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Moral Imagination, Parasocial Brand Love, and Customer Citizenship Behavior: Travelers' Relationship with Sponsoring Airline Brands in the United States

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Abstract: While travelers tend to engage in reflective thinking processes, the relationship between the ability to imagine and the human–brand relations has not been clearly understood. In sustainability and consumer-brand literature, morally imaginative travelers and their relationship with and behavior toward a sponsoring brand have received little attention. In connecting moral imagination with the airline cause sponsorship literature, this study aims to investigate the antecedent of travelers' parasocial brand love with airlines as sponsors of charitable causes and to identify what motivates customer citizenship behavior. Based on a study sample of 442 travelers who experienced US-based full-service airlines and who were aware of the airlines' sponsorship of environmental and social charitable causes, the study analyzed the data employing a structural equation modeling (SEM) technique to examine the relationship between moral imagination, parasocial brand love, and customer citizenship behavior. The investigation revealed a positive association between reproductive, productive, and creative imagination and parasocial brand love. Additionally, a positive influence of parasocial brand love on customer citizenship behavior was confirmed. This study highlights that imaginative travelers are good at evaluating the airlines' sponsorship-related moral situations, further developing parasocial brand love. The results provided important insights into practical, as well as theoretical, arenas.

Keywords: moral imagination; reproductive imagination; productive imagination; creative imagination; airline cause sponsorship; parasocial brand love; customer citizenship behavior

1. Introduction

After a rather long silence among tourism researchers concerning “philosophically informed discussions of morality and ethics” [1] (p. 1908), morality has emerged as one of the important issues in tourism literature [1,2]. Sustainable tourism may be attributed to tourists' willingness to behave in a prosocial way for the environment and society in general and the particular communities they may visit. Despite evidence that there is a group of people who tend to behave in a pro-environmental way at home and on vacation while embracing some level of sacrifice for prosocial activities [3,4], it has long been acknowledged that there is a gap between tourists' awareness of environmental impacts and their behavioral change toward pro-environmental activities [5]. This may be due to the ignorance of “the human mind as the locus of moral reasoning in tourism” [1] (p. 1909), despite some previous research touching on the surface of morality, not at a deeper level. The current research was conducted to fill this research gap by addressing the following research questions: (1) Why are some travelers better than the others at interacting and developing a parasocial love with airline brands involved

in sponsorship of charitable causes?; and (2) In what situation are the travelers willing to behave on behalf of a firm, thereby showing citizenship behavior?

There is a growing body of research, which is likely to answer the research questions. First, it has been argued that an individual cannot develop effective moral reasoning in the era of transmodernity in particular by confining to one rule and/or code of ethics [1]. Transmodern tourism is said to have a tendency to transcend modernity by valuing interdependence, partnership, and nondogmatic spirituality in response to limitations of modernity [1,6]. In this vein, tourism literature has recently identified the importance of reflexive learning process during and after the associated tourism experience [2,7]. For instance, reflexive tourists have been found to be adept at correcting misperceptions, which may arise after onsite tourism experiences. A so-called “self-transformation” [2] is likely to occur, especially when reflecting on what they have experienced and learned [2,7], often not restricted by a script. Additionally, building on the preceding, imagination and creativity appears to play an important role in enabling individuals to place themselves in the place of others with regard to morally sensitive situations involving several moral agents; this is especially the case when corporate messages about charity involvement are communicated [2,8,9]. From this perspective, “stimulating the moral imagination, recognizing ethical issues, developing analytical skills, eliciting a sense of moral obligation and personal responsibility and tolerating—and resisting—disagreement and ambiguity” has been proposed [10] (p. 173) to facilitate an ethics-based model of education. Whereas moral imagination relates to individuals’ ability to recognize and evaluate possibilities in a specific situation without being influenced by the circumstances and spurious logic [11], this perspective is of direct relevance to the evaluation of sponsorship programs associated with specific airline brands given its association with memory and imagination. Previous studies have found that imagination plays an important role in leading to reflexive, critical evaluations of the self and (imaginary) experiences [2]. Importantly, while prior research has identified the importance of imagination in interacting with objects and brands [9,12], the brand and marketing literature has highlighted numerous aspects of interpersonal (love emotion and love relationship), anthropomorphic, and parasocial factors that humans can develop in contact with brands [13,14]. Although brand love seems to have different connotations from interpersonal love (e.g., romantic love, parental love, and similar types of love), recent studies have also stressed that the human–brand relationship is based on one-sided, imagined, parasocial interaction, with anthropomorphic terms [14–16]. It is also highlighted that when people fall in parasocial love with the brand, they are likely to have long-term relationship, inducing positive emotional (e.g., affect), cognitive (e.g., commitment and loyalty), and psychological (e.g., identification, wishful identification, and affinity) outcomes [15,17,18], which in turn influence customer citizenship behavior [19–21]. However, there are important gaps in morality in sustainable tourism and consumer-brand relationship literature with regard to the relationships between moral imagination, parasocial brand love, and customer citizenship behavior.

