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When brand love is not enough: a conservation–feasibility account of switching under financial constraints

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Abstract
In today's economically unstable market, financial pressures prompt even strongly attached consumers to explore more affordable alternatives. This study examines how perceived financial constraints shape brand switching intentions among self-identified brand lovers. Drawing on Consumer–Brand Relationship Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, it develops and tests a mechanism whereby perceived financial constraints trigger financial anxiety, debt aversion, and perceived financial risk. These factors increase the perceived attractiveness of more affordable alternatives and, consequently, switching intention, despite sustained brand love. Survey data from 430 Turkish apparel consumers were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). The results robustly support the proposed mechanism and reveal that the intensity of brand love does not meaningfully reduce the effects of perceived financial risk or alternative attractiveness on switching intention. This pattern indicates *affective–behavioural decoupling*: consumers continue to value brand relationships emotionally while becoming behaviourally vulnerable when resource-protection motives dominate decision-making under financial strain. This study contributes to branding literature by qualifying the assumption that brand love functions as an unconditional behavioural safeguard against brand switching. This study demonstrates that the protective influence of brand love is behaviourally constrained when consumers perceive financial constraints. By integrating resource threat and feasibility mechanisms that operate independently of relational affect, the study advances the understanding of brand switching under financial pressure while bridging emotional branding with financial decision-making. From a managerial perspective, the results show that emotional engagement alone is insufficient to sustain loyalty when feasibility barriers arise. This highlights the need for retention strategies that directly address consumers' sense of financial risk and reduce the attractiveness of more affordable alternatives.

Keywords Brand love · Brand switching intention · Perceived financial constraints · Affective–behavioural decoupling · Perceived financial risk · Financial anxiety · Debt aversion · Alternative attractiveness · Economic volatility

Introduction

In today's economically volatile environment, building and sustaining consumer loyalty has become increasingly challenging and strategically consequential for brands. Rising inflation, unstable income patterns, and broad financial uncertainty have led many consumers to adopt more cautious spending behaviour (United Nations, 2024). Within this landscape, brand love—a profound emotional attachment characterised by passion, affection, and enduring commitment—has been widely regarded as a powerful loyalty driver (Albert et al. 2013; Bagozzi et al. 2017; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2010; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). Prior research has demonstrated that brand love increases purchase intention (Garg et al. 2015), reduces price sensitivity (Thomson et al. 2005), enhances willingness to pay premium prices (Santos and Schlesinger 2021), and strengthens resistance to brand switching, even when attractive alternatives exist (Batra et al. 2012; Sarkar and Sreejesh 2014). Collectively, these findings support an optimistic view, suggesting that brand love functions as a psychological shield, stabilising loyalty in the face of competitive pressure.

However, much of this evidence is drawn from consumption contexts in which financial strain is not a defining condition. Under economic volatility, consumers increasingly

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experience perceived financial constraints—the subjective sense that available resources are insufficient—which shifts decision-making towards prudence, loss avoidance, and feasibility considerations (de Andrés Alonso et al. 2016; Hsu 2017). This shift introduces critical tension in consumer–brand relationships. While emotional attachment motivates relationship maintenance, financial pressure activates self-protective evaluations that heighten sensitivity to cost, risk, and alternative options. In such circumstances, loyalty may be challenged not because attachment weakens, but because the basis of behavioural intention changes.

Emerging evidence suggests that this tension is consequential rather than purely theoretical. In a crisis context, Alyar and Çadırcı (2023) demonstrated substantial heterogeneity among consumers reporting brand love, with some perceiving continued purchases as financially risky despite levels of attachment comparable to those who perceived little risk. These findings suggest that resource-related appraisals can coexist with strong emotional bonds, challenging the assumption that brand love uniformly translates into behavioural resistance to switching. However, branding research has rarely specified the process through which perceived financial constraints translate into switching intentions among consumers whose emotional attachment remains intact. Consequently, the boundary conditions of brand love as a loyalty-protective mechanism remain insufficiently understood.

This gap is both conceptual and empirical. Prior research has demonstrated that brand love moderates responses to price-related stimuli by increasing price tolerance and willingness to pay (Santos and Schlesinger 2021; Thomson et al. 2005). However, these studies largely examine reactions to discrete price cues within a stable decision frame. Financial constraints present a qualitatively different challenge, altering the decision frame by foregrounding resource protection and behavioural feasibility. Consequently, there is a lack of detailed explanation regarding how switching intention can develop despite brand love—a pattern conceptualised here as *affective–behavioural decoupling*. This pattern has precedent in interpersonal attachment research, where affective bonds have been shown to persist despite behavioural separation; individuals remain emotionally attached long after relationships have dissolved (Chong and Fraley 2025). Extrapolating to consumer–brand relationships, this suggests that brand love may remain affectively intact while consumers revise their purchase behaviour when loyalty becomes financially unsafe or difficult to enact.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines how perceived financial constraints generate switching intentions among consumers with brand love and whether the intensity of brand love attenuates this process. To investigate this, the study integrates insights from Consumer–Brand Relationship (CBR) theory, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll 2001), and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen 1991). This integration yields *a conservation–feasibility pathway* that explains how resource threats and feasibility appraisals jointly shape switching intention despite enduring attachment.

Empirically, this pathway was tested among consumers experiencing brand love in Turkey's apparel sector using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), a prediction-oriented approach, analysing survey data from 430 respondents. Brand love was established through self-identification during the screening stage and the intensity of brand love was measured using the brand love scale (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). The apparel category provides a theoretically diagnostic setting because of its combination of emotionally meaningful brand relationships, price sensitivity, and readily available substitutes (Chand and Fei 2021; Zielke and Dobbelstein 2007). Turkey represents a context characterised by salient financial constraint appraisals stemming from sustained inflationary pressure and ongoing economic volatility (OECD, 2023).

This study contributes to branding research in three keyways. First, it qualifies the loyalty-protective role of brand love by identifying perceived financial constraints as a boundary condition that limits the extent to which emotional attachment prevents switching intentions. Second, it advances brand switching research by specifying a mechanism-based pathway through which relationship strength, resource threat, and behavioural feasibility jointly shape intention formation. Third, it offers actionable insights for brand managers operating in inflationary markets, suggesting that emotional engagement strategies alone may be insufficient when consumers perceive loyalty as financially risky or unsustainable.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework and hypotheses. Subsequently, the methodology, results, and a discussion of theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research are presented.

Theoretical framework and hypothesis development

The preceding section establishes the theoretical puzzle motivating this research: how do perceived financial constraints generate switching intention among consumers who love their brands? Resolving this puzzle requires theoretical resources that no single framework adequately addresses because the phenomenon spans three distinct psychological domains—relational investment, resource threat response,



and intention formation—each governed by different mechanisms.

Consumer–brand relationship (CBR) theory addresses the domain of relational investment by conceptualising brands as relationship partners and explaining how consumers form identity-relevant, emotionally consequential bonds (Fournier 1998). From this perspective, brand love reflects an attachment-like relationship characterised by affection, self-brand integration, and relationship-based commitment (Batra et al. 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Park et al. 2010; Thomson et al. 2005). These bonds support loyalty because relationship disruption incurs psychological costs, such as identity inconsistency, emotional loss, and perceived betrayal of the self-brand link. Consequently, CBR establishes the relational baseline that makes switching psychologically consequential; without such bonds, switching under financial pressure would be more readily explained by price optimisation alone. However, CBR is less explicit about when relational motives fail to translate into behavioural intentions, particularly when consumers face situational constraints that render relationship enactment impractical or risky. The theory specifies the forces that maintain consumer relationships but not the conditions under which those forces lose their behavioural authority.

The conservation of resources (COR) theory addresses the resource-threat response domain by specifying the factors influencing the sustainability of loyalty under pressure. COR theory posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources, and that perceived threats to these resources activate conservation motives and defensive coping (Hobfoll 2001; Hobfoll et al. 2018). Framing perceived financial constraints as resource-threat appraisals, COR predicts that consumers will shift toward loss prevention when they perceive their financial resources as inadequate. Under such threats, consumers exhibit increased sensitivity to downside outcomes and financial vulnerability, manifested as heightened distress, risk vigilance, financial anxiety, stronger debt aversion, and avoidance of potentially costly choices. Crucially, COR theory's multidomain resource logic suggests that consumers manage their financial and emotional resources through separable psychological systems (Hobfoll and Shirom 2000). As constraints intensify, trade-offs become salient; protecting financial resources may require curtailing relationship-consistent consumption. Thus, COR explains the activation of conservation motives and predicts that brand love can persist psychologically, although enacting behaviourally may become more challenging. However, COR remains agnostic regarding the specific behaviour a consumer selects from available coping responses—reduced purchase frequency, purchase deferral, downgrading within the brand portfolio, or switching to an alternative brand entirely.

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) addresses intention formation within the third domain by resolving this indeterminacy. The TPB posits that behavioural intention is a joint function of attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (PBC)— an individual's appraisal of how easy or difficult it is to perform the behaviour, given available resources and anticipated obstacles (Ajzen 1991, 2002). A central and empirically well-supported insight of the framework is that intentions are shaped by the perceived feasibility of acting on attitudes, rather than following attitudes alone. Meta-analytic evidence confirms that PBC independently predicts intentions beyond the variance explained by attitudes, and that attitude–intention relationships weaken systematically as perceived control diminishes (Armitage and Conner 2001; Conner and Armitage 1998). Applied to the brand love–switching context, a consumer who loves a brand holds a strongly positive attitude toward continued purchases; however, when financial constraints elevate the perceived risk of loyalty, PBC over maintaining that loyalty diminishes. Simultaneously, the availability of affordable alternatives increases PBC over switching, rendering alternative behaviour both cognitively accessible and practically enactable. Under these conditions, intention formation tilts toward the behaviour over which the consumer perceives greater control, even though the attitudinal basis for loyalty remains intact (Ajzen 1991; Sheeran 2002). This mechanism explains affective–behavioural decoupling: not because brand love weakens, but because the feasibility calculus surrounding its behavioural expression shifts decisively.

Taken together, CBR, COR, and TPB provide a mechanism-based account of switching under constraint: perceived financial constraints activate conservation motives (COR), which elevate loss-avoidant risk appraisals and shift feasibility perceptions (TPB), thereby increasing switching intention even when brand love and relational investment remain psychologically intact (CBR). Table 1 maps each construct to its theoretical origin, psychological domain, and functional role, enhancing the model's transparency regarding explanatory labour.

