

The influence of brand experience on brand equity: the mediating role of brand love in a retail fashion brand

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Abstract. *Based on a retail fashion brand, this article investigates how brand experience affects brand equity when it is mediated by brand love. Actual consumers are well-informed, demanding, and prefer brands that can surprise them over time. As such, offering emotional signals, meaning development, and strategic planning are critical to success when it comes to building strong and enduring relationships with customers. Based on 560 responses to a survey conducted in-store, this study tests the influence of brand experience on overall brand equity, through brand love, using a model of structural equations. The findings imply that brand experience dimensions play a different role in eliciting emotional reactions, such as brand love, which helps to reinforce brand equity. Research on the paths to consumer-based brand equity in the retail environment is still scarce. Exploring this pathway using the customer-brand relationship theory and integrating brand experience and brand love has fascinating potential, but it is still unexplored. Finally, another strength of this research is the test of brand experience dimensions (sensory, intellectual, affective, and behavioral), thus offering more operational insights for theory and practice. The results are based on the study of one brand in one specific country, which limits generalizations. Managers should pay special attention to the emotional impulses provided by a brand to its customers. Building on these triggers via experiences strengthens strong emotional reactions like brand love, which contributes to brand equity.*

Keywords: brand experience, brand love, brand equity, retail, fashion.

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Introduction

In mature and competitive markets, the pace of changes and improvements in products and services is high. Consumers are very attentive and informed individuals and have also changed the way they relate to brands. The "consumer-brand relationship" (CBR) theory has long pushed for building strong and enduring relations with customers (Fournier,

1998). The main notion behind this theory is that brands should move away from simply reinforcing product and service functional characteristics. Instead, they should create new methods to connect with customers by including more emotional cues in the meaning generation, elaboration, and reinforcement processes (Fournier, 1998). In this paradigm, brands should contribute to positive customer experiences (Schobeiri et al., 2018).

These processes may be thought of as the consumer's collection of experiences, as they suggest a series of important brand and customer behaviors. The idea of "experience" isn't new either. The concept "experience economy" was coined by Pine and Gilmore (1998), representing the idea in which products will become insignificant and their benefits will be usual and anticipated. The experiences delivered by the products and services would be used to differentiate them. As a result, experiential and emotional advantages would drive the economy. In this context, it is accepted that a brand is something more than its image and/or graphic or visual quality: it is the sum of all the buyer's positive and negative impressions over time while facing branded products, prices, distribution, communication, and people (Kapferer, 2003). In this process, the brand's collection of stimuli serves as a significant root for inward and outward customer reactions, referred to as brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009; Schoiberi et al., 2018).

The activities of sense development, refinement, and support, which may be embodied in the idea of brand experience, benefit the vigor and longevity of the connection between brands and consumers. Fournier (1998) defined brand relationship quality as the combination of multiple positive experiences, including emotional and socio-emotive ties (self-connection and passion/love), behavioral connections (commitment and interdependence), and favorable cognitive beliefs (brand partner quality and intimacy).

Several of these favorable emotions have received attention in the literature. However, scholars have only recently been interested in the idea of love/passion (Ahuvia et al., 2014; Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2014; Palusuk et al., 2019). Despite other important analogies in interpersonal love and love in consumer contexts, the love a consumer develops for a brand is the outcome of a deep emotional bond that can be far more powerful than simply like (Ahuvia, 2005; Palusuk et al., 2019).

The interest in brand love goes beyond theory and research; it is also interesting for managers (Palusuk et al., 2019). Positive word-of-mouth (WOM), repurchase intentions, and brand loyalty have all been linked to brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Some research suggest that brand love is important for a variety of marketing and consumer outcomes, as well as its connection to brand equity (Gómez and Pérez, 2018; Iglesias et al., 2018).

Using CBR theory, this article analyzes the role of brand experience in brand love, as well as how this connection helps to strengthen brand equity.