Hence, building upon the previous argument, the current study aims to contribute to tourism and sustainability literature by connecting the dots between moral imagination, parasocial brand love and customer citizenship behavior. In order to address the identified research gaps, the rest of this paper has been structured into the following five parts. First, it reviews the relationship between three levels of moral imagination (reproductive, productive, and creative), parasocial brand love, and customer citizenship behavior by drawing on theoretical orientation on the three-dimensional concept of moral imagination, followed by the articulation of four hypotheses. Second, the study provides a description of the detailed study method, including measurement, data collection, and analyses. Third, results showing the measurement model and hypotheses testing are presented. Fourth, critical issues arising from study results are discussed. Finally, the study presents a consideration of the theoretical and practical implications along with limitations and future research avenues.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Orientation: Moral Imagination

While the concept of moral imagination owes its origin to philosophy [11], previous research has appeared in various other social science fields, including business ethics, consumer research, and social behavior and personality literature. One of the most well-known authors in business ethics, Werhane [11] (p. 93) defines moral imagination as “the ability in particular circumstances to discover and evaluate possibilities not merely determined by that circumstance, or limited by its operative mental models, or merely framed by a set of rules or rule-governed concerns”. In order to elaborate the essence of moral imagination, Moberg and Seabright [22] attempted to go beyond the “engendering perspective taking or other aspects of moral sensitivity” (p. 874) while benchmarking the following ethical decision-making processes theorized by Rest [23]: Moral sensitivity, moral judgement, moral intention, and moral behavior.

First, with respect to moral sensitivity, moral imagination enables a person facing ethical dilemmas to evaluate multiple possible actions, determine the associated influences on others by moral inclusion, and conduct a “perspective taking”—all of which in turn further expand on a major theme of moral sensitivity. Throughout this process, people may fail to reach the point of recognizing the problem, in the case of using schema-based reasoning. As Dennis Gioia’s famous ethical dilemma case at Ford illustrates, individuals involved in morally charged situations may not be able to recognize the ethical issue, due to their inability to activate the appropriate moral sensitivity because of their predetermined schema or a script (i.e., a cognitive framework for understanding the information) [24]. Although he had an opportunity to care for customers’ complaints when investigating into the burned Pinto cars and was responsible for rectifying any problems via a recall program, he could not “recognize which ideas are morally worth pursuing and which are not” [25] (p. 213).

Second, moral imagination provides individuals with an opportunity to engage in morally charged situations where they are required to judge the situations creatively, thus calling for judgmental flexibility in whether to use relationship-, rules-, or case-based ethics to the situation. Regardless of the aforementioned mainstream ethics theories, the importance lies in considering “possible effects on the interests and feelings of others” [26] (p. 25) with regard to the given actions.

Third, moral intention plays an important role in determining whether one moral option should be given priority over the others, as suggested by theory [27,28]—self-sanctions and social sanctions. Particularly, with regard to referent groups affecting moral intent, in Moberg and Seabright’s [22] words, morally imaginative individuals tend to behave by “consider[ing] how their actions would be judged if they were described on the front page of the Wall Street Journal” (p. 870).

Finally, when a decision-maker reaches the implementation stage, moral imagination has significant implications for fitting the moral decision with the situation; a moral agent is best advised to revise the originally chosen moral alternative that was reasonably acceptable to others, in consideration of unforeseen conditions that may have appeared at the final stage [22]. Individuals can cognitively monitor moral issues through moral imagination and provide solutions along with realizing their potential influences on others [11,29,30]. Hence, Moberg and Seabright [22] underlined “personal commitment and the lasting effort” (p. 874) for making a moral vision fruitful, which can be obtained through moral imagination.

Likewise, three characters of moral imagination have been articulated by Yang [31] and Moberg and Caldwell [32] as follows: First, moral imagination facilitates the recognition of moral issues in a given situation; second, individuals consider the viewpoint of others who may be affected as a result of the decision-making; and third, fresh, creative, interpretations are made concerning a situation. Thus, moral imagination has, potentially, numerous implications for the ethical decision-making process; although moral imagination has been conceptualized in a social setting to consider invisible, critical and moral issues within “the network of relationship and patterns of interaction” [30] (p. 40) and

systems [33], tourism researchers have recognized the research gap in the literature concerning moral dimensions, which calls for the juxtaposition of the current tourism experience with morality [1,2].

A number of researchers have shed light on the thesis that moral imagination goes through a three-stage ethical procedure: Reproductive imagination, productive imagination, and creative imagination [25,34,35], which will be detailed in the following sections.

2.1.1. Reproductive Imagination

Hargrave [34] (p. 98) described reproductive imagination as “an awareness of what is at issue in a particular situation and the mental models one employs to understand it”. By exploring the indicators of the reproductive imagination dimension, Liang et al. [36] (p. 370) found “focusing, effectiveness, transformation, crystallization, and dialectics.” Likewise, special interest lies in recognizing the moral situation, where moral agents involved in a situation need to consider what McGregor [37] called “multi-lemmas,” since there may be more than two alternative options to the ethical situation (see McGregor [37] (p. 169)). One of the early philosophers, Kant, argued that imagination has a major role in organizing nonrecurring sensations into perceptions and subsequently synthesizing them into representations, thereby enabling people to become aware of the nonrecurring sensations [29]. Importantly, as noted earlier, Gioia now considers his behavior in dealing with requests for the recall of Ford Pinto automobiles as unacceptable [24]; however, at the time of receiving customers’ complaints, he was unable to identify the moral issue and ignored the ethical dimensions.