Brand love and loyalty: the question of relational buffering

Brand love denotes a deep emotional connection between consumers and specific brands that extends beyond transactional satisfaction (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). Unlike satisfaction, brand love reflects a bond wherein the brand is integrated into the consumer's identity and self-concept (Batra et al. 2012; Fournier 1998). This bond implies psychological value in maintaining the relationship, exceeding utilitarian outcomes, and representing an investment that

Table 1 Constructs, theoretical origins, psychological domains, and roles in the integrated framework

Construct	Theoretical origin	Psychological domain	Role in model
Perceived financial constraints	COR	Subjective resource-threat appraisal	Threat activator: initiates conservation cascade
Financial anxiety	COR	Affective response	Emotional distress: affective expression of resource threat that heightens loss sensitivity
Debt aversion	COR	Avoidance motivation	Protective orientation: reluctance to incur future financial obligations, redirecting preference away from costly options
Perceived financial risk	COR → TPB	Cognitive appraisal	Loss appraisal: continued purchase of the focal brand is appraised as a threat to financial resources, reducing PBC over loyalty
Perceived attractiveness of alternatives	TPB	Feasibility evaluation	Feasibility signal: viable alternatives render switching accessible and actionable under constraint
Brand switching intention	TPB	Behavioural intention	Outcome: readiness to discontinue purchase of the focal brand
Brand love	CBR	Relational attachment	Competing motivation: sustains relationship-maintenance preferences and raises the psychological cost of switching

COR = Conservation of Resources Theory; TPB = Theory of Planned Behaviour; CBR = Consumer–Brand Relationship Theory; PBC = perceived behavioural control. Perceived Financial Risk is designated COR → TPB because it is activated as a cognitive appraisal within COR's conservation cascade but simultaneously functions as a negative PBC signal within TPB's intention-formation architecture, reducing the perceived feasibility of continued loyalty

strengthens loyalty over time (Johnson and Rusbult 1989; Park et al. 2010; Thomson et al. 2005).

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that brand love fosters brand loyalty. Emotionally attached consumers exhibit a willingness to pay price premiums (Amani and Kapipi 2025; Siew et al. 2018), resist competitive alternatives (Bustaman and Dasuki 2022), and maintain loyalty even when economic comparisons favour switching (Albert et al. 2008; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Kim et al. 2014). These findings support the notion of brand love as a relational buffer that stabilises consumer choices.

However, prior research suggests that attachment-based protection may be context-dependent. Specifically, when conditions undermine consumers' perceived ability to maintain a relationship–for example, through expectation violations–attachment may not uniformly translate into continued patronage (Grégoire et al. 2009; Grégoire and Fisher 2008). This implies that the behavioural influence of attachment is contingent upon whether the broader context supports or constrains relationship development.

Extending this logic, perceived financial constraints may represent a distinct contextual challenge that affects the behavioural enactment of brand relationships more than their emotional substance. Rather than signalling relational failure, financial constraints raise concerns about affordability and potential loss, thereby altering the conditions under which relational motives translate into behaviour. Under such circumstances, brand love may remain psychologically meaningful—consumers continue to value the relationship—while its capacity to govern behavioural intentions depends on the relative salience of conservation-oriented and feasibility-related evaluations. This distinction between the persistence of relational affect and the fragility of relational behaviour under constraints is central to the present study. Accordingly, we treat brand love as a relational resource and test whether its behavioural influence—rather than its emotional presence—holds under perceived financial constraint.

Perceived financial constraints: triggering the conservation cascade

Perceived financial constraints refer to consumers' subjective beliefs that their financial resources are insufficient to meet their needs (Dias et al. 2020; Hamilton et al. 2019). Crucially, the perception of financial constraints does not necessarily mean that consumers can no longer purchase their preferred brands, even if they wish to; in fact, many consumers are objectively capable of affording their brands (Tully et al. 2015). What matters for consumers is the perceived threat to resource adequacy, a psychological evaluation that triggers defensive responses, even when objective finances remain stable. Grounded in the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, these defensive responses function as coping mechanisms to prevent further loss (Hobfoll 2001; Hobfoll et al. 2018). Scarcity research shows that perceiving financial constraints captures attention and depletes cognitive bandwidth, reorganising priorities toward immediate economic problem-solving (Mani et al. 2013; Shah et al. 2012).

When consumers perceive their resources as threatened, this appraisal activates a multifaceted response spanning affective distress, cognitive vigilance, and behavioural defense mechanisms. The most immediate psychological manifestation is financial anxiety, an affective state of distress and unease regarding one's financial situation



(Archuleta et al. 2013; Lim and Sng 2006). Such anxiety intensifies when consumers experience diminished control over their finances (Hampson and McGoldrick 2017) and when resource depletion obstructs goal attainment and life stability (Hobfoll 2001). Consistent with COR theory, diminished financial well-being erodes perceived stability and amplifies vulnerability under strain (Bruggen et al. 2017), whereas resource loss threats produce acute psychological stress responses that motivate defensive coping (Meuris and Leana 2018). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1 *Perceived financial constraints positively affect financial anxiety.*

Beyond affective distress, perceived constraints activate behavioural defences designed to prevent further resource loss. One such defense is debt aversion, which is the reluctance to incur future liabilities, even when borrowing may be advantageous (Boatman and Evans 2017; Hansen 1987). This reluctance reflects the fact that some consumers avoid debt even when credit would be economically beneficial because borrowing is experienced as an additional threat to stability under resource pressure (Tang and Baker 2016). From a COR perspective, debt aversion functions as a conservation strategy in which individuals avoid new obligations that could increase their vulnerability to stress. Research has shown that financially strained consumers budget carefully (Dittmar et al. 2014), cut non-essential expenses, and avoid credit to maintain control (Kim and DeVaney 2001; Xiao and Wu 2006). Callender and Jackson (2005, 2008) further note that such individuals tend to avoid financial commitments that might increase their susceptibility to financial risks and view debt as a direct threat to stability. This leads to:

H2 *Perceived financial constraints positively affect debt aversion.*

Finally, perceived financial constraints heighten perceived financial risk, which is the belief that purchasing a beloved brand may result in financial loss (Stone and Grønhaug 1993). According to COR theory, perceived financial risk functions as a cognitive threat appraisal that increases vigilance of potential loss under constraints (Gasiorowska 2014; Hobfoll 2001). A purchase that is acceptable under financial security may be reappraised as risky when resources feel scarce, elevating the anticipated negative financial consequences of staying with the brand (Jones et al. 2015). This cognitive reframing represents the third pathway through which perceived constraints reshape decision-making, leading to the following hypothesis:

H3 *Perceived financial constraints positively affect perceived financial risk.*

Together, these pathways position perceived financial constraints as a multidimensional threat, triggering affective distress (anxiety), behavioural defense (debt aversion), and cognitive vigilance (risk perception). The following sections trace how these conservation-oriented responses cascade through the decision-making system to shape intentions to switch.

From affective distress to cognitive vigilance: threat amplification dynamics

The conservation response triggered by perceived financial constraints cascades from affective distress to cognitive reappraisal. Financial anxiety operates as a mechanism that intensifies threat-focused information processing. Drawing on COR theory, anxiety is especially likely when individuals perceive a threat to their valued financial resources and doubt their ability to attain their goals (Hobfoll 2001). Under such conditions, anxiety undermines perceived control and decision confidence, increases vigilance, and amplifies sensitivity to losses.

Financial anxiety (H1) captures affective responses, whereas perceived financial risk (H3) reflects cognitive appraisal. When consumers feel anxious, they become more attentive to negative outcomes and interpret consumption decisions using a loss-avoidance framework (Cong 2021; Jones et al. 2015). Mechanistically, this aligns with decision research showing that constraints on information processing shift evaluations toward salient negative outcomes (Bettman 1973) and that affective arousal systematically alters risk sensitivity and choice (Kuhnen and Knutson 2011). In consumer settings, heightened vigilance under constraints is reflected in stronger attention to potential loss and price-risk cues (Zielke and Dobbelstein 2007), making risk appraisals more likely to escalate when anxiety levels are high. Emotional discomfort magnifies consumers' tendency to overestimate potential losses (Maignan and Lukas 1997), and anxiety undermines their confidence in financial evaluations. Thus, anxiety does not merely coexist with risk perception; it amplifies it.

H4 *Financial anxiety positively affects perceived financial risk.*

In addition to intensifying threat appraisals, anxious consumers adopt coping strategies to restore control and alleviate distress. Switching to more affordable options may function as a resource preservation response, reducing psychological discomfort. Price consciousness is central

to decision-making (Moschis and Burkhalter 2007), and anxious consumers tend to gravitate towards economical or private-label brands that provide financial reassurance (Hampson and McGoldrick 2017). Das et al. (2022) showed heightened financial anxiety during COVID-19 increased preference for affordable and unbranded products as a means of restoring financial equilibrium. This tendency should elevate the perceived attractiveness of more affordable alternatives—consumers' evaluations of the likelihood of substitute brands delivering satisfactory outcomes.

H5 *Financial anxiety positively affects the perceived attractiveness of alternatives.*

As threat appraisals crystallise into perceived financial risk (H4), consumers become increasingly oriented towards preventing additional resource loss. Consistent with the COR's emphasis on protecting future resources, a higher perceived financial risk should encourage debt aversion as a conservation strategy. Whereas the direct effect of perceived financial constraints on debt aversion (H2) reflects a generalised protective orientation activated by resource threat, the pathway through perceived financial risk represents an appraisal-specific reinforcement: once consumers cognitively evaluate continued purchases of the focal brand as financially risky, their reluctance to incur obligations is strengthened by a targeted loss-avoidance judgment rather than by diffuse resource concern alone. Xiao and Wu (2006) found that consumers with high-risk perceptions view debt as a threat to their stability. Weber and Johnson (2009) noted that such avoidance minimises potential losses, and Barber and Odean (2000) reported that risk-averse decision-makers avoid leveraging or credit-based instruments in favour of safer options. Accordingly, heightened risk perception reinforces a defensive stance toward liabilities.

H6 *Perceived financial risk positively affects debt aversion.*

Together, these relationships specify the cascading dynamics through which perceived constraints propagate: constraint triggers anxiety (H1), anxiety amplifies risk perception (H4), increases receptivity to alternatives (H5), and heightened risk reinforces defensive orientations, such as debt aversion (H6). The following section examines how these conservation responses converge to reshape brand evaluation.

Convergence on alternatives: when defenses become attractions

Debt aversion orients consumers toward options that satisfy their needs without creating financial obligations. Within COR's resource-protection logic, affordable alternatives function as 'safe harbours' that enable continued consumption while preserving the debt-free status that debt-averse consumers seek to protect. This preference has been documented in educational choice contexts (Burdman 2005; Forsyth and Furlong 2003) and extends logically to brand contexts, where lower-priced substitutes offer need satisfaction without the perceived liability of premium pricing. Applied to consumer–brand relationships, debt-averse consumers should evaluate affordable alternatives more favourably because such options align with their conservation priorities.

