

Brand Love as Mediator of the Brand Experience-Satisfaction-Loyalty Relationship in a Retail Fashion Brand

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Abstract. *Framed by the consumer-brand relationship theory, this paper investigates the path from the brand-consumer behaviour interaction to the relationship durability and stability, through brand relationship quality. Specifically, it examines brand experience as an antecedent of brand love, and customer loyalty and satisfaction as outcomes in the retail setting. Based on 560 customers' responses to a face-to-face questionnaire administered in a fashion brand retail store, research hypotheses were tested using a structural equation model. The findings suggest that brand experience influences brand love, with a higher incidence of sensory and affective dimensions. Brand love, in turn, influences customer loyalty, both directly and indirectly through customer satisfaction. This research contributes to the still understudied relation between brand experience and brand love in the retail context and to the need to understand the satisfaction-loyalty relation involving other variables as predictors. Nevertheless, results are limited to one specific retail fashion brand and generalizations should be taken carefully.*

Keywords: brand experience, brand love, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, retail

Introduction

The need for brands to develop strong and positive relationships with consumers is a long lasting topic for practitioners and for scholars. This need takes the assumption that in order for consumers to develop positive attitudes and favourable behaviours, brands should engage in actions to bond with consumers. The more they relate with consumers, the more brands will have positive return on that relationship.

The “consumer-brand relationship” theory goes further on this subject. According to (Fournier, 1998), the outcomes of the consumer brand relation are not only about the relation being present or absent; it's about the quality of the relationship. When brands and consumers interact, they do it in several levels, from intense to superficial for example. The outcome is a set of positive feelings, affective and socioemotive attachments, behavioural ties, and cognitive beliefs that reflect the overall relationship quality, strength and durability overtime.

This outcome in the form of the brand relationship quality starts, however, in the interaction between brand and consumer behaviours. The set of actions taken by both the consumer and the brand initiates a process of meaning creation, elaboration and reinforcement (Fournier, 1998). This process may be understood as the set of experiences lived by the consumer. Thus, creating meaning, elaborating and reinforcing is consistent with the notion of brand experience, conceptualized as “subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments” (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009, p. 53). The processes of meaning creation, elaboration and reinforcement, which can be encapsulated in the concept of brand experience, contribute to the strength and durability of the brand-consumer relationship (Chang and Chieng, 2006; Schembri, 2009).

Among the positive feelings, love is considered one of the most strong brand relationships, going beyond the simple notion of brand preference (Fournier, 1998). But despite this strength, only recently it caught the attention of researchers (Ahuvia et al., 2014; Bergkvist and Bech-larsen, 2010; Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2014; Forth, 2004; Lastovicka and Sirianni, 2011; Maxian et al., 2013). Brand love is the result of strong emotional relationships that can be considerably more intense than simple liking, although there are fundamental similarities between interpersonal love and love in consumer contexts (Ahuvia, 2005).

Despite the evidence suggesting the importance of brand love, there is still few evidence of how brand experience can influence such a positive feeling as brand love. In fact, research has examined several antecedents of brand love, such as interpersonal antecedents (Long-Tolbert and Gammoth, 2012), brand image and social-self (Unal and Aydin, 2013), brand personality (Ismail and Spinelli, 2012), brand identification and brand trust (Albert and Merunka, 2013), among others. However, with a few exceptions (Francisco-Maffezzolli et al., 2014; Jung and Soo, 2012; Şahin et al., 2012), there is almost no reference to the role of experiences in consumer-brand relationship quality research, specifically dealing with brand love. Specifically, when one turns to the retail context, research about the antecedents and outcomes of brand love are still scarce, with just a few exceptions (Kim et al., 2010; Koo and Kim, 2013; Vlachos and Vrechopoulos, 2012).

Brand love has been associated with several positive outcomes such as word-of-mouth, repurchase intentions, brand loyalty and active engagement, among others (Bergkvist and Bech-larsen, 2010; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Ismail and Spinelli, 2012; Unal and Aydin, 2013). The satisfaction-loyalty chain has long been advocated, but in a recent review of this relationship (Kumar et al., 2013) argued that although this is a positive relation, the variation explained by customer satisfaction is small. However, when other variables were considered as moderators, mediators or antecedents the prediction is substantially better. This means that for a better understanding of the satisfaction-loyalty relation, research should consider extending the models to other variables.