2.1.2. Productive Imagination

Productive imagination is defined as “revamping one’s schema to take into account new possibilities within a scope of one’s situation and/or within one’s role”. [29] (p. 85). Productive imagination includes individuals’ ability to understand others’ situations (e.g., culture and values), culminating in pursuing their interests while not trespassing others’ rights. As per Kant, productive imagination is inventive as it involves the development of fictional images, whereas reproductive imagination is meant to be “the imagination in memory,” recollective in its nature [38] (p. 469). For instance, drawing from the Pinto case, what Gioia later described as a moral failure partly occurred because he was influenced by a script lacking the dimension of morality in dealing with a large volume of information. The understanding of the relationships between a stimulus, mental model of individuals, and their responses is necessary to ensure productive imagination, given that a stimulus (e.g., mad cow disease in the United States) may be evaluated from the perspective of various frameworks (e.g., economic results and public health and safety) with different responses (concerns of financial risk to the beef industry versus providing a safe food supply) [24]. Likewise, Adolphson [24] has asserted that natural/human factors are likely to be given priority over financial costs in the case of biophysical economics, which posits that financial capital should be valued to the extent that natural and human capitals are kept intact, unlike in neoclassic economics, which places a significant emphasis on economic output (i.e., profit maximization).

2.1.3. Creative Imagination

Creative imagination has been found to be measured through intuition, sensibility, productivity, exploration, and novelty [36]. Described as “the ability to envision and actualize possibilities that are not context-dependent”, creative imagination can be effective in providing successful solutions to any given problem for the parties having contrasting views, such as the situation facing ExxonMobil’s Chad/Cameroon project when there were critics and opponents to object to the plan while the firm was desperate to produce a morally imaginative course of action [34]. To identify missed ethical dimensions and focus on consequences while considering various possibilities [24,39,40], imagination, disengagement, and evaluation are needed [39]. While moral imagination reflects the aspect of “reflective equilibrium” by Rawls [41], where various dimensions, issues, and diverse stakeholders are considered before reaching the final decision, the balance between context-based moral intuitions

and de-contextualized imagination in equilibrium with the general principles is at the center of this thought process [40].

2.2. Moral Imagination in Predicting Parasocial Love with a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Brand and Customer Citizenship Behavior

The concept of moral imagination has potential ways of providing tourists with a moral perspective from which they can critically reflect on their past experiences. Expanding on previous studies, the concept of moral imagination (i.e., imagination in memory, recollective imagination, and envisioning/actualizing possibilities) has a major role in enabling tourists to reflect on a given moral issue or a situation, as the following tourist's narrative on slum tourism illustrates: "... I was impressed by the guide and realized there was a lot I misunderstood about 'slums' from my western point of view" [2] (p. 212).

The current study argues that moral imagination has provided an important avenue for associating the human-brand interaction with the under-researched area of achieving morality through the reflexive tourist [1,2,12]. While developing relationships with branded products and/or services, consumers have been found to form parasocial love that builds on a one-sided relationship with the brand; this parasocial love can be defined as individuals' cognitive, emotional, and social relationships with a range of objects, including media and website personae, celebrities, fictitious cartoon characters, website personae, service employees, and the likes [18,42–44]. Concurrently, drawing from reproductive, productive, and creative imagination, it is posited that individuals capable of initiating "free reflection and imaginative thinking" [40] (p. 760) concerning organizations and their sponsorship-related behaviors can grasp multiple constructions of reality via collective sensemaking activities, which often include responsiveness and responsibility by the companies [45,46]. Additionally, the main thesis of object relations theory is that people relate to inanimate or animate objects whether they be physical or psychological objects (i.e., consumers' acquisition of a branded object versus a child-parent interaction) when the inner and outer world are connected in the "third space," such as blogs, websites, or media [47] (p. 375), thereby strengthening the human-brand relationship, that is, the parasocial relationship. Likewise, Ferreira and Scaraboto [9] provided the insight that consumers' imagination and emotional energy play important roles in bridging the material configuration phase, which produces consumption objects through marketing and design, and the objectification phase (i.e., branded products/services), thereby leading to identifying projects and cultural outcomes for consumers.

Importantly, as noted earlier, while consumers interact with objects through manifested material substances and engage with and interact with objects [9], as a result of building the relationship with the brand, individuals develop a consumption desire, emotional connection, and self-identity that is integrated with the brand identity, in particular, via imagination [14,48]. As highlighted by Huang and Mitchell [12], this imagination facilitates the one-way relationship with the brand through brand personality. Furthermore, the brand relationship literature has also confirmed that brand relationships (e.g., sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness) [49] are based on parasocial relationships (i.e., the absence of direct social relationship) facilitated through imagination [12]. Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi [14] theorized a process of developing brand love consisting of the following three phases: (1) Self-brand integration, which influences current and desired self-identity, as well as life meaning and intrinsic rewards; (2) passion-driven behaviors (i.e., passionate desire to use the brand); and (3) positive emotional connection with the brand. While the contribution of a brand to inner and social selves has been found to be positively associated with passionate brand love [50], one of the important factors influencing brand relationship quality is imagination.

The literature supports that while creativity is essential to go through the ethical decision-making process [8], consumers are likely to employ imagination when engaging with objects, including the brand and a media persona, in a cognitive and emotional way [9,18]. Given the complicated process of communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR) messages to customers [51], consumers

need to understand the corporate intention manifested in related marketing efforts, that is, the promotion of charitable cause sponsorship brands. This is especially the case with customers who follow the marketing efforts of organizations, which promote their cause sponsorship programs. For instance, Nijhof and Jeurissen [45] introduced the importance of sensemaking in investigating CSR, an interactive social process wherein moral issues are socially constructed in consideration of varied relationships among stakeholders. Particularly, previous cause-related marketing literature confirms that nowadays sponsorship programs are varied in terms of their relationship with sponsees (i.e., celebrity endorsements, image transfers, and brand-cause congruence); customers may require the ability to foresee in order to understand the motives of a sponsor. Thus, moral imagination plays a major role in making customers aware of the complicated relationships among the sponsors' extended stakeholders within the given systems, that is, "interpretations of a web of relationships" [33] (p. 431), and connecting them with CSR in a parasocial way.