H7 *Debt aversion positively affects the perceived attractiveness of alternatives.*

Similarly, perceived financial risk drives consumers toward economically secure options. Research has shown that perceived financial risk diminishes loyalty to premium brands and increases openness to economic alternatives. When premium retail settings are perceived as risky, consumers reassess their brand preferences (Mitchell and Harris 2005). Financial risk reduces consumers' willingness to pay premiums, weakens their brand commitment (Casidy and Wymer 2016), and negatively affects their future purchase intentions (Mieres et al. 2006). As loyalty erodes, low-priced options become more attractive (Trivedi and Morgan 1996). Thus, both debt aversion and financial risk perception converge on heightened receptivity to affordable brands, whether motivated by liability avoidance or loss vigilance.

H8 *Perceived financial risk positively affects the perceived attractiveness of alternatives.*

This convergence clarifies how conservation orientation translates into approach-oriented evaluation: consumers move toward options perceived as financially safer while limiting their exposure to losses. Thus, alternative attractiveness functions as a pivotal evaluation that translates threat appraisals and defensive orientations into actionable switching considerations. The next section examines how this convergent evaluation, together with perceived financial risk, translates into switching intention through complementary push and pull mechanisms.

From evaluation to intention: risk and feasibility as switching drivers

Having established how perceived financial constraints cascade through affective and cognitive appraisals that elevate

alternative attractiveness, this section examines how these evaluations translate into switching intentions.

Perceived financial risk undermines incumbent loyalty through two pathways based on complementary mechanisms. First, perceived financial risk directly increases brand switching intention by reframing loyalty as economically unwise. Financial risk is a central factor in switching decisions (Peng et al. 2016; Trivedi and Morgan 1996), including digital service contexts, where risk increases provider-switching (Wu et al. 2017). Heightened perceived financial risk is associated with the willingness to abandon favoured brands for greater financial security (Yoon and Kim 2023). When staying with a loved brand is cognitively appraised as risky, consumers become more willing to consider exiting despite emotional value. This pathway reflects attitude shifts toward expected outcomes, in which valued relationships become potential financial liabilities.

H9 *Perceived financial risk positively affects brand switching intention.*

Second, perceived financial risk operates indirectly by enhancing alternative attractiveness (H8) and enabling switching by signalling its feasibility. Within the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), the perceived attractiveness of alternatives operationalises feasibility by signalling viable substitutes, strengthening perceived behavioural control, and making switching actionable under constraints (Ajzen 1991). Research has confirmed that alternative attractiveness directly increases switching intention and behaviour (Bansal et al. 2005; Burnham et al. 2003; Pick and Eisend 2014). This aligns with classic switching accounts, in which attractive alternatives catalyse defection (Colgate and Lang 2001; Jones et al. 2000; Keaveney 1995).

In the proposed model, alternative attractiveness reflects perceived value for money, which is salient under financial pressure (Goode and Harris 2007). When competitors offer superior value, alternative attractiveness increases, thereby heightening the vulnerability of incumbent brands (Chuah et al. 2017; Ghazali et al. 2016; Koo et al. 2020). This evaluation is decisive under financial constraints because feasibility judgments govern intention formation. Consumers believe that affordable alternatives deliver satisfactory outcomes, shifting from desire to enactable solutions, a distinction that is central to the TPB.

H10 *Perceived attractiveness of alternatives positively affects brand switching intention.*

Together, these pathways capture switching intention formation under constraints through complementary "push" and "pull" forces: loss appraisal pushes consumers away from the focal brand (H9), whereas feasible and attractive substitutes pull them toward switching by making defection actionable (H10).

At a broader level, Hypotheses (H1–H10) specify a coherent conservation–feasibility pathway through which perceived financial constraints propagate from threat appraisals to brand switching intentions. This pathway was theorised and tested among consumers with brand love. In this context, the preceding hypotheses establish that even when brand love is psychologically strong, switching intentions can be shaped by conservation-oriented responses and feasibility evaluations. Having demonstrated the explanatory power of this pathway in an attachment-saturated context, the next analytical step is to determine whether this mechanism is uniform or sensitive to the magnitude of the consumer–brand bond itself.

The scope of brand love's influence under constraint

A central theoretical question concerns whether attachment intensity conditions the conservation–feasibility pathway—specifically, whether brand love attenuates the effects of perceived financial risk and alternative attractiveness, or whether conservation logic operates largely invariant to attachment strength once financial concerns become salient. The integrated framework therefore yields two competing expectations, reflecting distinct psychological systems emphasised by the Consumer–Brand Relationship (CBR) theory, versus Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB).

From a CBR perspective, attachment intensity should matter. Brand love reflects identity-relevant and emotionally consequential bonds (Batra et al. 2012; Fournier 1998) that heighten the psychological costs of switching, including perceived self-inconsistency, emotional loss, and relational betrayal. These costs generate approach–avoidance conflict (Elliot 2006; Lewin 2013), wherein consumers experience simultaneous pressure to switch (driven by financial threat) and to maintain loyalty (driven by identity preservation). Consequently, stronger attachment amplifies the avoidance component, raising the threshold at which financial risk translates into switching intention. Under this logic, higher brand love intensity should buffer the positive effects of perceived financial risk and the perceived attractiveness of alternatives on switching intention.

In contrast, COR theory and TPB imply that feasibility may dominate once resource threats become binding. COR predicts defensive regulation processes that prioritise the protection of vulnerable resources and may operate largely independently of relational evaluations (Hobfoll 2001). TPB similarly proposes that when perceived behavioural control is constrained, capability and risk assessments can



dominate intention formation, even when attitudinal evaluations remain favourable (Ajzen 1991). Together, these mechanisms imply that once financial risk and feasibility concerns reach sufficient salience, incremental differences in attachment intensity may exert limited behavioural influence, yielding similar switching intentions among consumers facing comparable threat appraisals and alternative evaluations.

Moderation analysis adjudicates between these expectations. Evidence of moderation would suggest that attachment intensity continues to shape behavioural outcomes under constraint; conversely, the absence of meaningful moderation would indicate an important scope condition for CBR theory—namely, that the behavioural influence of brand love is bounded when feasibility becomes the primary determinant of intention formation. Accordingly, the following moderation hypotheses are specified as boundary condition tests:

H11a Brand love intensity moderates the relationship between perceived financial risk and brand switching intention.

H11b Brand love intensity moderates the relationship between the perceived attractiveness of alternatives and brand switching intention.

H11c Brand love intensity moderates the relationship between perceived financial risk and the perceived attractiveness of alternatives.

Figure 1 presents the integrated conceptual model, illustrating the hypothesised conservation–feasibility pathway (H1–H10) and the boundary condition tests (H11a–c).

Methodology

This section details the research context, sampling procedures, measurement approach, and analytical strategy employed to test the conservation–feasibility pathway among consumers with confirmed brand love.

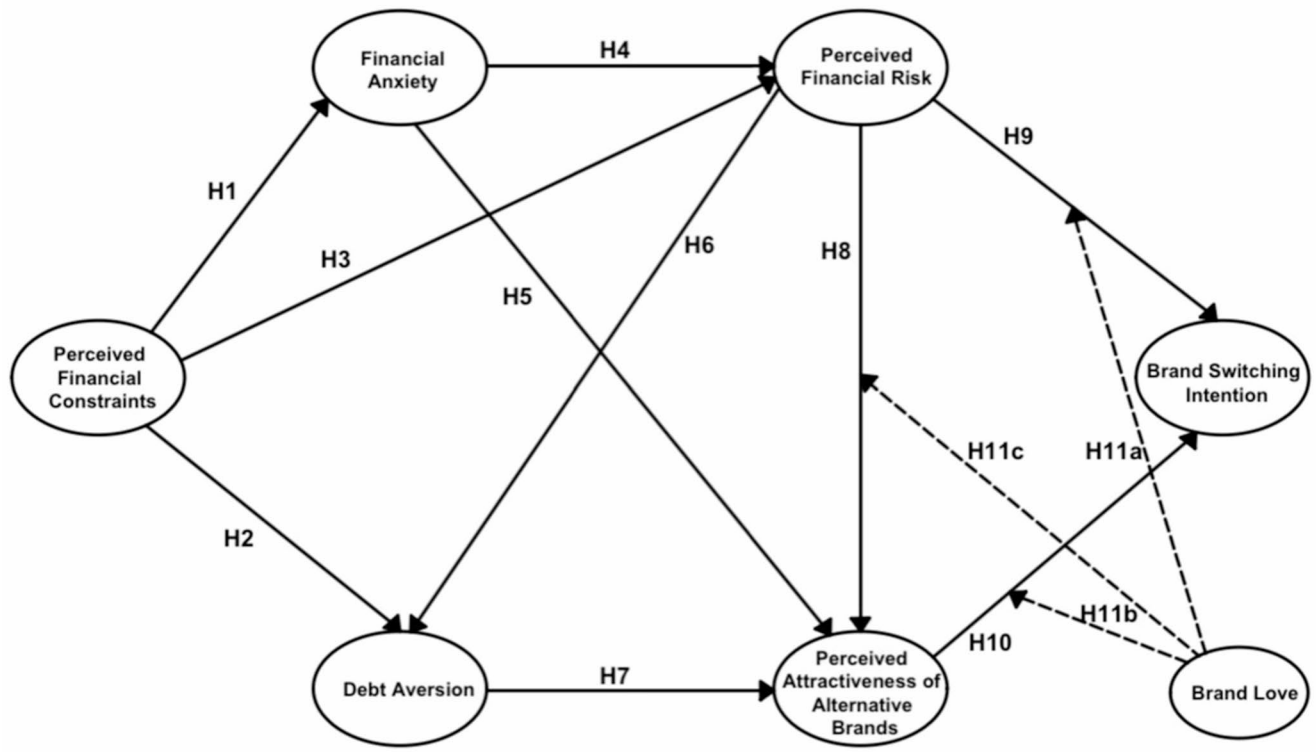


Fig. 1 Conceptual model. Solid paths (H1–H10) represent the conservation–feasibility pathway through which perceived financial constraints increase switching intention. Dashed paths (H11a–H11c) represent boundary condition tests. Sample consists exclusively of consumers who self-identified as loving an apparel brand during the screening stage

Research context and sample

Apparel brands were selected as the focal product category for this study for several reasons. Research indicates that brand attachment levels vary significantly across industries, with consumers frequently exhibiting strong personal identities and emotional connections to apparel brands (Castaño and Pérez 2014; Chand and Fei 2021). Moreover, apparel occupies a moderate price range compared to categories such as automotive or food, where price discrepancies and perceptions of financial risk differ considerably (Sethuraman and Cole 1999; Zielke and Dobbelstein 2007). This moderate positioning is important because financial constraints should influence switching behaviour in categories where alternatives are both economically meaningful and practically accessible. Focusing on a single sector ensured a consistent measurement of brand love and financial constraints across respondents, thereby enhancing internal validity.