Thus, based in the customer-brand relationship approach, the lack of understanding of brand experience as an antecedent of brand love, and the suggestion made by Kumar, Pozza and Ganesh (2013), this paper investigates the contribution of brand experience to brand love, and how this relationship contributes to enhance positive attitudes and behaviours towards retail brands, namely customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Literature review

Brand Experience: definition, antecedents and outcomes

According to Schmitt (1999), experiential marketing suggests a new marketing perspective, focused on the customer, instead of focusing on the product and the market. Smilansky (2009) suggests that experiential marketing is the new trend in marketing, since it relates directly to the customer and not to the product, generating a stronger commitment. According to these authors, experiential marketing comes to change the marketing focus to experiences, giving shape to what Pine and Gilmore (1998) believed to be the focus of the economy structure.

Schmitt (1999) suggests five different types of experiential strategic modules (SEMs) that brands should manage in order to create an holistic experience: sensory experiences based on SENSE; emotional or affective experiences, based on emotion (FEEL); creative and cognitive experiences, based on reason and thinking (THINK); physical, behavioural and lifestyle experiences based on acting (ACT), and experiences of social identity that result from belonging to a reference group or culture, based on relationships (RELATE).

Based on the principles of experiential marketing, brand experience is defined as the internal response of consumers in the form of sensations, feelings and cognitions, but also behaviours, induced by brand stimuli such as identity, packaging, communication and environment (Brakus et al., 2009). This conceptualization stands out from other customer-focused brand tactics, such as brand attachment, brand engagement, and customer delight (Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010), exceeding the concept of feelings, fantasy and fun pointed out by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982). Different from the product experience, buying experience and consumption experience, brand experience captures internal and subjective consumer responses, induced by brand-specific stimuli (Ishida and Taylor, 2012).

The intensity of the brand experience varies according to the number of dimensions, as well as according to its intensity. The intensity of the brand experience depends on the profile of the consumer. There are consumers who like holistic experiences and are involved in brand experience as a whole, but also the most utilitarian consumers who are not influenced by any dimension of the brand experience. There are more hedonistic consumers who attach greater importance to the sensorial and emotional stimulus of the brand; but also more action oriented consumers that focus on brand actions and behaviours (Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010).

Brand-related experiences tend to be engraved in long-term memory, playing a significant role in several positive outcomes. The most prevalent in the literature are customer satisfaction and loyalty (Khan and Rahman, 2015a). The influence of brand experience on customer satisfaction was studied by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009), and this relation was further examined in services (Nysveen et al., 2013), internet services and online (Ha and Perks, 2005), and in retail brands (Khan and Rahman, 2015b). Brand loyalty is also influenced by brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009; Francisco-Maffezzolli et al., 2014). Similarly to customer satisfaction, brand loyalty was investigated in several contexts, such as services (Morrison and Crane, 2007; Nysveen et al., 2013) and retail (Ishida and Taylor, 2012; Khan and Rahman, 2015b).

Other outcomes of brand experience considered by past research are brand attitude (O'Cass and Grace, 2004; Shamim and Butt, 2013; Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2013), brand credibility (Shamim and Butt, 2013), brand equity (Shamim and Butt, 2013; Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2013), brand recall (Baumann et al., 2015) and purchase intention (Gabisch, 2011).

Just a few studies consider brand experience as an antecedent of several manifestations of brand relationship quality. Francisco-Maffezzoli, Semprebon and Prado (2014) examined the mediating effect of brand love on the brand experience-loyalty relation with consumers of perfume and bath soap. They found that brand experience had no direct effect on loyalty, but when mediated by a form of brand relationship quality (love/passion, self-connection, interdependence, commitment, intimacy or partner quality), the effect was significant.

Şahin, Zehir and Kitapçı (2012) also concluded that brand experience is far more relevant than other brand constructs when it comes to build meaningful and long-lasting relations with consumers. The research was conducted in automobiles context, and sought to investigate the influence of brand experience and service quality on repurchase intention, when mediated by brand relationship quality. Brand relationship quality was assessed by brand trust, brand satisfaction and brand commitment. The results showed that, although brand experience had no significant effect on brand trust, it presented a positive and significant influence on repurchase intention when mediated by brand satisfaction and brand commitment.