When individuals interact with a brand, they tend to develop cognitive and emotional and behavioral outcomes consistent with interpersonal relationships [14]. Extant parasocial relationship research suggested that customers share some interpersonal relationships with media personae, thereby producing self-figure identification and positive feelings, such as affinity [17]. However, recent studies have extended the study context to the interaction with website persona and (digital) celebrity endorsers in predicting positive attitudes and behavior intentions (e.g., loyalty, electronic word-of-mouth, and purchase intention) [18,52,53]. Thus, on the one hand, previous studies have confirmed that one positive influence of parasocial relationships with a firm is the tendency of consumers to be willing to provide various support not required of them, including positive discretionary behavior, such as word-of-mouth, feedback, similar acts toward a firm or brand, and extra support in the form of customer citizenship behavior [54,55]. According to Gruen [54], customer citizenship behavior is concerned with customers' positive contributions to a firm by providing valuable suggestions, cooperation, and positive word-of-mouth. Another noteworthy point is that while brand relationships are drawn from a parasocial relationship, brand love literature supports the argument that brand-consumer relationships lead to long-term relationships, given that one aspect of brand love includes frequent thought and use, thereby making the brand-consumer relationship legitimate. Importantly, it has been found that customers in positive affect are likely to perform customer citizenship behavior [21], while the identification between customers and a firm is also positively associated with customers' extra-role behavior (e.g., recommending products) [56].

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Reproductive imagination is positively associated with parasocial love with an airline brand involved in sponsoring charitable causes.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Productive imagination has a positive influence on parasocial love with an airline brand involved in sponsoring charitable causes.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Creative imagination has a positive influence on parasocial love with an airline brand involved in sponsoring charitable causes.*

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Parasocial love with a CSR brand is positively associated with customer citizenship behavior.*

3. Method

3.1. Measures

We formulated a questionnaire for a survey comprising the following three sections: Five constructs in the hypothesized model, a demographic section, and a section related to airline use. All items for measuring the five constructs were modified with reference to existing research wherein the reliability and validity of items were confirmed. Moral imagination comprises three sub-dimensions,

namely, productive imagination, reproductive imagination, and creative imagination. To measure moral imagination from measures, we derived items that were used in the work of Yurtsever [25], which involved three items for productive imagination, six items for reproductive imagination, and five items for creative imagination. To measure parasocial brand love, we adapted eight scale items from Fetscherin's [15] parasocial love scale. We measured the customer citizenship behavior construct, by using three items adapted from Yi and Gong [21] and Yi, Natarajan, and Gong [55]. We scored all 25 items in our questionnaire using a five-point Likert-type scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree." In order to make sure that the flow of the questionnaire is efficient and effective, a pilot survey was conducted. We approached a group of five experts, consisting of academics and postgraduate students who are knowledgeable about tourism and the airline industry, and asked them to try to answer all the questions included in the initial questionnaire. We received their responses along with associated feedback, particularly on whether the questions included are understandable via e-mail and modified the questionnaire shortly thereafter.

3.2. Data Collection and Sample

We tested the current study's conceptual model using data collected through the survey. A web-based survey firm, Qualtrics, invited respondents by using their partners to access representative data. In order to help the firm recruit the respondents, we provided background information on the current research along with specific screening questions. To choose respondents who were more knowledgeable about the charitable-cause sponsorship programs of American full-service airline companies, we provided a definition and specific examples of airline cause sponsorships. Additionally, we asked the following three initial questions to determine whether participants were qualified:

- First, we provided the following statement: "Please select every airline on which you have traveled in the past" along with a list of the US-based full-service airline companies conducting charitable-cause sponsorships, and we requested that participants choose multiple-choice answers. Unqualified participants who chose "none of these" were automatically screened out from responding to further questions.
- Second, we provided the statement "Please specify the one you think is the most concerned about sponsoring causes," and we asked participants to write down one airline brand name. Individuals were allowed to select the statement "I have no idea" as an answer.
- Finally, we screened out individuals who answered "no" to the following question: "With regards to the airline brand in your response to Q2, are you aware of charity involvement by the airline-sponsoring causes?"

As this study aimed to contact any person who has ever flown on American full-service airlines, the total population is unknown. However, the target population should include anyone who has ever traveled on one of the twenty-seven US-based full-service airlines in the past, and who has acquired some knowledge about their environmental and/or social sponsorship. The chosen twenty-seven airlines included: American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, United Airlines, Hawaiian Airlines, Virgin America, Alaska Airlines, JetBlue, Sun Country Airlines, Endeavour Air, Blue Moon, Ameristar, Compass Airlines, American Eagle, United Express, Envoy Air, ExpressJet, GoJet Airlines, Miami Air International, Piedmont, PSA Airlines, Republic Airline, Shuttle America, Songbird Airways, Skywest Airlines, Trans States Airlines, Swift Air, and Ultimate Air. Thus, with regard to the first screening question above, respondents were asked whether they flew on one of the 27 airlines identified as American full-service airlines.