The study was conducted in Turkey, a context selected for its sustained inflationary pressures and prolonged economic instability, which provides a highly relevant environment for investigating the impact of perceived financial constraints on consumer behaviour (OECD, 2023). Turkey's macroeconomic conditions during the data collection period created natural variations in financial constraint perceptions across income levels, strengthening the ecological validity of the research design. Additionally, the researchers' familiarity with the Turkish consumer market facilitated culturally appropriate survey administration and the contextual interpretation of the findings.

Participants were initially recruited using convenience sampling from public areas and through social media. This approach was chosen because of its ease of access, geographical proximity, and availability of respondents at the time of data collection, in line with the methodological recommendations for efficient participant access outlined by Dörnyei and Griffee (2010). Following the identification of the initial group, purposive sampling was employed to select participants who fulfilled the study's specific requirement of having a deep emotional attachment to an apparel brand. Guided by Etikan et al. (2016), this approach ensured the inclusion of cases that were rich in information and consistent with the study's theoretical framework.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Yildiz Technical University, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. Data were collected via an online survey administered through a QR code that enabled participants to complete the questionnaire on their smartphones.

The survey began with a screening question: "Do you have a loved apparel brand that you have regularly purchased?" to identify consumers who self-recognized emotional attachment to a specific brand. Brand love was subsequently assessed using the Brand Love Scale developed by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Brand lovers were identified using a two-stage procedure. First, self-identification at the screening stage established the presence of a consumer–brand relationship as a theoretical inclusion criterion rather than a scale-based inference. Second, among self-identified brand lovers, brand love intensity was measured using the Brand Love Scale and modelled as a continuous construct to capture meaningful variation in attachment strength. Throughout the study, brand love was treated as a relational inclusion condition, whereas attachment strength functioned as a boundary condition examined analytically rather than as a classification threshold.

Of the 544 responses collected, 430 met the inclusion criteria and constituted the final analytical sample of respondents reporting brand love. The sample was balanced by gender (52.8% female, 47.2% male), skewed toward younger adults (predominantly aged 21–34), and relatively well-educated (70.2% undergraduate degree holders, 14.7% postgraduate). Income levels were distributed across categories, with the majority falling within the middle-income brackets. Demographic characteristics, including gender, age, education, and income, were retained as control variables in subsequent analyses based on prior research demonstrating their relevance to consumer financial behaviour and brand-related decision-making (Bhatt and Saiyed 2015; Cornelius et al. 2015; Orth 2005; Ness et al. 2002; Nikić 2012).

Measures

Following the screening question, participants were asked to name their loved apparel brand. This procedure anchored all subsequent responses to a specific, personally meaningful brand, ensuring that evaluations reflected lived brand relationships rather than abstract attitudes. All constructs were measured using validated multi-item scales adapted from prior research. To ensure cultural and conceptual equivalence, all items were translated and back-translated by two independent bilingual experts who reviewed the final wording in Turkish.

The measurement model included brand love (BL; 10 items; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006), perceived financial constraints (PFC; 4 items; Paley et al. 2019), financial anxiety (FA; 3 items; Shapiro and Burchell 2012), debt aversion (DA; 4 items; Walters et al. 2016), perceived financial risk (PFR; 3 items; Stone and Grønhaug 1993), perceived attractiveness of alternatives (PAA; 6 items; Bansal et al. 2005), and brand switching intention (BSI; 3 items; Bansal and Taylor 2002).

Consistent with established survey development guidelines, the questionnaire underwent rigorous pretesting to assess item interpretation and response-format performance. Procedural remedies to mitigate common method bias were embedded at the design stage, including guaranteed respondent anonymity, psychological separation of predictor and criterion variables across survey sections, and randomisation of item order within each scale (Podsakoff et al. 2003). These procedural safeguards complement the statistical diagnostics reported in Sect. 3.3.

Pretesting was conducted in two stages to optimise scale functioning for financially sensitive constructs central to the conservation–feasibility pathway. In the first pilot study ($N=110$), a conventional five-point Likert format produced substantial clustering at the neutral midpoint across key variables: 47.3% for financial anxiety, 43.6% for perceived financial constraints, and 39.1% for debt aversion. Even brand love—typically less socially sensitive—exhibited a midpoint selection rate of 28.2%. Such patterns indicate systematic midpoint usage rather than genuine neutrality.

This response concentration is consistent with cross-cultural survey research demonstrating that neutral categories often function as face-saving or social harmony strategies in collectivist contexts, particularly when respondents evaluate financially sensitive or self-relevant topics (Chen et al. 1995; He et al. 2014; Si and Cullen 1998). In these settings, respondents may avoid extreme positions not because attitudes are weak, but because moderate responses minimise social risk. Methodologically, this behaviour introduces non-attitudinal variance and increases measurement noise, undermining construct discrimination and attenuating structural relationships (Johns 2005; Kankaraš and Capecchi 2025; Van Vaerenbergh and Thomas 2013).

To address this issue, the neutral midpoint was removed, and all constructs were measured using a four-point forced-choice Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 4 = Strongly Agree). This decision aligns with methodological evidence showing that omitting midpoint options is advisable when social desirability pressures or ambiguity avoidance are likely to bias respond (Johns 2005). Importantly, prior psychometric research indicates that reducing the number of response categories from five to four does not compromise reliability or validity; scales with four, five, or six response options exhibit virtually equivalent psychometric properties when constructs are well specified (Lee and Paek 2014). Moreover, cross-cultural measurement studies suggest that four-point formats often improve construct validity in collectivist contexts by discouraging habitual midpoint selection and restoring meaningful variance (Chen et al. 1995; Lee et al. 2002). This format choice also aligns with the theoretical basis of the Financial Anxiety Scale, for which neutrality is conceptually ambiguous due to the construct's arousal-based nature (Shapiro and Burchell 2012).

A second pilot study ($N=78$) confirmed the adequacy of the revised instrument. All constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.852$) and clear unidimensional factor structures (Appendix Tables A3 and A4), with no evidence of floor or ceiling effects. Collectively, these results indicate that the forced-choice format improved measurement precision without sacrificing reliability. The potential implications for cross-study comparability are acknowledged and addressed in the Limitations section.

Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two stages: assessment of distributional properties, followed by structural modelling. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test revealed statistically significant deviations from normality for most measures ($p<0.05$). Although common in applied consumer research, these deviations necessitate an analytical approach capable of handling non-normal data through resampling-based inference.

Structural equation modelling was employed to examine the proposed nomological network, comprising multiple endogenous constructs and moderation paths. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was selected over covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) because it is well suited to prediction-oriented research and theory development and performs effectively with complex models that include interaction effects (Hair et al. 2019, 2022; Shmueli et al. 2019). This approach is particularly appropriate for the present study because it supports prediction-focused variance explanation in switching intention within an integrative model grounded in conservation of resources (COR) theory, theory of planned behaviour (TPB), and consumer–brand relationship (CBR) theory, while enabling boundary condition tests that specify the scope of CBR under financial pressure. All analyses were conducted using SmartPLS 4. Statistical inference was performed using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to obtain standard errors and confidence intervals (Hair et al. 2022).

Sample size adequacy was evaluated using multiple benchmarks. Following the '10-times rule' (Hair et al. 2019), the minimum sample size is 10 times the largest number of structural paths directed at any construct; with five paths directed at brand switching intention, this yields a minimum requirement of 50. More conservatively, power analyses for partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM; Kock and Hadaya 2018) suggest that detecting medium effects ($f^2 = 0.15$) at 80% power requires approximately 55 observations for each predictor. With 430

participants, the study substantially exceeded both thresholds, ensuring robust statistical power for all hypothesised direct and moderating effects.

The conceptual framework was evaluated in three stages. First, Harman's single-factor test (Harman 1976) was used as an initial diagnostic tool to check for common method bias. The first factor accounted for 48.79% of the variance, which is below the 50% threshold recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2024), indicating that single-factor dominance was unlikely. Second, the measurement model was assessed to establish internal consistency, reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity. Third, the structural model was evaluated to test the conservation–feasibility pathway hypotheses (H1–H10) and empirically adjudicate between competing theoretical predictions regarding the moderating role of brand love (H11a–c) using bootstrapped PLS-SEM estimates (Hair et al. 2022).

Table 2 Reliability and validity of measurement model

Constructs		Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Perceived financial constraints	PFC1	0.882	0.871	0.871	0.795
	PFC2	0.904			
	PFC4	0.889			
Perceived attractiveness of alternatives	PAA3	0.871	0.906	0.908	0.781
	PAA4	0.897			
	PAA5	0.847			
	PAA6	0.918			
Perceived financial risk	PFR1	0.865	0.852	0.854	0.772
	PFR2	0.881			
	PFR3	0.890			
Debt aversion	DA1	0.918	0.958	0.958	0.887
	DA2	0.935			
	DA3	0.948			
	DA4	0.967			
Financial anxiety	FA1	0.928	0.889	0.889	0.819
	FA2	0.917			
	FA3	0.869			
Brand love	BL1	0.921	0.971	0.986	0.810
	BL2	0.936			
	BL3	0.830			
	BL4	0.937			
	BL5	0.925			
	BL6	0.944			
	BL7	0.848			
	BL8	0.936			
	BL9	0.810			
Brand switching intention	BSI1	0.909	0.904	0.905	0.840
	BSI2	0.917			
	BSI3	0.923			

PFC = perceived financial constraints; PFR = perceived financial risk; PAA = perceived attractiveness of alternatives; DA = debt aversion; FA = financial anxiety; BL = brand love; BSI = brand switching intention; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted

Assessment of measurement model

The measurement model was evaluated using the established PLS-SEM criteria for internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) values. As shown in Table 2, all constructs demonstrated satisfactory reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70 and CR values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). Convergent validity was assessed using outer loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). After removing the tenth indicator of brand love (BL10) because of a factor loading below the 0.70 threshold, all remaining loadings exceeded 0.70. The AVE values exceeded 0.50 for all constructs, confirming that the latent variables explained more than half of the variance in their respective indicators (Hair et al. 2022).

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Initial diagnostics indicated insufficient separation between the two construct pairs: perceived financial constraints and financial anxiety, and brand switching intention and the perceived attractiveness of alternatives. Following recommended remedial procedures (Hair et al. 2021), indicators contributing to cross-construct overlap were identified through cross-loading analysis and removed sequentially, with all diagnostics re-estimated after each removal to verify the incremental improvement. Table B2 in the Appendix provides complete details of the removed and retained indicators, including the cross-loading patterns and the theoretical rationale for each decision.

To ensure that the refinement preserved construct integrity, a systematic evaluation of the conceptual content of each removed indicator was conducted. For perceived financial constraints, PFC3 measures relative deprivation through social comparison rather than direct personal constraint perception, creating conceptual ambiguity with affective financial responses captured by the financial anxiety construct. Its removal clarified perceived financial constraints as absolute constraint appraisals. The retained items (PFC1, PFC2, and PFC4) cover three complementary domains: material constraint awareness, spending limitations, and financial dissatisfaction.