Brand Love

Consumers' love for brands comes mainly from the consumer-brand relationship theory. Love is a positive feeling that reflects an emotional attachment that goes beyond brand liking (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Rossiter, 2012). Fournier (1998) already pointed out love as the strongest brand relationship, in the context of the indicators of brand relationship quality: "the affect supporting brand relationship endurance and depth was much greater than that implied in simple notions of brand preference" (p. 363).

Following the work of Ahuvia (2005) about the love prototype, brand love can be conceptualized as the "degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81). It includes several aspects such as passion for the brand, attachment to the brand, positive evaluation of the brand, positive emotions in response to the brand, and declarations of love for the brand.

The literature also distinguishes brand love from other similar and close concepts. For example, brand love is distinct from satisfaction. While satisfaction is a more cognitive and rational judgement, brand love is more affective. Moreover, brand love implies a long-term relationship, while satisfaction is a transactional-related outcome (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Brand love also goes beyond brand affect, because it is deeper and more enduring (Albert and Merunka, 2013). Thus, brand love is not only more intense than liking, but also conceptually different. A beloved brand is part of a consumer's identity, since through its image and attributes, the consumer is able to express his/her own self (Karjaluoto, Munnukka and Kiuru, 2016).

Insofar brand love is a positive feeling reflecting an emotional attachment to a love-object, the literature has sought to find what factors contribute to build this feeling. Some brand related concepts were found to influence brand love. For example, Ismail and Spinelli (2012) found that brand image and brand personality have a significant and positive influence in brand love; others have examined the influence of brand identification (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Bergkvist and Bech-larsen, 2010) and brand trust (Albert and Merunka, 2013) to find a positive relation with brand love. Others still sought to explain brand love through interpersonal factors (Long-Tolbert and Gammoth, 2012; Unal and Aydin, 2013);

hedonic products (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006) or variety-seeking (Unal and Aydin, 2013) are also among the factors that positively predict brand love.

But brand love is also considered to have managerial value, since it can positively influence several consequences. Researchers have focused on several actionable outcomes such as active engagement (Bergkvist and Bech-larsen, 2010), willingness to pay more (Albert and Merunka, 2013), or word-of-mouth (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Ismail and Spinelli, 2012; Unal and Aydin, 2013). But the most studied outcome of brand love is loyalty in its several forms (Bergkvist and Bech-larsen, 2010; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Koo and Kim, 2013; Unal and Aydin, 2013).

Brand Love in retail

There are still few studies that look at brand love in the context of retail. Nevertheless, Kim et al. (2010), measured the mediating role of brand love between service quality and several relational outcomes, such as positive word-of-mouth, willingness to pay more, self-disclosure and competitive insulation (the degree to which the customer is resistant to competitive alternatives, i.e., a form of conative loyalty). They found that while customer love partially mediated the relation of service quality with positive word-of-mouth and willingness to pay more, it fully mediated the relation between service quality with self-disclosure and competitive insulation. Despite the results, the researchers call for a cautious interpretation of the findings, since brand love should not be considered the only predictor of the relational outcomes examined.

Koo and Kim (2013), based on the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model, followed a similar approach, by considering brand love as the mediator between brand behaviour and relational outcomes. Specifically, they used store love as the mediator between store environmental cues and store loyalty. They found that design and merchandise cues have a positive influence in the formation of store love, while ambient and social cues don't. Store love, when influenced by design and merchandise cues, also has a positive effect on store loyalty.

Also, Vlachos and Vrechopoulos (2012) investigated several factors as antecedents of brand love. They conducted two studies in two different grocery retailer brands. In the first study they found retail store image, perceived transactional value, and corporate social responsibility associations to predict consumer-retailer love, which in turn predicted purchase intentions. In the second study they added several personality traits as moderators. They found that, while retail store image and perceived transactional value kept their influence on consumer-retailer love, the influence of corporate social responsibility was no longer significant. Also, they found that avoidant attachment style negatively moderates the effect of consumer-retailer love on re-patronage intentions and warm relationships with others enhances the effect of consumer-retailer love on re-patronage intentions.

Research Methods

The main goal of this study was to investigate the relation between brand experience and customer loyalty, mediated by brand love and customer satisfaction. The relations established between concepts are presented in figure 1.