Qualtrics identified respondents who are eligible for the study based on the three screening questions and they got paid pending the quality of their responses to the questions. The data was collected for two days in April in 2017; it took two days, one day for initial data collection and another for the rest of the data collection, to complete collecting responses. The average time taken to complete the survey was 12 min. Additionally, the investigators have checked the quality of responses after all

the data was collected. The total sample size was 422, which seems to be adequate to represent the population of the current study, as suggested by Krejcie and Morgan [57] and the confidence level of the current study was set at 95%.

The participants in the survey were characterized as presented in Table 1. Females (50.9%) were slightly better represented than males (49.1%). A total of 39.8%, 28.0%, 14.5%, 15.1% were aged 20–29 years, 30–39 years, 40–49 years, and above 50 years, respectively. The dominant ethnicity was Caucasian (62.1%), and the majority of respondents (about 65%) possessed a college degree or a higher qualification. A total of 20.1%, 23.9%, 21.1%, and 13.7% of the participants reported an annual income of US\$20,000–US\$40,000, US\$40,000–60,000, US\$60,000–US\$80,000, and over US\$100,000.

Table 1. Profile of respondents.

| Characteristics | Categories | Frequency (N) | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Gender | Male | 207 | 49.1 |
| | Female | 215 | 50.9 |
| Age | 20 | 11 | 2.6 |
| | 20–29 | 168 | 39.8 |
| | 30–39 | 118 | 28.0 |
| | 40–49 | 61 | 14.5 |
| | Older than 50 | 64 | 15.1 |
| Ethnicity | Caucasian | 262 | 62.1 |
| | Hispanic/Latino | 34 | 8.1 |
| | African-American | 75 | 17.8 |
| | Asian American | 34 | 8.1 |
| | Other | 17 | 4.0 |
| Level of Education | Some high school | 6 | 1.4 |
| | High school graduate | 143 | 33.9 |
| | College or university graduate | 235 | 55.7 |
| | Post-graduate | 38 | 9.0 |
| Income level (Annual income) | Under \$20,000 | 46 | 10.9 |
| | \$20,000–less than \$40,000 | 85 | 20.1 |
| | \$40,000–less than \$60,000 | 101 | 23.9 |
| | \$60,000–less than \$80,000 | 89 | 21.1 |
| | \$80,000–less than \$100,000 | 43 | 10.2 |
| | Over \$100,000 | 58 | 13.7 |

4. Results

4.1. Measurement Model

We analyzed the data using SPSS 23 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) and AMOS 23 software. In order to assess the reliability and validity of the constructs and measurement items, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted based on Gerbing and Anderson's [58] recommendation. The measurement model's goodness-of-fit indices were acceptable ($\chi^2 = 553.320$, $\chi^2/df = 2.088$ at the $p < 0.001$, GFI = 0.918, CFI = 0.967, IFI = 0.967, TLI = 0.961, and RMSEA = 0.043), based on the suggestion of Hair et al. [59].

Results of the CFA revealed that all measurement items are valid since (1) the standardized factor loadings were substantially high, ranging from 0.521 to 0.854 (see Table 2), and (2) all constructs' average variance extracted (AVE) values, as indicated in Table 3, exceeded the threshold of 0.5 [59]. Therefore, convergent validity was confirmed. Discriminant validity can be established if the AVE value of each construct is greater than the squared correlation coefficient of pairs [60]. Otherwise, a chi-square difference test should be conducted between a free model and a mixed model of two concepts to re-examine it [61]. In this study, two pairs of factors (productive and reproductive

imaginations and the parasocial brand love-customer citizenship behavior) were tested. It was found that each factor is a distinctive concept, thus confirming the discriminant validity. As shown in Table 4, additionally, the composite reliability of all constructs surpassed the cutoff of 0.7, showing strong internal consistency [60].

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis: Items and loadings.

| Items | Standardized Loading |
|---|----------------------|
| Productive imagination | |
| I find it easy to put myself in the place of others. | 0.677 |
| I have the ability to compare and contrast my own culture with other cultures. | 0.724 |
| My moral imagination increases my ability to understand morally relevant situations. | 0.722 |
| Reproductive imagination | |
| I have the ability to recognize which ideas are morally worth pursuing and which are not. | 0.738 |
| I would identify various factors that could affect my moral decisions. | 0.704 |
| My imagination would enable me to look at myself from another person's point of view. | 0.659 |
| I can create alternative solutions to new situations that need moral consideration. | 0.712 |
| I could imagine how some decisions are informed in order to negotiate morally complex situations. | 0.748 |
| My moral imagination would help me anticipate unstated social factors on information that I receive related to moral decisions. | 0.713 |
| Creative imagination | |
| I would take moral responsibility for what I imagine in terms of affecting others. | 0.748 |
| The amount and diversity of my social knowledge would be sufficient to make moral decisions. | 0.816 |
| I would be able to imagine similarities and differences between similar situations where a certain rule or law applied. | 0.836 |
| I am able to conceive of moral standards that should be in place within a system. | 0.815 |
| I like to imagine the consequences of moral issues that would call for unusual facts. | 0.743 |
| Parasocial brand love | |
| This airline brand makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend. | 0.747 |
| I see this airline brand as a neutral, down-to-earth person. | 0.722 |
| I look forward to using this airline brand. | 0.758 |
| If this airline brand appeared on the media (e.g., internet, TV, etc.), I would watch it. | 0.725 |
| This airline brand seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know. | 0.781 |
| If there was a story about this airline brand in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it. | 0.657 |
| I miss seeing this airline brand when it's not available to book. | 0.672 |
| I find this airline brand to be attractive. | 0.706 |
| Customer citizenship behavior | |
| I make constructive suggestions to this airline on how to improve its service. | 0.521 |
| I give this airline my full cooperation. | 0.709 |
| I say positive things about this airline to others. | 0.854 |