Regarding the perceived attractiveness of alternatives, PAA1 and PAA2 were highly similar comparative-evaluative statements, and their shared evaluative-intentional content contributed to overlap with switching intention. The retained items (PAA3, PAA4, PAA5, and PAA6) provide broader construct coverage across four distinct facets: perceived availability, feasibility of finding alternatives, anticipated satisfaction, and perceived functional adequacy (see Table B2 in the Appendix for complete domain mapping).

Two independent academic experts, each with doctoral-level expertise in consumer behaviour measurement, reviewed the refined indicator sets. Each expert conducted an independent assessment before reaching a consensus through a structured discussion. Both confirmed that the removed indicators contributed to cross-construct overlap rather than representing essential construct facets and that the refined measures maintained adequate domain coverage with improved discriminant properties. Following refinement, the square roots of the AVE for all constructs exceeded their highest inter-construct correlations, satisfying the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Reliability and convergent validity remained satisfactory after all modifications (see Table B3 in the Appendix) (Table 3).

Assessment of structural model hypothesis testing

Prior to estimating the structural model, indicator-level multicollinearity was assessed in accordance with the PLS-SEM guidelines. Hair et al. (2019) recommend that VIF values remain below 3.0 in PLS-SEM applications, with values exceeding 5.0 indicating critical collinearity issues (Hair et al. 2011). The initial evaluation identified DA4 ("If I have debts, it does not bother me") and four brand love indicators (BL2, BL4, BL5, and BL6) as contributing to elevated VIF values and indicator redundancy. Consistent with the remedial procedures outlined by Hair et al. (2021), these indicators were removed sequentially, with all collinearity diagnostics re-estimated after each step. Following refinement, all retained indicators exhibited VIF values below the 3.0 threshold, confirming that multicollinearity did not compromise the stability of the structural estimates. Complete details of all measurement refinements, including item content, diagnostic values, assessment thresholds, and refinement rationale, are provided in Appendix B.

To ensure that post-hoc refinement preserved the theoretical scope of the affected constructs, a systematic evaluation of construct representation was conducted before and after indicator removal. For brand love, an examination of the original ten-item scale (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006) revealed that all items operationalised variations of the same core theme: an intense affective-evaluative response toward the brand. The five removed items (BL2, BL4, BL5, BL6, and BL10—the last removed during the measurement model stage for low loading) restated these core affective themes using alternative phrasing rather than contributing to distinct conceptual dimensions (see Table B1 in the Appendix for a detailed semantic overlap analysis). The final five-item measure (BL1, BL3, BL7, BL8, and BL9) retained representation across the construct's affective-evaluative domain, aligning with Carroll and Ahuvia's (2006) and Batra et al.'s (2012) conceptualisation of brand love as encompassing intense positive evaluation, passion, and a positive emotional connection. Refinement thus removed redundancy within this single dimension rather than excluding theoretically distinct facets.

For debt aversion, DA4 ("If I have debts, it does not bother me") is functionally equivalent to DA2, as both capture psychological discomfort with debt. The retained three-item measure preserves complete domain representation across the construct's three facets: repayment urgency (DA1), psychological discomfort (DA2), and borrowing aversion (DA3).

Two independent academic experts reviewed the complete set of refined indicators across all affected constructs and confirmed that the theoretical breadth of each construct was preserved after refinement. Table B2 in the Appendix summarises the complete indicator refinement trajectory across the measurement and structural model stages, presenting the original item count, items removed at each stage, the statistical and theoretical rationale for removal, the final retained items, and the domain coverage assessment for each construct. This transparency allows readers to evaluate the cumulative impact of all measurement modifications on the representation of the constructs.

The final measurement model demonstrated strong internal consistency (composite reliability > 0.85), satisfactory convergent validity (AVE > 0.50), and robust factor loadings (all > 0.70; see Appendix B for complete results). These properties confirm that the refined measurement model

Table 3 Discriminant validity (Fornell Larcker)

	PFC	PFR	PAA	DA	FA	BL	BSI
PFC	0.892						
PFR	0.545	0.879					
PAA	0.468	0.785	0.884				
DA	0.663	0.557	0.503	0.942			
FA	0.874	0.540	0.418	0.568	0.905		
BL	0.493	0.372	0.327	0.545	0.411	0.900	
BSI	0.485	0.825	0.879	0.480	0.464	0.274	

Diagonal elements represent the square root of AVE for each construct. Off-diagonal elements represent inter-construct correlations. Discriminant validity is established when diagonal elements exceed all corresponding row and column entries. PFC = perceived financial constraints; PFR = perceived financial risk; PAA = perceived attractiveness of alternatives; DA = debt aversion; FA = financial anxiety; BL = brand love; BSI = brand switching intention

Table 4 Results of hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	Relationships	Path coefficients (β)	Standard deviation	T Statistic	*P* Values	Results
H1	Perceived financial constraints positively affect financial anxiety	0.873	0.014	61.749	0.000	Accepted
H2	Perceived financial constraints positively affect debt aversion	0.512	0.047	10.933	0.000	Accepted
H3	Perceived financial constraints positively affect perceived financial risk	0.315	0.088	3.574	0.000	Accepted
H4	Financial anxiety positively affects perceived financial risk	0.265	0.082	3.232	0.001	Accepted
H5	Financial anxiety positively affects perceived attractiveness of alternatives	−0.055	0.039	1.389	0.083	Rejected
H6	Perceived financial risk positively affects debt aversion	0.276	0.052	5.342	0.000	Accepted
H7	Debt aversion positively affects perceived attractiveness of alternatives	0.088	0.047	1.873	0.031	Accepted
H8	Perceived financial risk positively affects perceived attractiveness of alternatives	0.755	0.037	20.681	0.000	Accepted
H9	Perceived financial risk positively affects brand switching intention	0.368	0.053	6.906	0.000	Accepted
H10	Perceived attractiveness of alternatives positively affects brand switching intention	0.612	0.051	11.922	0.000	Accepted

$p<0.05$. Path coefficients estimated using PLS-SEM with 5,000 bootstrap resamples

Table 5 Moderation (boundary condition) testing: the moderating effect of brand love

Hypotheses (boundary condition/moderation tests)	Relationships	Path coefficients (β)	Standard deviation	T Statistic	*P* Values	Results
H11a	Brand love intensity moderates the relationship between perceived financial risk and brand switching intention	−0.014	0.053	0.264	0.396	Rejected
H11b	Brand love intensity moderates the relationship between perceived attractiveness of alternatives. and brand switching intention	−0.024	0.046	0.524	0.300	Rejected
H11c	Brand love intensity moderates the relationship between perceived financial risk and the perceived attractiveness of alternatives.	0.051	0.029	1.764	0.039	Accepted (negligible)

Interaction terms were created using the product indicator approach. Effect sizes (f^2) interpreted following Cohen's (2013) guidelines: 0.02 = small, 0.15 = medium, 0.35 = large. All moderation effects demonstrated negligible practical significance ($f^2 < 0.02$)

provides a stable foundation for estimating structural paths. The structural path estimates, hypothesis tests for the conservation–feasibility pathway (H1–H10), and competing moderation hypotheses (H11a–c) are reported in the following sections.

Main effects

The PLS-SEM results indicate significant support for most of the hypothesised relationships. Perceived financial constraints were positively associated with financial anxiety (β = 0.873, t = 61.749, $p<0.05$), debt aversion (β = 0.512, t = 10.933, $p<0.05$), and perceived financial risk (β = 0.315, t = 3.574, $p<0.05$), supporting H1–H3. Financial anxiety was positively related to perceived financial risk (β = 0.265, t = 3.232, $p<0.05$), supporting H4. However, financial anxiety did not significantly predict the perceived attractiveness of alternatives (β = − 0.055, t = 1.389, $p=0.083$), rejecting H5. This suggests that the affective component of the conservation response (anxiety) may not directly orient consumers toward alternatives; instead, this evaluation appears to be driven primarily by cognitive risk appraisal (H8), a pattern that is examined further in the Discussion.

Perceived financial risk was positively associated with debt aversion (β = 0.276, t = 5.342, $p<0.05$; H6), perceived attractiveness of alternatives (β = 0.755, t = 20.681, $p<0.05$; H8), and brand switching intention (β = 0.368, t = 6.906, $p<0.05$; H9). Debt aversion was also positively associated with the perceived attractiveness of alternatives (β = 0.088, t = 1.873, $p<0.05$; H7), and the perceived attractiveness of alternatives increased switching intention (β = 0.612, t = 11.922, $p<0.05$; H10). The findings are summarised in Tables 4 and 5, which provide an overview of the supported and unsupported hypotheses.

These results strongly support the conservation–feasibility pathway (H1–H10), demonstrating that perceived financial constraints drive switching intention through the theorised sequential mechanisms. This analysis now addresses the critical question of whether brand love

moderates this pathway by testing competing CBR and COR/TPB predictions.

Boundary condition (moderation) effects

As reported in Table 5, brand love intensity did not meaningfully moderate the association between perceived financial risk and brand switching intention (H11a: β = 0.014, p = 0.396, f^2 = 0.000) or between the perceived attractiveness of alternatives and brand switching intention (H11b: β = 0.024, p = 0.300, f^2 = 0.001). These results indicate that incremental variations in attachment intensity within the brand lover sample does not alter the strength of feasibility-based predictors of switching intention.

Brand love intensity had a statistically significant but substantively negligible moderating effect on the relationship between perceived financial risk and the perceived attractiveness of alternatives (H11c: β = 0.051, p = 0.039, f^2 = 0.008). Following Cohen (2013), f^2 values below 0.02 indicate negligible effect sizes; at 0.008, this interaction explains less than 1% of the variance in the relationship, indicating no meaningful conditioning in practical or theoretical terms. Notably, with N = 430 and 5,000 bootstrap resamples, the statistical power to detect even trivially small effects is substantial; the fact that H11c reached statistical significance while remaining substantively negligible illustrates this sensitivity, reinforcing that statistical significance should not be conflated with theoretical or practical importance in well-powered studies (Cohen 2013; Hair et al., 2022). Collectively, the moderation results support the COR/TPB prediction over the CBR buffering hypothesis: within a sample of confirmed brand lovers, incremental variation in attachment intensity does not meaningfully attenuate the conservation–feasibility pathway.