Literature review

Brand experience

Consumers develop cognitive and affective responses to brands through experiences (Chen-Yu, 2016). Brand experience is a multidimensional construct that may be defined as sensations, thoughts, cognitions, and behavioral reactions elicited by brand-related cues (such as communication, settings, and packaging), representing a customer response and commitment with a brand (Schmitt, 1999; Brakus et al., 2009; Yasin et al., 2019). The notion of brand experience transcends the definitions of fun, fantasy, or feelings referred to by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982).

Schmitt (1999) differentiates brand experience from several other brand conceptualizations. Among them are the concepts of brand attachment, brand involvement, brand attitudes, brand personality, and customer delight because brand experience fosters strong connection through emotional responses with significant meaning for consumers. Based on Schmitt's (1999) experiential modules, Brakus et al. (2009) developed a four-dimensional scale to assess brand experience (sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral). The concept underlying this operationalization of brand experience is that consumption does not occur through an emotionally detached like or dislike, since when customers encounter the brand, they get engaged, hence increasing their relationship with brands.

The operational concept of brand experience proposed by Brakus et al. (1999) has been used in several ways. Although some research measures brand experience as a latent construct (e.g. Iqbal et al., 2020; Prentice et al., 2019), there is evidence that the dimensions of brand experience have different influences on several constructs (e.g. Huang, 2017; Ferreira et al., 2019; Pina and Dias, 2020; Rodrigues and Brandao, 2021). Thus, understanding brand experience dimensions may be more insightful for theoretical and practical reasons.

Brand experience has been used in many different settings like product, service, and even place brands (Kumar and Kaushik, 2020), but also as an antecedent of several brand and consumer outcomes such as WOM (e.g. Rodrigues and Brandao, 2021), destination brand engagement (e.g. Kumar and Kaushik, 2020), brand satisfaction (e.g. Rizvi et al., 2020), customer engagement (e.g. Prentice et al., 2019), among others. Recently, brand experience has also been considered by research as an antecedent of brand love. This relation was explored in several contexts and with different consumers. The findings reveal that brand experience is systematically a strong antecedent in explaining the formation of brand love (Nikhashemi et al., 2019; Huang, 2017; Iqbal, et al., 2020; Safeer et al., 2020). But, despite this evidence, and with few exceptions (e.g. Ferreira et al., 2019; Dima & Vasilache, 2016; Nikhashemi et al., 2019; Rodrigues and Brandao, 2021), there is almost no research and support for the brand experience-brand love relation in the retail sector, and virtually none on the fashion retail industry.

The development of new information technologies gave rise to new opportunities for retail brands to offer new, different experiences to consumers. In this context, the online brand experience can be understood as "an individual's internal subjective response to the contact with the online brand" (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013, p. 22). Online brand experience has also an important role to play in influencing consumers' feelings, attitudes, and behaviors. Research shows that online brand experience can influence several consumer-based outcomes, such as brand attitude (Rezaei and Valaei, 2017; Torres and Augusto, 2019), satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013), brand loyalty (Khan et al., 2016), brand trust (Khan and Rahman, 2016), and brand attachment (Rezaei and Valaei, 2017).

Although the influence of brand experience on consumer-based outcomes finds general support in the literature, the influence of different dimensions of brand experience (Brakus et al., 1999) in the online environment seems to be different when compared with the offline physical environment. For example, Huang (2017) investigated the influence of sensory, affective, and cognitive experiences on brand awareness and brand loyalty, when mediated by relational experience, and found that affective brand experiences are more relevant in the in-store environment, while sensory brand experiences are more significant in the online store.

Based on the theoretical framework offered by the "consumer-brand relationship" approach, on previous research on the brand experience-brand love relation, and on the use of brand experience dimensions, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1a: Sensory (a), affective (b), intellectual (c), and behavioral (d) brand experience will positively affect brand love in the in-store environment.

Brand love and brand equity

For decades, researchers have studied how consumers form like and/or dislike attitudes toward brands. In the past few years, a burgeoning interest grew among both practitioners and academics in consumers' love for brands (Batra et al., 2012).

Previous research suggests that pleasing customers may not be enough to ensure long-term success in today's mature and competitive marketplaces (Carrol and Ahuvia, 2006). Brand love is a trendy topic right now, as consumers who love a brand will purchase, spend, and speak more favorably about the brand, potentially improving brand loyalty (Batra et al., 2012; Albert and Meruka, 2013; Hapsar, 2018).