Note: All factor loadings were significant at $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and associated measures.

| | Construct | Mean (SD) | AVE | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|-------------------------------|--------------|-------|--------------------|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1 | Productive imagination | 3.93 (0.778) | 0.501 | 0.767 ^a | 0.876 ^b | 0.189 | 0.63 | 0.652 |
| 2 | Reproductive imagination | 3.92 (0.701) | 0.508 | 0.767 ^c | 0.880 | 0.174 | 0.624 | 0.659 |
| 3 | Creative Imagination | 2.64 (1.025) | 0.628 | 0.035 | 0.030 | 0.849 | 0.041 | 0.006 |
| 4 | Parasocial brand love | 3.86 (0.779) | 0.521 | 0.396 | 0.389 | 0.001 | 0.892 | 0.846 |
| 5 | Customer Citizenship Behavior | 3.83 (0.769) | 0.501 | 0.425 | 0.434 | 0.000 | 0.715 | 0.757 |

Note: SD = Standard deviation; AVE = average variance extracted; GFI = goodness-of-fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; IFI = incremental fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; ^a Composite reliability is indicated along the diagonal; ^b Correlations are above the diagonal; ^c Squared correlations are below the diagonal. Goodness-of-fit indices: $\chi^2 = 553.320$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.088$, GFI = 0.918; CFI = 0.967; IFI = 0.967; TLI = 0.961; RMSEA = 0.043.

Table 4. Standardized parameter estimates for the structural model.

| | Paths | Standardized Estimate | t-Value | Support |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|----------|---------|
| Productive imagination | → Parasocial brand love | 0.372 | 2.467 * | support |
| Reproductive imagination | → Parasocial brand love | 0.337 | 2.331 * | support |
| Creative imagination | → Parasocial brand love | 0.096 | 2.152 * | Support |
| Parasocial brand love | → Customer citizenship behavior | 0.853 | 9.293 ** | Support |

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

4.2. Hypothesis Testing

To verify the hypotheses in the proposed model, SEM was applied. The hypothesized model provided a substantially acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 553.320$, $\chi^2/df = 2.088$ at the $p < 0.001$, GFI = 0.918, CFI = 0.967, IFI = 0.967, TLI = 0.961, and RMSEA = 0.043) [59].

The relationships among constructs were determined through data analysis, as provided in Table 4. Specifically, all four causal relationships in the hypothesized model were significant. Consistent with the anticipation that productive imagination is a precursor in positively inducing parasocial brand love, the path coefficient from productive imagination to parasocial brand love was found to be positive and significant ($\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.05$). This result supported Hypothesis 1 (H1). In accordance with the expectation of the positive relationship between reproductive imagination and parasocial brand love, the path of reproductive imagination and parasocial brand love was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.337$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 (H2) was also supported. The hypothesized notion that creative imagination has a positive effect on parasocial brand love was found to be significant ($\beta = 0.096$, $p < 0.05$). This finding provided support for Hypothesis 3 (H3). Moreover, the relationship of parasocial brand love with customer citizenship behavior was determined. As predicted, the linkage between parasocial brand love and customer citizenship behavior was significantly positive ($\beta = 0.853$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, Hypothesis 4 (H4) was supported.

5. Discussion

This study analyzed the consumer data from 422 travelers who flew on full-service airlines operating in the United States (excluding low-cost carriers) and who were aware of the airlines' involvement in sponsorship of charitable causes in order to examine the relationships between moral

imagination, including reproductive, productive, and creative imaginations, and parasocial brand love and customer citizenship behavior. Delving into the idea that imagination plays an important role in human–brand relationships, this study provides insights into why some individuals have a closer relationship with brands involved in charitable cause sponsorships than the others, developing a one-sided parasocial relationship of brand love and spurring customer citizenship behavior toward the firms.

The current study supports the importance of imagination in the context of airline cause sponsorship. The importance of moral imagination lies in the recognition of the problem; as Buchholz and Rosenthal [8] (p. 313) expressed, “a problem cannot be stated until it is felt.” Drawing from this perspective, several researchers have argued that the role of imagination lies at the heart of moral imagination. Likewise, Mkono [2] highlighted “a capacity for reflexivity,” wherein the aspect of using imagination is stressed, leading tourists to an “ethical, vigilance and moral imagination” (p. 215). The authors found that reflexive tourists tend to interrogate their personal misconceptions and transform the self by modifying the preconceptions of the given slum tourism context. In exploring the role of imagination, the current study has extended the study context to sponsorship communication among travelers, airlines, and other related stakeholders eliciting sponsorship response. As suggested by Du et al. [62], there are many things to be considered for customers to perceive corporate sponsorship in a positive way, spawning attitudes, attributions, purchase loyalty, and advocacy, and viewing the companies as good companies. These may include communication itself (content, message channels), stakeholder characteristics, and company characteristics. The current paper, however, argues that it is more important to ensure positive sponsorship response lies in customers’ ability to elaborate on the sponsorship in such a way that processing mechanics based on the associated information relating to sponsorship and the sponsor leads to altruistic brand image and sponsor credibility, culminating in cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes through parasocial relationships [63–66]. This is the moment when the construct of moral imagination comes into play. While morally conscious tourists are emergent in the tourism context [2,3,67], a recent study found that reflexive tourists can initiate a process of understanding ethical dimensions by identifying differences in perspective between the tourist and community, wherein it is sometimes difficult to identify the best option for ethical problems—for instance, in the context of the different, nuanced context for slum tourism [2]. In connecting moral tourists and their interactions with brands, the current study has demonstrated the positive influence of moral imagination on parasocial brand love.