Control effects

Control variables were included to account for demographic influences on endogenous constructs. Gender was coded as female = 1, male = 0; the results indicate that women perceived affordable alternatives as more attractive (β = −0.045, p = 0.035), whereas men reported higher switching intention (β = 0.060, p = 0.022). Education level was negatively associated with alternative attractiveness (β = −0.075, p = 0.010) and positively associated with debt aversion (β = 0.094, p = 0.021), suggesting that higher levels of education correspond to stronger debt-avoidance orientations but lower receptivity to substitutes. Income level was negatively associated with financial anxiety (β = −0.056, p = 0.001), consistent with resource-based expectations. Age was negatively associated with perceived financial risk (β = −0.071, p = 0.021) and positively associated with debt aversion (β = 0.079, p = 0.003) (see Table C1 in the Appendix). These patterns are consistent with prior research on the demographic influences on consumer financial behaviour and do not alter the substantive conclusions regarding the conservation–feasibility pathway.

Predictive power and model evaluation

The structural model was evaluated using standard PLS-SEM criteria, including explained variance (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2) (Hair et al. 2019). The predictive power for endogenous constructs was moderate to substantial, with R^2 values of 0.315 for perceived financial risk, 0.626 for perceived attractiveness of alternatives, 0.492 for debt aversion, 0.762 for financial anxiety, and 0.824 for brand switching intention, indicating moderate-to-substantial predictive power (Cohen 2013; Hair et al. 2019). Q^2 values above zero (0.221–0.760) indicate satisfactory predictive accuracy (Geisser 1974; Stone 1974). The effect size (f^2) revealed a substantial effect of perceived financial constraints on debt aversion (f^2 = 0.363) and financial anxiety (f^2 = 3.201), whereas perceived financial risk significantly influenced alternative brand attractiveness (f^2 = 0.935) and moderately affected brand switching intentions (f^2 = 0.266) (Cohen 2013; Hair et al. 2019). Brand love had a negligible effect on the relationship between perceived financial risk and alternative brand attractiveness. SRMR values below 0.08 for the saturated and estimated models confirmed good model fit (Henseler et al. 2016; Hu and Bentler 1998) (see Tables B5, B6, and B7 in the Appendix).

Taken together, the model achieved substantial explained variance in switching intention (R^2 = 0.824), strong predictive relevance (Q^2 values ranging from 0.221 to 0.760), and significant effect sizes for the main pathway relationships. These indicators demonstrate that the conservation–feasibility pathway provides strong explanatory power and that the core theoretical contribution stands regardless of moderation findings.

The following section discusses the theoretical and managerial implications of these findings in detail.

Discussion

Theoretical contributions

This study advances Consumer–Brand Relationship (CBR) theory by identifying a feasibility-based boundary condition for brand love under perceived financial constraints. Whereas prior CBR research has largely assumed that brand love reliably buffers against switching, the present findings demonstrate that when feasibility becomes the binding



constraint, emotional attachment retains psychological salience but loses behavioural authority. Under such conditions, consumer decision-making shifts away from relationship enactment toward resource protection and behavioural defensibility, even among individuals whose emotional attachment to the brand remains intact. This refinement specifies a clear scope condition for CBR: brand love stabilises relationship valuation, but its capacity to sustain behavioural loyalty depends on whether continued patronage is perceived as financially defensible.

Empirically, perceived financial constraints activate a sequential conservation–feasibility pathway culminating in switching intention among consumers who experience brand love ($R^2 = 0.824$). Boundary analyses further indicate that incremental variations in brand love intensity do not meaningfully condition this pathway (H11a–b nonsignificant; H11c statistically significant but substantively negligible; all interaction $f^2 \leq 0.008$). Importantly, this pattern does not reflect affective weakening. Rather, it indicates that brand love's loyalty-protective function is contingent on enactment feasibility, not on the persistence or strength of emotional attachment. Once feasibility-based considerations become salient, they dominate intention formation, consistent with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory's resource priority logic, according to which threatened financial resources are prioritised over other resources under conditions of scarcity (Hobfoll 1989; Hobfoll et al. 2018).

Crucially, this boundary is not a simple affordability artefact. Perceived financial constraints operate as psychological scarcity appraisals that heighten loss sensitivity and reorient attention toward financial defensibility, even among consumers who remain objectively capable of purchasing their preferred brands (Tully et al. 2015). Within the proposed model, constraint perceptions elevate financial anxiety, perceived financial risk, and debt aversion, which collectively shift the decision frame toward financially safer and more defensible options. These dynamics give rise to affective–behavioural decoupling: emotional continuity with a loved brand can coexist with behavioural discontinuity when loyalty is judged to be financially imprudent and switching is perceived as viable. This decoupling explains why high affective attachment does not necessarily translate into behavioural loyalty under financial strain.

Taken together, the findings yield five interconnected theoretical contributions, ordered from most conceptually novel to most integrative.

First, this study introduces and empirically supports a valuation enactment distinction within CBR theory. Consumers can preserve relationship valuation—the emotional significance, identity relevance, and subjective importance of the brand bond—while revising relationship enactment—the behavioural expression of that bond through continued purchasing. This distinction resolves the apparent paradox of brand love coexisting with switching intention: under financial pressure, the decision frame shifts from preference enactment ("What do I want?") to viability management ("What is financially defensible?"). Importantly, intense brand love does not resolve the latter question. This insight cautions against inferring behavioural loyalty directly from affective metrics in constrained contexts and opens a broader research agenda on the conditions under which emotional bonds retain versus lose behavioural authority.

Second, building on this distinction, the study specifies CBR's boundary conditions by demonstrating that brand love's protective influence is behaviourally constrained rather than unconditional. Boundary analyses show that variations in attachment intensity do not meaningfully moderate feasibility-based intention formation once financial defensibility becomes salient. This finding refines the implicit assumption in prior work (e.g., Batra et al. 2012) that brand love operates as a generalised behavioural safeguard, demonstrating instead that its authority is bounded when feasibility becomes binding.

Third, this study extends COR theory into consumer–brand contexts by identifying a functionally differentiated conservation response set—financial anxiety, perceived financial risk, and debt aversion—that systematically reorients decision-making toward resource protection. Rather than treating conservation as a unitary reaction, the findings distinguish vigilance-oriented responses (financial anxiety) from action-directive responses (risk appraisal and debt avoidance), clarifying how perceived constraints translate into switching without requiring an erosion of emotional attachment.

Fourth, this study refines the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) for financially constrained consumption by demonstrating that feasibility-linked control appraisals can override relationship-based evaluations. Under perceived constraints, perceived financial risk undermines the defensibility of staying loyal, while more affordable alternative attractiveness signals that switching is enactable. These feasibility cues function as gatekeepers of intention formation, extending the explanatory reach of TPB to contexts in which attitudes and perceived behavioural control operate in opposing directions.

Fifth, integrating CBR, COR, and TPB, this study proposes and empirically tests a mechanistically specified conservation–feasibility framework that explains how perceived financial constraints translate into switching intention among brand lovers. By mapping the sequence from constraint perceptions to conservation responses, feasibility appraisals, and ultimately switching intention, the framework exposes an assumption largely implicit in prior CBR research: that consumers possess sufficient resources

to enact their relational preferences. Under financial constraints, this assumption fails, and with it, the expectation that emotional engagement reliably produces behavioural loyalty.

The following subsections elaborate these contributions by (4.1.1) conceptualising perceived financial constraints as psychological scarcity and identifying functionally differentiated conservation responses; (4.1.2) tracing the sequential conservation–feasibility pathway from threat activation to switching intention; (4.1.3) specifying where and why brand love's influence is behaviourally constrained under financial strain; (4.1.4) situating these dynamics within the Turkish apparel context; and (4.1.5) documenting demographic heterogeneity in how consumers enter and traverse the conservation–feasibility pathway.

Perceived financial constraints as psychological scarcity

Perceived financial constraints operate as psychological scarcity, reordering decision priorities by narrowing attentional focus toward financial viability and reducing the salience of competing goals, such as relationship maintenance (Shah et al. 2012; Mullainathan and Shafir 2013). Under scarcity, consumers allocate disproportionate cognitive resources to managing potential losses, heightening sensitivity to the downside of financially consequential actions (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). In consumer–brand relationships, this reordering is particularly consequential because loyalty is not merely an evaluative stance but a resource-committing behaviour whose defensibility must be reassessed when scarcity becomes salient. Consequently, consumers may continue to value a loved brand while simultaneously re-evaluating whether continued patronage constitutes a financially prudent course of action.

The findings show that constraint-induced scarcity elicits a functionally differentiated set of conservation responses rather than a uniform withdrawal from consumption. Financial anxiety primarily operates as a vigilance mechanism, heightening awareness of potential loss without directly motivating alternative-seeking behaviour within the proposed pathway (H5: $\beta = -0.055$, $p = 0.083$). This nonsignificant path is theoretically informative, indicating that affective distress alone does not redirect consumers toward alternatives. Instead, cognitive appraisal processes play a decisive role in translating vigilance into behavioural redirection. Specifically, perceived financial risk serves as the principal driver of alternative attractiveness (H8: $\beta = 0.755$), signalling that continued loyalty may expose the consumer to an unacceptable downside. This pattern clarifies that anxiety's contribution to the conservation–feasibility pathway is entirely mediated through risk amplification (H4: $\beta = 0.265$) rather than operating as an independent driver of alternative evaluation. The conservation response is thus affectively initiated but cognitively resolved: anxiety alerts consumers to potential resource loss, but it is the subsequent cognitive appraisal of financial risk—not the emotional distress itself—that redirects evaluation toward more affordable alternatives.

In contrast, perceived financial risk and debt aversion function as action-directive mechanisms. These responses transform vigilance into avoidance of loyalty-consistent choices that are appraised as financially risky or debt-inducing, and increase the preference for safer, more affordable alternatives. This functional separation—where anxiety alerts, but risk appraisal and debt aversion direct behaviour—clarifies why consumers can experience financial strain without immediately pursuing alternatives, yet become willing to switch once continued patronage is judged to threaten financial defensibility. Together, these scarcity-activated responses establish the psychological entry point for the conservation–feasibility pathway elaborated in the following section.

The conservation–feasibility pathway: from threat to switching intention

Building on the scarcity-induced conservation responses identified above, the integration of the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) clarifies how perceived financial constraints translate into switching intention through a sequential conservation–feasibility mechanism. COR captures the activation and amplification stages of this process: perceived constraints increase financial anxiety (H1: $\beta = 0.873$), debt aversion (H2: $\beta = 0.512$), and perceived financial risk (H3: $\beta = 0.315$). Financial anxiety intensifies risk perception (H4: $\beta = 0.265$), perceived risk reinforces debt aversion (H6: $\beta = 0.276$), and both perceived risk and debt aversion increase the perceived attractiveness of affordable alternatives (H8: $\beta = 0.755$; H7: $\beta = 0.088$). Collectively, these links show how scarcity appraisals progressively redirect attention and motivation away from relationship enactment and toward the protection of constrained resources.