In consumer research, the first authors to approach the concept of brand love were Sternberg (1986), Shimp and Madden (1988), Ahuvia (2005), and Fournier (1998), considering love as one of the key issues for consumers to develop a relationship with a brand based on hedonic factors (Albert et al., 2009; Batra et al., 2012; Ahuvia et al., 2014).

According to the idea of the inter-personal relationship (Fetscherin, 2014; Hess et al., 2011), love may be described as an attitude held by one person toward another, involving dispositions to feel, think, and behave in a certain manner (Albert and Merunka, 2013). Following this reasoning, brand love can be understood as a construct that describes the passionate feelings and emotional attachment that satisfied consumers have for brands. This interpretation of brand love is based on both affective judgment and long-term relationships, allowing consumers to develop a passionate emotional connection toward a specific brand (Whang et al., 2004).

Falling in love with a brand can lead to romantic love for the brand, encouraging consumer engagement (Junaid et al., 2019), brand commitment (Dam, 2020) and loyalty (Huang, 2017; Iqbal et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). The literature also shows evidence that brand love is a way to promote positive WOM (Dam, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). The bottom line of the positive impact of brand love is the predisposition it creates in consumers to pay for premium prices (Ahuvia, 2005; Bairrada et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2020).

Being able to build a strong brand with considerable or significant equity is considered a very important market asset for business (Iglesias et al., 2018). Brand equity can be understood as the liabilities and assets that a specific brand holds (Aaker, 1991). Such assets may include brand knowledge (Keller, 1993), brand identification (Datta et al., 2017), and brand associations (Kamakura and Russell, 1993), among others.

A considerable number of brand equity models developed in recent years share some basic assumptions about brand equity: (1) the power of a brand lies in consumers' minds, as a result of what they have experienced, learned, and felt about it; (2) brand equity can result from the added value or benefit perceived by consumers, inducing thoughts, words, and actions, such as repurchase intention; (3) there are different ways that customers' added value can affect the company, namely in terms of higher revenue and lower costs (Leone et al., 2006). Taking these assumptions into consideration, brand equity can be understood as a multi-dimensional consumer-centered conceptualization. The consumer-based brand equity can be understood as the 'consumer's' different response between a focal brand and an unbranded product when both have the same level of marketing stimuli and product attributes" (Yoo and Donthu, 2001, p. 1).

Consumer-based brand equity can be formed from a wide array of factors. Recent literature has found positive effects of brand - managed factors such as brand experience (Pina and Dias, 2020), customer-based attitudes and behaviors - like customer brand engagement (Algharabat et al., 2020; Machado et al., 2019) -, and even online factors - such as social media marketing communication (Zubair et al., 2020), perceived social media marketing activities (Koay et al., 2020), online reviews (Brzozowska-Woś and Schivinski, 2019), and e-WOM (Sijoria et al., 2019). Only recently has brand love attracted the attention of researchers as an important factor in determining consumer-based brand equity (Cho et al., 2018; Machado et al., 2019; Cho and Hwang, 2020).

Although the literature is more concerned with the antecedents, consumer-based brand equity can lead to several positive outcomes. For example, strong brand equity can enhance several consumer-related behaviors such as consumer brand attitude (Liu et al., 2017), purchase intention (Slaton et al., 2020), and the willingness to pay premium prices (Augusto and Torres, 2018). Additionally, brand equity can also have positive outcomes for businesses such as increased market share (Zarantonello, 2020). Although relatively scarce in number, the literature is consensual on the importance of brand equity for business success.

From the preceding review of the literature, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H2: Brand love will have a positive impact on brand equity

Methods

The primary purpose of this research is to look at the relationship between brand experience and brand equity in the fashion retail industry when mediated by brand love. Although research on brand experience has steadily grown in the last decade or so, there is still a lack of understanding of the importance of brand experience dimensions in the brand and consumer-related outcomes. Accordingly, the specific goal of this paper is to contribute to this gap by investigating the role of brand experience dimensions in brand equity, mediated by brand love.