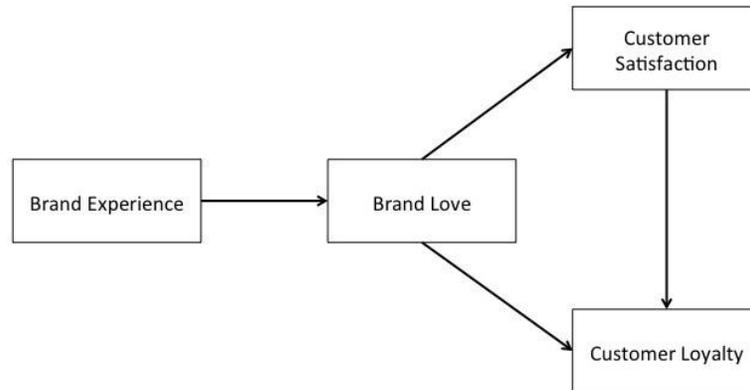


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Source: Authors' own research results/contribution.

Following the literature (Koo and Kim, 2013) this study considers the dimensions of brand experience as conceptualized by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009), namely sensory experience, affective experience, intellectual experience and behavioural experience. Thus the first group of hypotheses are stated as follows:

- H1: Sensory experience has positive effects on brand love
- H2: Affective experience has positive effects on brand love
- H3: Intellectual experience has positive effects on brand love
- H4: Behavioural experience has positive effects on brand love

Also, following the recommendation of Kumar, Pozza and Ganesh (2013) regarding the importance of considering other variables in the satisfaction-loyalty relation, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H5: Brand love has positive effects on customer satisfaction
- H6: Brand love has positive effects on customer loyalty
- H7: Customer satisfaction has positive effects on customer loyalty

The research design follows a quantitative approach. Research goals and hypotheses were drawn from the literature. Relations were established and variables were measured using validated constructs. Finally, statistical procedures were used to describe data and to test hypotheses.

To examine the postulated hypotheses, an empirical study was conducted in a widely known retail fashion brand in Portugal. The sample was made of consumers who are customers of the retail fashion brand (n=560).

Following the relations established in the model and the hypothesis, the main concepts relevant for the empirical research are brand experience, brand love, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. These concepts were measured using validated scales identified in the literature. Brand experience is conceptualized as the internal response of consumers in the form of sensations, feelings and cognitions, but also behaviours, induced by brand stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009). Brand experience is considered a holistic phenomenon involving several reactions, both emotional and rational. As such, brand experience was measured using the scale from Schmitt et al. (2009), since it contemplates several dimension, namely Sensory (e.g. "This Brand is interesting in a sensory way"), Affective (e.g. "This Brand

induces feelings and sentiments”), Intellectual (e.g. “I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter this Brand”) and Behavioural (e.g. “I engage in physical actions and behaviours when I use this Brand”) using 12 items in a 7- point Likert scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7 =strongly agree.

Brand love was assessed using the measurement proposed by from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). This brand love scale not only is the most used and consistent scale, but also captures the main theoretical characteristics of brand love, such as passion for the brand (e.g. “I am passionate about this brand”), attachment to the brand (e.g. “This brand is totally awesome”), positive evaluation of the brand, positive emotions in response to the brand (e.g. “This brand makes me very happy”), and declarations of love for the brand (e.g. “I love this brand”). The measure comprises 6 items evaluated by respondents in a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Finally, customer satisfaction was measured by adapting the scale suggested by Cronin, Brady and Hult (2000), comprising 3 items. A 3-item scale suggested by Lin and Wang (2006) was adapted to measure customer loyalty. These measures used a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Data collection was based on a questionnaire with four sections: the first section comprised a set of questions to measure brand experience; the second section included the items measuring brand love; the third section included the items measuring customer loyalty and customer satisfaction; and finally, the fourth section included demographics. Data was collected face-to-face in-store. A preliminary version of the questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample of 25 individuals. The analysis of the pre-test allowed some improvements in the layout of the questionnaire, but no modifications were made regarding the main variables.

Data collection was conducted in-store during the month of January 2019. Participants were randomly invited to answer the questionnaire when leaving the store. The purpose was to assure clients had a full experience of the brand, in the case they were first comers. Four professional interviewers were specifically hired for this task. The researchers briefed the interviewers and followed-up data collection on a daily basis.