TPB informs the resolution stage of the pathway through feasibility-linked control logic. Conservation responses consolidate behavioural intentions as consumers evaluate whether continued loyalty remains practically defensible and whether switching is enactable. Perceived financial risk undermines the defensibility of remaining loyal ("Can I afford to stay?"), whereas alternative attractiveness signals the feasibility of switching ("Is switching viable?"). Both constructs directly predict switching intention (H9: $\beta = 0.368$; H10: $\beta = 0.612$), explaining 82.4% of the variance in switching intention. The strong correlation between



perceived financial risk and alternative attractiveness ($r = 0.785$) is theoretically diagnostic: as staying is appraised as financially infeasible, switching becomes correspondingly feasible, creating a convergent push–pull dynamic toward defection. Although tightly coupled under constraints, the constructs perform distinct functions—perceived risk as a threat appraisal and alternative attractiveness as a feasibility signal—explaining how switching intention can increase even when affective attachment remains intact.

In summary, perceived financial constraints transform switching into a resource-protective response grounded in financial pragmatism rather than relational preference reversal. The remaining theoretical question is whether brand love can meaningfully disrupt this conservation–feasibility mechanism, which is examined directly in the following subsection.

Brand love's boundary conditions: the limits of relational protection

The conservation–feasibility pathway established in the preceding subsection raises a decisive question for Consumer–Brand Relationship (CBR) theory: Can brand love meaningfully disrupt feasibility-driven intention formation under financial constraints, or does the pathway operate largely invariant to attachment strength? This subsection addresses this boundary test. Although brand love remains emotionally salient for consumers in the sample, the results indicate that its capacity to govern behavioural intentions becomes constrained once financial feasibility considerations are binding.

Within this attachment-saturated context, perceived financial constraints activated a conservation–feasibility pathway that explained a substantial proportion of the variance in brand switching intention ($R^2 = 0.824$). The boundary analysis examined whether variations in brand love intensity among brand lovers meaningfully conditioned these effects. The results indicate that this is not the case. Specifically, brand love intensity did not moderate the effect of perceived financial risk on switching intention (H11a) or the effect of perceived alternative attractiveness on switching intention (H11b). Although a statistically significant interaction emerged between perceived financial risk and alternative attractiveness (H11c), the associated effect size was negligible, indicating no substantive moderation. Taken together, these results demonstrate that once financial defensibility becomes salient, feasibility-based intention formation proceeds largely independently of attachment strength.

Conceptually, this pattern reflects a valuation enactment divergence. Consumers continue to value the brand emotionally and integrate it into their identity, yet revise the behavioural enactment of the relationship when continued patronage is appraised as financially imprudent. The decision frame shifts from preference enactment ("What do I want?") to viability management ("What is financially defensible?"). Under these conditions, high- and moderate-intensity brand lovers respond similarly—not because attachment diminishes, but because feasibility constraints operate as binding conditions on behaviour.

Two complementary mechanisms account for this constrained relational protection. First, consistent with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, perceived resource-loss threat prioritises conservation motives—particularly risk appraisal and debt avoidance—through psychological channels that operate largely independently of relational attachment. Second, consistent with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), feasibility-linked control assessments gatekeep whether love-informed attitudes translate into resistant intentions: perceived financial risk undermines the defensibility of staying loyal, whereas attractive and affordable alternatives signal that switching is possible. Together, these feasibility cues dominate intention formation, even among highly attached consumers.

This pattern reflects adaptive coping under constraint rather than relational dissolution. Switching enables consumers to protect threatened material resources while preserving emotional attachment as a psychological resource, allowing affective continuity alongside behavioural revision until feasibility conditions improve. Accordingly, the present findings specify a clear scope condition for CBR theory: brand love stabilises relationship valuation, but its behavioural authority is constrained when perceived financial constraints become binding.

Having established the conservation–feasibility mechanism and the boundary conditions of brand love, the following sections clarify how this mechanism is amplified by contextual volatility and enters through distinct demographic routes.

Contextual dynamics: brand loyalty under economic volatility

The Turkish apparel sector provides a theoretically diagnostic context because it combines strong brand love dynamics with high substitutability, making it unlikely that the observed switching is driven by weak attachment. If perceived financial constraints suppress brand love's loyalty-protective function even in an identity-relevant yet substitutable category, this pattern supports feasibility-based boundary conditions on brand love under economic volatility.

Macroeconomic instability renders resource protection chronically salient, increasing the likelihood that consumers appraise continued loyalty as financially risky and that

lower-cost alternatives become psychologically and practically feasible. Prior research has shown that brand love predicts loyalty and willingness to pay premiums, even in highly substitutable apparel markets (Choi and Han 2019; Ferreira et al. 2019; Islam and Rahman 2016; Nikhashemi et al. 2019). Therefore, the present findings are theoretically consequential in demonstrating that financial constraints can override this protection, even in cases in which attachment is typically robust.

Cultural norms may further accentuate these dynamics. In collectivist-oriented contexts, brands often function as identity anchors, while norms of prudence and responsibility intensify sensitivity to financially imprudent consumption (Escalas and Bettman 2005; Hofstede 2001). Together, these forces may render affective–behavioural decoupling more pronounced under constraints. Moreover, in cultural contexts where financial prudence carries moral weight, consumers may experience reduced psychological friction when discontinuing purchases from a loved brand, as switching can be narratively framed as responsible and self-consistent rather than disloyal—potentially lowering the psychological cost of acting against an enduring emotional bond. Although such contextual amplification was not directly tested, it delineates a meaningful boundary condition for the proposed framework. Within this macro-cultural context, the demographic control analyses reported below reveal micro-level heterogeneity in how individual consumers enter and traverse the conservation–feasibility pathway.

Demographic heterogeneity in the conservation–feasibility pathway

Although these associations carry less inferential weight than the primary structural findings, they clarify how a common mechanism can be activated through distinct psychological entry points.

Age and education shape dispositional conservation tendencies. Older and more highly educated consumers exhibit elevated debt aversion, reflecting prudential norms and greater debt literacy, while simultaneously reporting lower perceived financial risk, suggesting norm-driven rather than threat-driven conservation. This dissociation suggests that the conservation–feasibility pathway can be entered through at least two distinct routes: a threat-driven route characterised by heightened risk perception and a norm-driven route characterised by dispositional debt avoidance. Education also attenuates alternative attractiveness, consistent with commitment-consistency mechanisms (Cialdini 2009).

Income selectively buffers the affective entry point of conservation behaviour: higher income reduces financial anxiety but does not significantly alter risk appraisal or debt aversion. A modest gender asymmetry further suggests that the translation from feasibility appraisal to switching intention may vary across groups, although these effects remain associational.

Taken together, these patterns reinforce the parsimony of the proposed framework: the conservation–feasibility mechanism itself is stable, whereas the entry conditions are demographically configured. These theoretical insights have direct implications for how brands can sustain loyalty under financial constraints, which the following section translates into actionable strategic priorities.

Managerial implications

For brand managers operating in economically volatile markets, the findings have direct strategic implications: emotional engagement alone is insufficient to sustain loyalty when consumers perceive financial constraints. In our structural results, among consumers with brand love, switching intention is most strongly associated with feasibility-based evaluations— particularly perceived financial risk and the perceived attractiveness of more affordable alternatives—rather than with a weakening of attachment. Brand love does not meaningfully attenuate these constraint-driven mechanisms; consumers with stronger attachment are no more resistant to financial risk perceptions or alternative attractiveness than those with moderate attachment. Consequently, relationship marketing remains necessary but insufficient; brands should complement emotional engagement with feasibility-focused retention strategies that make continued loyalty feel financially safe, controllable, and practically achievable.

Importantly, the intensity of brand love does not provide behavioural protection once feasibility concerns become salient, challenging the managerial assumption that deepening emotional bonds is sufficient to prevent churn during downturns. The practical implication is straightforward: managers must directly address feasibility barriers, regardless of how strongly consumers report loving the brand.

The five strategic priorities below are organised along the conservation–feasibility pathway indicated by the structural results. Priority 1 targets the most proximal driver of switching (alternative attractiveness), Priorities 2–3 target two amplifying mechanisms (perceived financial risk and debt aversion), Priority 4 targets an upstream entry condition (financial anxiety), and Priority 5 integrates these interventions at the program level.



Strategic priority 1: reduce the feasibility advantage of external alternatives

Business challenge

Affordable alternatives become the most immediate switching driver under constraint because they are perceived as a more prudent and defensible option—not merely a cheaper one.

Managerial response

Create within-brand pathways that allow consumers to downshift consumption without exiting the relationship, thereby weakening competitors' perceived "safer choice" advantage.

Implementation levers

- Tiered product architectures preserve core identity cues (signature design elements, quality markers, and service standards), so that stepping down feels like a responsive fit rather than a concession. A concrete illustration is Apple's iPhone SE tiering logic, which preserves key identity cues and ecosystem access while offering a lower-exposure entry point for more price-sensitive consumers (Podolny and Hansen 2020).
- Modular purchasing formats (smaller bundles, entry-level SKUs, and progressive build-up options) to maintain engagement at lower commitment levels.
- Time-bounded flexibility (seasonal access tiers, temporary "bridge" offerings) legitimises temporary downshifting without identity loss.

Managerial takeaway

Compete on within-brand flexibility, not price wars: build credible step-down pathways (tiering, modularity, time-bounded access) so consumers can reduce perceived exposure without exiting, thereby weakening the feasibility advantage of external alternatives.

Strategic priority 2: reframe loyalty as financial protection

Business challenge

Perceived financial risk motivates switching directly and indirectly by elevating alternative attractiveness. This risk is subjective: consumers may retain objective purchasing capability while still appraising continued loyalty as imprudent because of downside exposure.

Managerial response

Reduce perceived downside exposure and increase perceived recoverability, rather than relying on blanket discounts that can erode brand equity.

Implementation levers

- Value-recovery systems (trade-in, buy-back, repair credits, and upgrade pathways) transform purchases from sunk costs to recoverable value. For instance, IKEA's Buyback & Resell service illustrates how recoverability can be operationalised by offering in-store credit for returned items and reselling eligible products through reuse channels, reframing the purchase as partially reversible rather than fully sunk (IKEA, n.d.).
- Resale-value transparency (credible guidance on expected value retention) to reposition loyalty as preserving future options.
- Risk-reversal assurances (extended warranties, satisfaction guarantees, and total-cost-of-ownership transparency) reduce perceived loss from staying.

Managerial takeaway

Position loyalty as downside protection, not ongoing spend: lower perceived risk through recoverability and risk reversal, reducing switching pressure without equity-eroding price cuts.

Strategic priority 3: structure commitments to mitigate debt aversion

Business challenge

Debt aversion reflects discomfort with open-ended obligations and uncertainty. Under constraints, consumers may defect toward "simpler" options because they feel psychologically safer, even when objective price differences are not decisive.

Managerial response

Make commitment structures bounded, transparent, and closed-ended to reduce perceived open-ended exposure.