Specifically, the current study has found the positive influence of reproductive imagination ($\beta = 0.337, p < 0.05$), productive imagination ($\beta = 0.372, p < 0.05$), and creative imagination ($\beta = 0.096, p < 0.05$) on parasocial brand love. The aforementioned findings indicate that the travelers who have the ability to show “reproductive activity of the imagination in memory” [38] (p. 469) in relation to the moral issue, revise their schema, identify new possibilities with a problem reframed in a different way, [29,68], and create solutions to ethical problems are more likely to fall in parasocial love with an airline brand involved in the sponsorship of environmental or social charitable causes. Importantly, concerning reproductive and productive imagination, Kant argued that people can use faculties of sensibility in the presence and absence of an object [38]. Additionally, according to Schmidt [38], as far as productive imagination is concerned, Kant emphasized that people are likely to use imagination, thereby producing “the fictional representations” (p. 469) through transcendental operation of the imagination, whereas they use memory to go through empirical operation of the imagination. Given that customers’ capabilities of memory and imagination for understanding the moral reality behind the cause-related marketing are likely to produce a cognitive process involving images, thoughts, sensations, and emotions, they can reach the point of parasocial brand love, described as “a one-sided relationship where one party knows greatly about the other, but the other knows nothing,” as per Fetscherin [15] (p. 431). As articulated by Moberg and Seabright [22], imaginative decision-makers (e.g., travelers) who can reframe ethical problems and consider different perspectives (relating to the airline brand they flew and its reported sponsorship activities), rather than being influenced by their

own schema, are more likely to produce empathy for affected parties in a moral situation in consumers' minds based on evidence. Hence, these customers may evaluate the associated sponsorship programs and the sponsor thoroughly, further developing the relationship. Research findings are consistent with previous parasocial relationship/interaction research, which has found that empathizing and perspective-taking abilities lead to parasocial relationships [52,69,70]. Furthermore, prior research has demonstrated that consumers respond to the perceived immoral brands, especially, when they feel high empathy, measured as empathic concern and perspective taking, and when consumers' identities are incongruent with the brand image [71,72]. Specifically, Romani et al. [72] highlighted the influence of customers' ability to consider a given situation in the place of others on their anti-brand activism. Although some research has assumed consumers' ability to recognize moral problems based on moral and non-moral brand scenarios [72], the current study confirmed the important aspects of moral imagination in morally charged situations, wherein perspective taking and empathy toward the moral situation need to be at work, as Moberg and Seabright [22] theorized.

Finally, the current study has confirmed the positive relationship between parasocial brand love and customer citizenship behavior in the context of airline cause sponsorship ($\beta = 0.853, p < 0.01$). This finding is well supported by existing studies. Recent studies have found that parasocial interaction (e.g., a feeling of proximity, similarity, and attraction) produces corresponding benefits, spawning valuable brand experiences and brand equity along with quality relationships and producing well-being [18,53]. It has also been empirically confirmed that when people begin to love a brand, they express willingness to behave in ways in which their behavior is helpful to a firm (e.g., loyalty, word-of-mouth, and resistance to negative information) [13,14,73]. Thus, although previous research on the citizenship behavior has investigated the brand distinctiveness, emotional intelligence (i.e., an ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions), customer-based corporate reputation, and brand commitment, as its antecedents in diverse settings [19,20,74,75], the current study adds to the current understanding customer citizenship behavior as an important outcome of parasocial love. While there is a limited amount of research exploring the antecedent of customer citizenship behavior in human–brand relationship, the current study has confirmed the importance of developing parasocial relationships, given their long-term positive influences, such as the customer citizenship behavior.

6. Conclusions

While a for-profit organization and its sponsorship of (sports) events, including mega-events and festivals, have been in the spotlight previously [76,77], there is a growing body of research investigating the commercial organizations' sponsorship of non-sports related causes (e.g., [78–80]). Additionally, recent psychology, business, and tourism studies focus on the role of imaginative and creative capabilities in addressing moral issues [2,8], particularly in relation to human–brand relationships [9,12]. However, to the best of the knowledge of the authors, the relationship between consumers' ability to morally imagine parasocial love with a brand and their citizenship behavior has remained unexplored; in addressing this research gap, the current study has provided theoretical and practical implications, which are detailed below.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

First, it has been well-documented how customers use their memories and respond to stimuli containing advertising sponsorship information after being exposed to the sponsorship stimuli, and subsequently exhibit awareness of sponsorship-related messages (e.g., recall, memory, and association) and effective and/or behavioral responses toward a brand [64,81–84]. However, while it has been previously found that airlines' cause-sponsorship actions encompass several different dimensions of CSR activities (e.g., community/environmental charity and donations) [85,86], how airline travelers use their imaginations when they develop brand knowledge about charitable cause sponsorships remains unclear. Although the role of imagination has been noticed in research investigating the relationship between objects and consumers, it has largely been ignored in human–brand relationships.