According to the goals of the paper and the hypotheses formulated, the following theoretical model is tested:

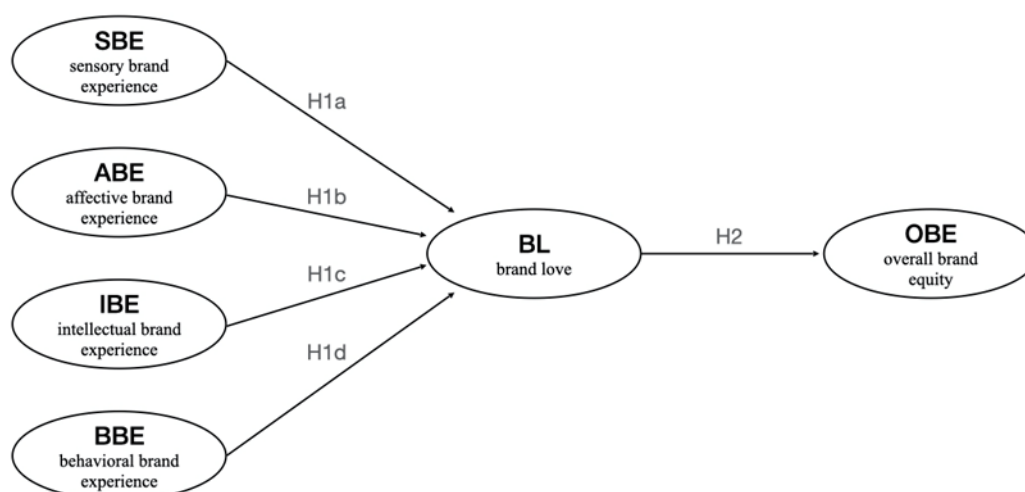


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Source: Authors' research.

Participants

The participants were customers of a specific retail brand of fashion accessories with several stores in Portugal. The sample is made up of individuals who visited and made at least one buy in one of the retail brand stores in February 2020 and agreed to answer the questionnaire (n=560). Taking into account that the store registered 21,352 buys (according to sales tickets), the margin error is 4.1%, for a 95% confidence interval. The non-response rate was 9.8%.

Sample and survey administration

A questionnaire with four sections was used to collect data. Each section was devoted to each of the main constructs (brand experience, brand love, brand equity) and to the demographics. Data were gathered in person, in-store. Customers were invited to answer the questionnaire when leaving the store. As such, the sampling method is non-probabilistic. A convenience sample of 25 individuals received a preliminary version of the questionnaire. The pre-test analysis enabled for minor improvements in the questionnaire form, but no changes were made to the primary variables.

Most of the participants are female (90.2%), aged between 16 and 45 years old (86.8%), and are single (64.5%). 41.1% report having a college degree, while 37.7% report having a high school degree. The large majority of respondents report a monthly income of less than 1500 euros. The brand is a fashion retail brand targeted at women between 25 and 45 years old. This helps to explain the apparent sample bias.

Measures

The main concepts were assessed using validated measures found in the literature. The scale formulated by Brakus et al. (2009) was used to assess brand experience. The scale is made up of four attributes, namely Sensory, Affective, Intellectual, and Behavioral. The 12 items were rated on a 7-point Likert (strongly agree).

Carroll and Ahuvia's measurement of brand love was used. The scale is made of 6 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).

Finally, the Overall Brand Equity (OBE) scale proposed by Yoo and Donthu (2001) was used to measure brand equity. The construct consists of 4 items scored on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree).

Statistical Approach

Data analysis procedures were as follows: (1) confirmatory factor analysis was performed on the scales in order to confirm the structure of the constructs, followed by (2) the test of hypothesis based on a structural equation modeling (SEM). This study follows Churchill (1979) and Bollen (1989) in evaluating the psychometric qualities of the scales, namely the verification of scales' reliability, validity, and dimensionality.

Results

In order to validate the measurement model, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) by the maximum likelihood estimation method in two steps was performed. But before the analysis these were: (1) analysis of normality, multicollinearity, and common method variance and (2) evaluation of reliability and the three types of validity of the constructs.