Implementation levers

- Bounded instalment plans (fixed monthly amounts, fixed end dates, no hidden fees, and explicit "total paid" disclosures).
- Prepaid packages and clearly scoped bundles convert uncertainty into defined commitments.
- Cost-clarity tools (itemised breakdowns, payment calendars, and "no surprises" messaging) reduce ambiguity.

Managerial takeaway

To foster loyalty, make it feel finite and controllable, as debt-averse consumers defect when obligations feel psychologically costly, not only when prices are high.

Strategic priority 4: intervene early to prevent anxiety from consolidating into risk appraisal

Business challenge

Financial anxiety functions as vigilance: consumers become cautious before actively evaluating alternatives. If uncertainty persists, vigilance can consolidate into stable risk appraisals that then activate downstream alternative evaluations and switching intentions.

Managerial response

Intervene early with concrete risk-mitigation signals, before hesitation hardens into "this is financially unsafe."

Implementation levers

- Low-friction returns/exchanges with minimal penalties and clearly explained steps.
- Price protection assurances that reduce anticipated regret (framed as downside absorption rather than promotion-led discounting).
- Proactive outreach triggered by hesitation signals (basket contraction, delayed repurchase, and reduced browsing-to-purchase conversion) to deliver risk-mitigation cues before risk perceptions stabilise.
- Operationalised contingency messaging (here, exactly how you can reverse the decision) prioritising reversibility over emotional reassurance.

Table 6 Constraint-response segmentation heuristic: feasibility barriers and strategic emphases

Segment (heuristic)	Primary feasibility barrier	High-fit strategic emphasis
Vigilance-oriented	Elevated financial anxiety with heightened perceived financial risk	Risk reversal & recoverability; low-friction reversibility; early outreach
Prudence-oriented	Debt aversion/obligation discomfort	Bounded commitments; total-cost clarity; prepaid bundles; within-brand downshifting

Managerial takeaway

Treat anxious consumers as risk-sensitive hesitators, not deal seekers: Early reversibility and downside absorption reduce the likelihood that vigilance escalates into active defection.

Strategic priority 5: redesign loyalty programmes and segment by feasibility barrier

Redesigning loyalty programs

Traditional schemes that emphasise delayed rewards often misalign with constrained consumers' needs for immediacy, predictability, and control. Programs should deliver near-term benefits that directly reduce feasibility barriers—for example, guaranteed member pricing framed as predictability (not price wars), instant-use credits, transparent savings statements ("you saved X this month"), free returns, extended warranties, and value-recovery benefits. The design principle is to target feasibility barriers identified by the pathway, rather than assuming unconstrained consumption and rewarding volume post hoc.

Mechanism-based segmentation (heuristic)

Segmentation based on the dominant feasibility barrier rather than attachment strength or demographics alone. Table 6 provides a pragmatic heuristic mapping from feasibility barrier profiles to a high-fit intervention emphasis.

These profiles are heuristic and not mutually exclusive; alternative attractiveness should be treated as a downstream evaluation that either profile can activate. When psychographic or behavioural indicators are available, they should be prioritised for targeting; when they are not, managers may rely on second-best diagnostics interpreted cautiously.

Demographic diagnostics

When psychographic measurement is unavailable, demographic signals may provide low-cost approximations of constraint profiles; however, these patterns are descriptive and should not be interpreted as causal segmentation rules. In the present dataset, income was most diagnostic of anxiety-driven vigilance (lower income associated with elevated financial anxiety), age was most diagnostic of dispositional prudence (older consumers exhibiting elevated debt aversion even when perceived financial risk was lower), and education showed a mixed pattern (greater debt aversion alongside lower perceived attractiveness of alternatives, consistent with commitment–consistency mechanisms (Cialdini 2009). A sex asymmetry—women reporting higher perceived attractiveness of alternatives and men reporting higher switching intention—warrants cautious interpretation but suggests potential value in targeted churn monitoring if replicated.

Managerial takeaway

Segment and target on feasibility barriers (risk, debt aversion, anxiety), not on attachment intensity; use demographics only as pragmatic, non-causal diagnostics when direct psychographic or behavioural indicators are impractical.

Integration: emotional engagement supported by feasibility architecture

Brand love remains foundational to long-term brand equity, and this study clarifies its behavioural boundary conditions. Attachment sustains the desire for loyalty, but feasibility determines whether loyalty can be enacted prudently under constraints. During downturns, the strategic task is not to replace relationship marketing, but to support it with a feasibility architecture—the coordinated design of offerings, commitments, and risk-reduction mechanisms that keep loyalty behaviourally viable without relying on price wars.

Implementation sequences. A pathway-consistent rollout is as follows: **(1)** neutralise external alternatives' feasibility advantage via within-brand flexibility; **(2)** reduce perceived downside exposure through value recovery and risk reversal; **(3)** bound obligations and increase cost transparency to mitigate debt aversion; **(4)** intervene early so that anxiety does not crystallise into a stable risk appraisal; and **(5)** calibrate the full architecture through mechanism-based segmentation.

Key managerial takeaways. Brand love is behaviourally constrained—rather than emotionally erased—under perceived financial constraints; therefore, retention in volatile economies requires a feasibility architecture alongside relationship marketing. The most effective levers reduce perceived downside exposure without indiscriminate discounting and weaken alternative attractiveness by enabling within-brand downshifting. Finally, segmentation should be mechanism-led, with demographics used only as pragmatic, non-causal diagnostics when direct measurement is impractical.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

As with any theory-driven empirical investigation, this study has limitations that delineate the scope of its conclusions and point to promising directions for future research.

Contextual constraints. The empirical context of apparel consumption in Turkey limits the generalisability of the findings. Apparel is a highly substitutable product category that may amplify feasibility-driven switching when affordability concerns are salient. Future research should replicate the proposed model across product categories that vary in substitutability, involvement, and necessity, as well as across culturally and economically diverse markets, to further delineate the boundary conditions of affective–behavioural decoupling.

Sampling constraints. The use of non-probability convenience sampling restricts population-level inference; probability- or quota-based designs would strengthen external validity. In addition, the sampling strategy introduced statistical range restriction. By purposively focusing on consumers with brand love, the study excluded indifferent or negatively oriented consumers, thereby narrowing the variance in attachment intensity. Because range restriction attenuates correlation and interaction effects (Cohen et al. 2003), moderation estimates should be interpreted within this bounded variance context rather than as evidence that brand love is irrelevant across the full spectrum of consumer–brand relationships. Future studies should employ full-range samples to assess whether moderating effects re-emerge when consumers with weak or absent brand attachments are included.

Measurement considerations. All constructs were measured using a four-point Likert scale without a neutral midpoint to address pronounced midpoint clustering observed in the pilot study, consistent with evidence that midpoint responding in collectivist contexts can reflect face-saving rather than genuine neutrality (He et al. 2014; Si and Cullen 1998). However, fewer response categories may compress variance and attenuate smaller effects—particularly interaction terms—and the absence of a midpoint may reduce cross-study comparability where neutrality is substantively

meaningful (Chyung et al. 2017). Replication with five- or seven-point scales in contexts with lower midpoint responding would help assess the robustness and generalisability of both pathway and moderation estimates.

Scale refinement. Establishing satisfactory discriminant validity and addressing indicator collinearity required the removal of several items, resulting in abbreviated measures for brand love, perceived financial constraints, and perceived attractiveness of alternatives. Domain-mapping analyses and expert evaluations confirmed that the retained items captured the core conceptual facets (see Appendix B). However, the extent of scale refinement warrants further validation. The original brand love scale was designed to represent a broad affective–evaluative domain (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006); the refined version retains central elements but may underrepresent peripheral facets in other populations or economic contexts. Future research should test the full multidimensional structures across varying economic conditions using multi-group and measurement-invariance approaches.

Cross-sectional design. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference and limits the assessment of temporal sequencing. Longitudinal designs, experience sampling methods, or quasi-experimental studies conducted during periods of economic fluctuation would allow researchers to examine whether the conservation–feasibility pathway unfolds sequentially and to distinguish between temporary affective–behavioural decoupling and more enduring relational recalibration.

Conclusion

Brand love has long been celebrated as a powerful force in consumer–brand relationships, a psychological bond that sustains loyalty, resists competitive encroachment, and transforms customers into brand advocates. This study reveals a critical boundary on that power: when consumers perceive financial constraints, brand love retains its emotional presence but loses its behavioural authority.

Empirically, among self-identified brand lovers, perceived financial constraints activated a conservation–feasibility pathway that explained 82.4% of the variance in switching intention. Crucially, greater attachment intensity conferred no additional behavioural resistance. Consumers who loved their brands deeply were no more resistant to feasibility-driven switching than those with moderate attachment. This pattern is not indicative of affective weakening; rather, it reflects the behavioural insufficiency of attachment when financial defensibility becomes salient.

This finding resolves an apparent paradox in branding research: how consumers can simultaneously love a brand and intend to leave it. The answer lies in recognising that relationship valuation and relationship enactment are governed by separable psychological logics. Under financial strain, the decision frame shifts from "What do I want?" to "What can I defend?"—and brand love, regardless of its intensity, does not resolve the latter question.

The central theoretical contribution of this research is to expose an assumption that has remained largely implicit in branding scholarship: that consumers possess sufficient resources to enact their relational preferences. By integrating Conservation of Resources Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour within Consumer–Brand Relationship Theory, this study demonstrates that emotional attachment and behavioural enactment depend on distinct resource systems and that feasibility appraisals can override strongly favourable attitudes when perceived behavioural control is compromised by resource threats. Under financial constraints, the resource-sufficiency assumption fails, and with it, the expectation that emotional engagement reliably produces behavioural loyalty.

For managers, the implication is clear. Although emotional branding remains essential for creating attachment, attachment alone cannot sustain loyalty when feasibility barriers emerge. Brands operating in economically volatile markets must therefore complement relationship marketing with feasibility architecture, ensuring that loyalty feels financially safe, controllable, and practically achievable, not merely emotionally desirable.

These findings open a broader research agenda centred on a single generative question: Under what conditions does affective-behavioural decoupling occur in consumer-brand relationships? While the present study demonstrates that perceived financial constraints constitute one such condition, the underlying mechanism is not domain-specific. Any situational pressure that renders attitude-consistent behaviour infeasible or imprudent—whether resource-based, temporal, or social—may produce analogous decoupling. The conservation–feasibility framework developed here provides a parsimonious and testable architecture for identifying these boundaries across contexts.

Brand love, therefore, is not an unconditional safeguard. Its limitation is not affective but situational: consumers do not stop loving brands under financial pressure; they stop being able to act on that love when feasibility considerations dominate the decision process. In markets where consumers' financial realities increasingly collide with their emotional attachments, feasibility is not a secondary consideration—it is decisive.

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