There are few studies investigating the role of imagination in the context of consumers using material and/or branded products. Huang and Mitchell [12] highlighted the role of consumers' imaginations from the perspective of parasocial relationships in recognizing brand relationships via the application of metaphor to brands, which, in turn, enhances a perception of brand relationship quality, whereas Ferreira and Scaraboto [9] evidenced the role of consumer emotional energy in blogs and imagination in mediating material interaction between consumers and objects. The current study has expanded on the previous studies by highlighting the important role of imagination in understanding meaning manifested in the brand and its relationship with brand relationship quality and further provided an insight into the positive influence of various dimensions (reproductive, productive, and creative) of imagination on brand love. This study has provided the understanding of parasocial relationships with airline brands associated with environmental and/or social charity causes [15]. Specifically, while previous studies have ascribed the antecedents of brand love based on interpersonal theories to factors influencing the identification of the inner and/or social self, including self-congruity, self-expressive brand, and brand identification, and others have examined the perceived brand qualities based on the brand experience (e.g., value, uniqueness, and prestige) and interpersonal/social factors (e.g., gratitude for service offered, brand personality traits, sense of community) [50,87–92], the reflexive ability of the consumers, especially moral imagination, to predict brand love with moral brands have been understudied. The current study has confirmed the link between the ability to be reproductive, productive, and creative in terms of moral issues by using memory and imagination and parasocial brand love with the sponsoring brand.

Second, expanding on recent research findings on the positive and negative consequences of parasocial relationships, including the cognitive and affective states of consumers [18,42], the current study bolsters the arguments for the positive influence of parasocial brand love, which is in line with the work of Fetscherin [15], which found brand loyalty, purchase intention, and word-of-mouth as outcomes of parasocial brand love. Although a growing body of research has explored the role of parasocial relationships with brands (e.g., the work by Fetscherin [15]), the current study extended those findings by adding parasocial interactions with brands (e.g., measurement items of parasocial brand love, such as "this airline brand makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend," "I miss seeing this airline brand," and "I find this airline brand to be attractive") and by examining how developing feelings of love is likely to influence customers' willingness to sacrifice on behalf of companies.

6.2. Practical Implications

This study has produced significant insights for management, aiming to help airline brands sponsoring charitable causes. First, the relationship between moral imagination and parasocial love with the brands involved in the sponsorship of charitable causes illustrates the need for management to understand consumers' capabilities for interacting with brands. The current study suggests that management should not overlook travelers' abilities to use memory and imagination in highly complex tourism systems in its efforts to develop consumers' love for their brand that is supporting environmental and/or social causes. Management also needs to diversify a range of channels wherein customers can interact with brands and develop the one-sided relationship; for instance, companies may be interested in creating a third place (i.e., participating in exhibitions) [93,94] to transform customers' misconceptions, if any, regarding a brand's image. Additionally, the use of metaphors in advertisements about airlines' cause sponsorships is encouraged to inspire customers' imaginations, ensuring that they can identify and consider morally charged situations—for instance, environmental impacts, investments in renewable energy, nature conservation, and helping communities (e.g., partnerships with charities and/or organizations, such as Red Cross, UNICEF, and American Cancer Society, military charities). Second, given the positive influence of parasocial brand love and customer citizenship behavior, frontline employees need to be easily approachable and thereby allow travelers to provide suggestions. Importantly, the aforementioned third place needs to identify potential customers

who are likely to develop feelings of love based on parasocial interactions and to provide them with opportunities to get engaged with the firms. For instance, a leading innovative coffee brand illustrates a way of engaging customers through various virtual platforms in its website and through its My Starbucks Idea in social platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Starbucks Rewards applications on mobile phones [95,96].

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

In response to the research gap in the literature connecting travelers' moral imagination, human–brand relations, and citizenship behavior, the current study has further paved the way for the “moral turn” in tourism research. The current study focused on full-service airlines operating in America (excluding low-cost carriers) by asking travelers who have flown one specific airline and who have been aware of its charity involvement (i.e., sponsorship of environmental and social causes) about their ability to imagine, in morally charged situations, their relationship with the brand and willingness to help the firm. The current study's contribution is not without its limitations. However, these limitations open avenues for future research. First, the results of this study were dependent on the sample's demographic information (e.g., country of origin) and the time of data collection. It has been reported that 25% of 2306 adult Americans who participated in the Harris Poll felt responsible for getting involved in relevant issues and causes, whereas just 17% of them felt the moral responsibility to participate in prosocial activities, such as donations to charities, with a decreased percentage in 2014 compared to 2007 [97,98]. Hence, the application of this research's findings to other regional and demographic contexts (e.g., cross-cultural study, as suggested in the study of Go and Kim [99]), in a particular window of time should be made with caution, followed by considering other factors influencing the understanding of cause-related marketing. Second, moral imagination is largely investigated with regard to various ethical situations where multiple ethical agents are involved [33,34,37]. Therefore, a further research focus should also include whether the current study's findings are still relevant in consideration of multiple stakeholders' perspectives, including those of airlines, individual passengers, nonprofit organizations, and the most-affected parties (e.g., patients, people in disaster-stricken communities, governments, and similar parties). In this manner, travel and tourism researchers may investigate tourists' moral imagination being employed in a specific context of moral dilemmas.

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