The statistical procedures were as follow: (1) a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted in the scale used to measure the constructs and (2) the hypotheses were tested using structural equation modelling (SEM). A set of validated scales drawn from the academic literature was used. In the evaluation of the psychometric properties of the scales this research followed Churchill (1979) and Bollen (1989). This involves ensuring that the scales are reliable, have validity and are one-dimensional.

Results and Discussion

The sample is made of 90.2% female respondents. This doesn't come as a surprise, since the retail fashion brand is mainly directed to this target. The large majority of the sample (86.8%) has between 16 and 45 years old, and 64.5% are single. In terms of education, 41.1% has a college degree and 37.7% has a high school degree. Finally, 85.7% have a monthly household income until 1500 euros.

CFA was used to validate the measurement models consisting of seven constructs. Given the known sensitivity of statistics to sample size, the use of the χ^2 index provides little guidance in influencing the extent to which the model lacks fit. Thus, decisions were made based on other fit indices. The measurement model shows a reasonable fit when RMSEA is

below 0.10 and the CFI are above 0.90 (Hair et al., 2006). Validation of the latent constructs is evaluated by convergent validity. All composite reliabilities are greater than the minimum criteria of 0.70 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994), except for the AE construct. The average variance extracted (AVE) provides evidence of overall convergent validity of each construct as it indicates the amount of variance explained by the construct relative to the amount of variance that may be attributed to measurement error, and should exceed 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Constructs are related as theoretically expected and all path weights are significant ($p < 0.001$), demonstrating high convergent validity.

Reliability was tested by examining the Cronbach's alfa coefficients. All values exceed Nunnally's (1978) threshold value. Following the procedures suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981), convergent and discriminant validity was tested using confirmatory factor analysis. A comparison of the average variance extracted by each construct to shared variance between the construct and all other variables were used to test for discriminant validity. For each comparison, the explained variance exceeded all combinations of shared variance. As result, the scales showed acceptable discriminant validity. Convergent validity was assessed by verifying the significance of the t values associated with the parameters estimated. All t values were positive and significant. Then, the scales showed acceptable convergent validity. The structural models were elaborated to examine the hypothesized relationship among constructs (Table 1).

Table 1. Psychometric properties of the scales – Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Construct	Items	Convergent Validity	Reliability		
		Factor Loading	α	CR	AVE
Sensory Experience	SE1	0,890*	0,796	0,882	0,790
	SE2	0,750*			
Affective Experience	AE1	0,635*	0,803	0,865	0,683
	AE2	0,780*			
	AE3	0,811*			
Intellectual Experience	IE2	0,668*	0,769	0,843	0,733
	IE3	0,884*			
Behavioural Experience	BE1	0,819*	0,861	0,922	0,855
	BE2	0,923*			
Brand Love	BL1	0,795*	0,871	0,926	0,806
	BL2	0,822*			
	BL3	0,882*			
Customer Satisfaction	CS1	0,769*	0,839	0,903	0,756
	CS2	0,813*			
	CS3	0,805*			
Customer Loyalty	CL1	0,798*	0,790	0,871	0,694
	CL2	0,789*			
	CL3	0,663*			
		Goodness-of-fit indexes			
		RMSEA	CFI	TLI	IFI
$\chi^2_{(131)} = 1490,46$ $p = 0,000$		0,136	0,764	0,725	0,765

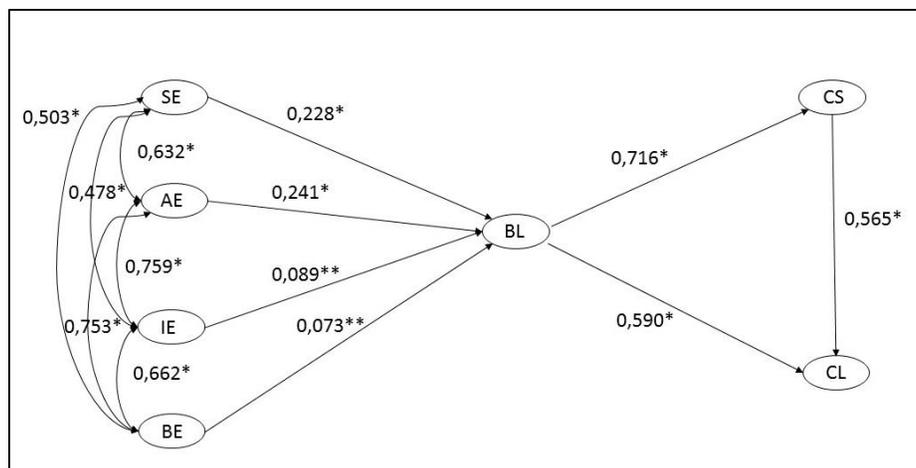
CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted; * $p < 0,001$

Source: Authors' own research.