We verify that the skewness and kurtosis values were both in the suggested ranges (Curran, West, and Finch, 1996), for access to data normality. With variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics for all items varying between 1.53 and 3.57, between the common

cutoff values of 1 and 5, the results show minimal collinearity among the indicators (Chin, 2010).

The Harman test was performed, for all the constructs, and it was verified that there is no common method variance (CMV) problems (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The results were 31.5%, which allows us to conclude that the common-method bias is not a concern in this case. On the other hand, in the CFA where all items were considered in one construct, the adjustment indicators were not as good. However, respondents were not informed of the object of the study. Additionally, respondents were informed about their responses confidentiality and anonymity, and were warned that there were no proper answers (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis – Scales' psychometric qualities

Construct	Items	Convergent Validity	Reliability		
		Factor Loading	a	CR	AVE
SBE	SBE1: SBE2: SBE3:	0,874* 0,856* 0,681*	0,719	0,907	0,770
ABE	ABE1: ABE2: ABE3:	0,877* 0,867* 0,808*	0,803	0,936	0,829
IBE	IBE1: IBE2: IBE3:	0,753* 0,900* 0,802*	0,755	0,917	0,787
BBE	BBE1: BBE2: BBE3:	0,898* 0,894* 0,642*	0,741	0,913	0,781
BL	BL1: BL2: BL3:	0,878* 0,889* 0,909*	0,871	0,956	0,880
OBE	OBE11: OBE12: OBE13: OBE14:	0,858* 0,892* 0,881* 0,860*	0,896	0,959	0,816
		Goodness-of-fit indexes			
		RMSEA	CFI	TLI	IFI
c ² Standardized = 1,895*		0,074	0,828	0,798	0,828

Source: Authors' research.

The final modeling presents a good model fit (Table 1). The χ^2 index may offer unreliable information about model fit, since sample size is known to affect statistics sensitivity. For this reason, the model fit assessment is based on other fit indexes. Since

RMSEA is lower than 0.10, and CFI is higher than 0.90, it is possible to assume that the model has a good fit (Hair et al., 2006).

Convergent validity assesses the validity of latent constructs. Following the criteria proposed by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), all the composite reliabilities are higher than 0.70. The convergent validity of the overall construct is measured by the average variance (AVE), which informs the relative amount of variance of each construct relative to the measurement error. All constructs' AVE is above the threshold value of 0.50, proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Finally, the correlations between the constructs are significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming the theoretical expectations, demonstrating the convergent validity.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity

	SBE	ABE	IBE	BBE	BL	OBE
SBE	0.8775 ^a					
ABE	0.3421*	0.9105 ^a				
IBE	0.3762*	0.2441*	0.8871 ^a			
BBE	0.4321*	0.4121*	0.4401*	0.8837 ^a		
BL	0.3224*	0.3628*	0.3902*	0.2987*	0.9381 ^a	
OBE	0.4112*	0.3009*	0.3226*	0.2258*	0.4008*	0.9033 ^a

^a

Square root of AVE in the diagonal

*Correlation is significant at level 0.01 (bilateral)

Source: Authors' research.

The Cronbach's alfa coefficients were examined for reliability, and they exceeded Nunnally and Bernstein's (1994) criterion value. Convergent and discriminant validity were examined using confirmatory factor analysis, as indicated by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The statistical significance of the t values along with the computed parameters was used to determine the convergent validity. All of the t values are positive and statistically significant, showing the good convergent validity of the scales. Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the average variance extracted by each construct and the shared variance between the construct and all other variables. Since the variance extracted surpassed all combinations of shared variance, the scales demonstrated satisfactory discriminant validity. The condition was satisfied since the AVE for each concept was greater than the squared correlations between all pairs of constructs. The scales then demonstrated good convergent validity. (Table 2).

