsi fans.

The three other types of consumer-brand connection identified by Mr Alvarez and his co-authors are "communal relationships", in which people feel a sense of obligation or concern for a brand (local stores can often fit into this category); "brand addiction", often characterised by uncontrollable urges to buy a firm's products and services; and "brand friendships", to denote positive feelings that fall somewhere short of love.

These are the five types identified in the literature review, but the analogies between humans' relations with each other and with brands can be extended in all sorts of directions. Researchers use the term "brand flings" to describe shorter-lived, intense interactions with brands, often in zeitgeisty industries such as fashion. "Brand flirting" involves a little dabbling with a competitor of your preferred brand; it can redouble your liking for the original. Friendships have subcategories, too: best friends, casual friendships and so on.

Some of this taxonomy can feel a bit forced. You're going shopping, not joining an orgy. Brands cannot reciprocate feelings. But the idea of gradations of attachment rings true; how people feel about a brand determines their behaviour. Vivek Astvansh of McGill University and his co-authors found that people are more likely to report safety incidents when they believe a brand is

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Lego elicits a depth of emotion that feels like brand love. But Mr Alvarez wouldn't put it in that category, because most adults do not continue to have frequent interactions with the products. It's more like a childhood friend, he says, one that depends on the trigger of nostalgia to cause a wave of warm feelings.

Such distinctions are not just academic. Lego's bosses, for example, make no bones about the fact that they have a limited window early in a child's life to form a bond that can cause them to shed tears in a room in Billund decades later. If managers know what kind of connection a brand is likely to have with its customers, the bricks of a marketing strategy will fall into place. ■

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