The model fit was very good: $\chi^2(122) = 523,309$, $p < 0,000$, IFI = 0,930, TLI = 0,913, CFI = 0,931, RMSEA = 0,077. As shown in figure 2, all constructs measuring brand experience have a positive and significant inter-correlation and all the hypotheses were validated.

The first set of hypothesis aimed to assess the relation of brand experience with brand love. Following the multi-dimensional approach to brand experience (REFERENCES), this research measured four dimensions of brand experience proposed by (REFERENCES). Regarding the dimensions of brand experience, sensory experience is positively related to brand love ($\gamma_1 = 0,228^*$, $p < 0,000$) (H1) and affective experience has a positive influence on brand love ($\gamma_2 = 0,241^*$, $p < 0,000$) (H2). Intellectual experience ($\gamma_3 = 0,089^{**}$, $p < 0,05$) (H3) and behavioural experience ($\gamma_4 = 0,073^{**}$, $p < 0,05$) (H4) also have a positive influence on brand love, but the strength of the influence is smaller than the two previous dimensions.

The literature on consumer-brand relationship suggests that an emotional attachment to a brand (like love) strengthens the relationship (REFERENCES). This assumption supported the second set of hypothesis that proposes a positive relation between brand love and two outcomes, customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. The influence of brand love on brand loyalty is also demonstrated, either directly ($\beta_2 = 0,716^*$, $p < 0,000$) (H6), or through customer satisfaction ($\beta_1 = 0,716^*$, $p < 0,000$) (H5). Finally, customer satisfaction has a positive influence in customer loyalty ($\beta_3 = 0,565^*$, $p < 0,000$) (H7).



Note: SE=Sensory Experience; AE=Affective Experience; IE=Intellectual Experience; BE=Behavioural Experience; BL=Brand Love; CS=Customer Satisfaction; CL=Customer Loyalty

Figure 2. Model estimation

Source: Authors' own research results.

This paper is framed by “consumer-brand relationship” theory, and followed two main assumptions. First, consumer-brand interaction involves a set of meaning creation, elaboration and reinforcement processes that define the brand relationship quality. Second, the type and strength of the brand relationship quality will define the relationship stability or durability (Fournier, 1998). The first assumption allowed considering brand experience as the stage for meaning creation, elaboration and reinforcement, which would lead to a specific type of brand relationship quality – brand love. The second assumption justifies the relationship between brand love and two measures of relationship stability and durability, namely customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Two main findings should be emphasized. On the one hand brand experience, through its dimensions, namely sensory experience, affective experience, intellectual experience and behavioural experience, has a positive effect on brand love. This is consistent with Jung and Soo (2012) that tested the influence of the affective and behavioural brand experience dimensions on the brand relationship quality. They found that these two dimensions had a positive impact on brand trust and brand commitment (the measures of brand relationship quality).

But although the brand experience dimensions are all significant, they don't seem to influence equally the love for the brand. In fact, the sensory ($\gamma_1 = 0,228^*$, $p < 0,000$) and the affective ($\gamma_2 = 0,241^*$, $p < 0,000$) brand experience dimensions seem to be more relevant than the intellectual ($\gamma_3 = 0,089^{**}$, $p < 0,05$) and behavioural ($\gamma_4 = 0,073^{**}$, $p < 0,05$) brand experience dimensions when it comes to enhance a strong feeling for the brand. Although this relation is not commonly found in the literature, this disparate degree of importance among brand experience dimensions was already found in previous studies. For example, a study of mobile phone brands found sensory experience as the major driver of brand love (Huang, 2017). This finding is also in line with Koo and Kim (2013) that examined the influence of several store environmental cues on store emotional attachment (brand love). The dimensions of store environmental cues were ambient, design, social and merchandise cues, which can be understood as the "brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments" proposed by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009). They found that the design and merchandise cues influence brand love, while ambient and social cues did not. Although there is not a straightforward correspondence between the findings of Koo and Kim (2013) and the findings of the present study, the point is that brand experience dimensions do not have the same effect on the formation of the experience and consequently on the brand relationship quality. However, there is also some literature that places brand experience not as an antecedent of brand love but rather as a consequence, by mediating the relation between brand love and word-of-mouth (Karjaluoto et al., 2016). In this study, researchers found that brand experience functions as an enhancer of the effect of brand love on offline word-of-mouth.