The second step of the analysis was to set up a structural model reflecting the relationships hypothesized in the theoretical model. The results of the model fit show promising results ($\chi^2_{(141)} = 620,145$, $p < 0,000$, IFI = 0.921, TLI = 0,904, CFI = 0,921, RMSEA = 0,078), indicating a very good model fit. All H1 sub-hypotheses were validated (H1a: SBE is positively related to BL ($g_1 = 0,232$, $p < 0,000$), H1b: ABE has a positive influence on brand love ($g_2 = 0,240$, $p < 0,000$), H1c: IBE has a positive influence on brand love ($g_3 = 0,141$, $p < 0,000$)), except H1d (BBE does not explain brand love ($g_4 = 0,107$, $p < 0,063$)). The hypothesis stating that brand love influences brand equity for consumers visiting a physical store (H2) was also confirmed ($b_1 = 1,039$, $p < 0,000$).

Table 3. Hypotheses Summary

	Hypothesis	Path coefficient	p values	Decision
H1a	<i>Sensory brand experience</i> will positively affect <i>brand love</i> in the in-store environment	0,232	p <0,000	Accept
H1b	<i>Affective brand experience</i> will positively affect <i>brand love</i> in the in-store environment	0,240	p <0,000	Accept
H1c	<i>Intellectual brand experience</i> will positively affect <i>brand love</i> in the in-store environment	0,141	p <0,000	Accept
H1d	<i>Behavioral brand experience</i> will positively affect <i>brand love</i> in the in-store environment	0,107	p < 0,063	Reject
H2	<i>Brand love</i> will positively influence <i>brand equity</i>	1,039	p <0,000	Accept

Source: Authors' research.

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this research was to explore the link between the experience offered by a brand and its brand equity in fashion retail, as mediated by brand love. Furthermore, the influence of brand experience was assessed using the sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral dimensions of brand experience. According to the CBR theory, the experiences provided by a brand are an essential set of activities that can elicit favorable responses in customers. This research study expected that consumers' collection of experiences could elicit strong responses, such as brand love. This experience could subsequently lead to brand equity.

Field study was carried out at a retail fashion brand that operates a network of outlets, providing the proper research set to test the hypotheses suggested. Empirical research used data from a face-to-face survey with customers to test the theoretical model.

The first conclusion is that all brand experience dimensions, except the behavioral brand experience, have a significant and positive influence on brand love. Previous research has indicated that brand experience has an impact on brand love, either as a second-order (Prentice et al., 2019; Iqbal et al., 2020) or as a first-order construct (Huang, 2017; Ferreira et al., 2019; Rodrigues and Brandao, 2021).

Regarding brand experience dimensions, the literature is not conclusive about the impact of different dimensions. Although there is evidence of the importance of all brand experience dimensions to several consumer and brand outcomes (Rodrigues and Brandao, 2021; Safir et al., 2020), there is also some evidence showing that some dimensions fail to prove their influence. For example, the sensory brand experience fails to influence destination brand engagement (Kumar and Kaushik, 2020), the intellectual brand experience fails to influence brand trust on mobile phone brands (Huang, 2017), behavioral and sensory brand experiences fail to influence brand equity of retail consumers after taking a 360° virtual tour to the store (Baek et al., 2020). Finally, Safir et al. (2020) found that for a sample of Asian consumers of global brands, behavioral and intellectual brand experiences had no significant influence on brand love. Hence, the importance of different brand experience dimensions seems to differ according to the context and the constructs being used.

Sensory, affective, and intellectual brand experiences are in the cognitive and affective domains (Brakus et al., 2009). Since brand love can be considered a strong positive

emotional reaction forged by the experiences offered by the brand (Fournier, 1998), the cognitive and affective experiences may be more important for the formation of brand love. Furthermore, following the findings of Baek et al. (2020), behavioral experiences are relevant for the intentions to visit a store when the consumer has the opportunity to have an experience even before visiting the store, namely through virtual resources. This study dealt with a traditional store environment, with no previous stimuli being offered to consumers, which may help explain the lack of importance of behavioral brand experience.

Additionally, the lack of significance of behavioral brand experience may have a theoretical explanation. Following the suggestion of Palusuk et al. (2019), the formation of brand love may be based on different brand love trajectories. One of those trajectories is the "experience-based relationship". This trajectory assumes that brand love is gradually built upon the experiences the consumer collects in the interaction with the brand. As such, brand love is not constant, assuming a growing trend if the experiences are favorable. In this context, the authors suggest that consumers "do not go all the way", maintaining a 'safer distance', and exploring alternatives at least at an early phase of the relationship.