The sensory marketing approach (Hultén, 2011) may offer a suitable basis to explain the relatively greater importance of the sensory experience found in the present study. The sensory marketing approach relies on the assumption that consumers experience products, services and brands through sensations – "an emotion or feeling that deliberately links the human mind and the senses" (p. 264) –, which in turn comes to constitute the multi-sensory experience. Brands can make use of sensory expressions – "an experience trigger that clarifies a brand's identity and values and leaves an imprint in the customer's mind" (p. 265) – in order to be more deeply imprinted in the consumer's mind. Thus, it can be assumed that sensory clues work as emotional triggers, including love for the brand.

The second main finding is related with the effect of the brand relationship quality on the outcome of the relationship stability and durability. The results point to the importance of brand love to customer loyalty, both directly and indirectly through customer satisfaction. This finding echoes in the scarce research supporting the path from brand love to customer loyalty (Bergkvist and Bech-larsen, 2010; Huang, 2017). Bergkvist and Bech-larsen (2010) in a study of six brands found that brand love has a positive influence in brand loyalty. Also, Unal and Aydin (2013) examined the influence of brand love on brand loyalty and word-of-

mouth in a study about sport shoes brands and found that brand loyalty and word-of-mouth were both influenced by brand love.

This relation has also been demonstrated in the retail environment. Kim et al. (2010) developed a study in the apparel and grocery store contexts in order to examine the impact of service quality on several behavioural outcomes, including competitive insulation (a form of customer loyalty), when mediated by customer love. They found that customer love fully mediated the relation between service quality and competitive insulation. The study by Koo and Kim (2013) already mentioned also confirmed that store emotional attachment (in the form of store love) is a significant predictor of store loyalty in the context of a single-brand apparel store. Finally, Vlachos and Vrechopoulos (2012) found that consumer-retailer love has a positive and significant effect on re-patronage intentions in the grocery retail context.

Despite the evidence supporting the well-established satisfaction-loyalty chain approach, there is evidence that this relationship is better understood when considering other antecedent variables (Kumar et al., 2013). Also, despite the demonstrated relation between brand love and customer loyalty, there is almost no evidence of the love-satisfaction-loyalty relation, to the best of our knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper intended to present the results of a study conducted on fashion retail brand. The main goal was twofold: on the one hand illustrate the relation between brand experience and brand love; on the other hand, examine the love-satisfaction-loyalty relationship. The results show that brand experience can be a strong predictor of brand love, but brand experience dimensions do not all have the same effect on brand love. Also, the satisfaction-loyalty relation can be best explained when brand love functions as an antecedent of this relation.

Despite the results there are some theoretical and methodological limitations to be considered. Although brand experience is considered one important antecedent of brand love, as the results demonstrate, it should be noted that other antecedents should be examined, since the meaning creation, elaboration and reinforcement processes are not limited to the experience context. Also, there are other feelings, besides love/passion, that deserve further investigation. For example, negative feelings or “the dark side” of consumer-brand relationships should be further investigated (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2014).

Some methodological options raise other limitations. The present study was conducted on a single retail brand, which can make generalizations a cautious task. Also, data was collected in only one of the stores. Although this was the major store of the brand and with greater consumer movement, results maybe affected by the specific store environment.

Some practical implications emerge from this study. Although the management of experiences should be based on an integrated approach, managers should take particular attention to the types of experiences to be developed. In order to enhance customer love, retail brands should focus the content of experiences more on sensory and affective stimuli. Moreover, retail brands should consider the induction of positive and strong feelings towards the brand as an important step in promoting customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. A retail brand that the consumer nourishes strong feelings, like love, will facilitate and enhance positive behaviours such as loyalty.

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