The second conclusion points to the relevance of brand love as a mediator of the relationship between brand experience dimensions and brand equity. Positive and powerful sentiments, such as brand love, are vital in reinforcing brand equity, thus confirming the premises of CBR theory. (Fournier, 1998). Brand love has been investigated as a mediator of several consumer- and brand-related outcomes, either in product or service-based brands. The literature reports that brand love successfully mediates the relation between brand experience and brand loyalty (Huang, 2017), and brand experience and e-WOM (Iqbal et al., 2020), both in mobile phone brands. Also, Liu et al. (2020) report brand love as a significant mediator for lifestyle hotels.

In retail settings, brand love has also been shown to play a relevant role in mediating the path to several positive brand outcomes. Among these, previous studies show that brand love enhances the path to positive WOM (Dam, 2020), satisfaction and loyalty (Ferreira et al., 2019; Slaton, 2020), and willingness to pay more, and continuous purchase intention (Nikhashemi et al., 2019). These pieces of evidence offer support for the mediating role of brand love found in the present research in the context of retail.

There is a scarcity of research on the link between brand love and brand equity. However, some evidence supports that brand love can enhance brand equity in different contexts. For example, in a study of Facebook brand pages, Machado et al. (2019) conclude that brand love positively influences consumer-based brand equity. Mobile phone brand equity also benefits from brand love. This relationship was validated with Samsung mobile phone users in Pakistan (Nawaz et al., 2020) and with the preferred mobile brand of consumers in India (Verma, 2021). But despite these pieces of evidence in several contexts, there is no research examining the relevance of brand love in enhancing the brand equity of a retail fashion brand, making the present research an important contribution.

Implications (theoretical and managerial)

This research has some practical ramifications. The first theoretical contribution is related to adding the combination of brand experience and brand love to the consumer-brand relationship theory. This approach postulates that to develop a durable and strong consumer-brand relationship, it is important to create, elaborate, and reinforce brand meaning (Fournier, 1998). As this research shows, the brand experience can incorporate the mechanisms of meaning creation and reinforcement, while brand love expresses a durable and strong relationship with the brand.

Other important implications and contributions are related to consumer-based brand equity formation in the retail environment. As it was previously described, research on brand equity in the retail industry remains scarce. As such, this research makes a relevant contribution by offering a path to consumer-based brand equity. Finally, this research approached brand experience as a set of different but complementary brand experience dimensions (sensory, intellectual, affective, and behavioral). This approach is not only scarce in the literature but offers more in-depth theoretical insights.

The results and main conclusions also offer some interesting information for retail practitioners. For example, addressing brand experience as a series of distinct and yet complementary components provides insights into integrated experience management, with an emphasis on sensory, emotive, intellectual, and behavioral experiences. Proper experience management is a powerful inducer of favorable impressions about a brand, which adds to strong and long-lasting connections with customers. Finally, brand equity must be based on good sensations; that is, the perceived value of a brand and its practical repercussions can never be full until customers have an emotional attachment to it.

Limitations

Despite the important contributions, this study presents limitations. The present study is based on a specific retail fashion brand. Each brand has its idiosyncrasies, producing its own experiences and inducing specific feelings towards the brand. As such, it is important to test the assumptions and conclusions of this study in different retail fashion brands. This research was conducted in one specific country – Portugal. This one-country approach may also limit the conclusions and generalizations. It is widely accepted that each country has its own cultural, social, and economic specificities that impact consumption patterns. Although this impact was not within the scope of this research, it is important to keep in mind that research on this topic would benefit from studies in different countries or even cross-country approaches. Also, the sample of this study was made up of 90.2% of female respondents, which biases the results toward this particular demographic category. Finally, this research was conducted in physical stores, considering only the experiences offered by the brand in the stores. However, the growing importance of technologies in building experiences, or the online environment, and the omnichannel strategies developed by retail brands should also be taken into account in future research.

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