

Linking Brand Experience and Brand Love to Word-of-Mouth in Food Retail

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ABSTRACT

Brand love is associated with consumer behavior that affects organizational performance. This article examines the relationship between brand experience and brand love and between brand love and positive word-of-mouth among Portuguese consumers in the context of the international food retail chain LIDL. Specifically, it analyzes how brand experience contributes to consumers' love for the LIDL brand and how this affects positive word-of-mouth. First, a narrative review of the literature on brand experience, brand love, and positive word-of-mouth is presented, followed by a quantitative study based on a sample of 1,049 Portuguese LIDL customers. Data were processed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including correlations, structural equation modeling and tests of differences. The results show significant positive associations between brand experience and brand love, and positive word-of-mouth, as well as significant differences in gender, generation, and occupational groups. However, the mediating role of brand love between brand experience and word-of-mouth is not significant. With a view to boosting positive word-of-mouth, marketers should manage the experience consumers have in-store and enhance both hedonic and utilitarian values.

Keywords: Brand experience; Brand love; Word-of-mouth; Food retail

JEL Codes: M3; L81

I. Introduction

Recent years have seen significant changes in consumer behavior regarding the purchase of essential goods. Globalization has been crucial for several retail brands and the evolution of consumer behavior, either in their purchasing preferences or in the promotion of the brand itself (Rodrigues & Brandão, 2021). Studies of international retail brands could help to identify consumer patterns and trends, which could facilitate the development of brand strategies and improve performance.

LIDL is a supermarket chain founded in 1930 in Germany, which today has more than twelve thousand stores in Europe and the United States of America. According to a study by Deloitte entitled, "Global Powers of Retailing 2019", the Schwarz Group, responsible for LIDL, has reached the 5th position in the ranking of the largest retail groups at the global level and the first position in the discount retail segment (LIDL, 2021).



The company entered the Portuguese market in 1995 as the first discount retailer in the country, bringing a new perspective to the national retail market. The brand has more than 7,000 employees spread across 260 stores in the country (LIDL, 2021). In Portugal, food retail competition is fierce, especially amongst the top five players in the market, of which LIDL is one. These retail chains compete mostly in terms of loyalty, quality, location, promotion, and price (Morais, 2016).

LIDL's business model is based on a standardized store system that eliminates superficial costs and focuses mainly on the final price. For example, the brand creates a simpler interior design and relies on a reduced brand offer. Furthermore, when the company works with a large number of suppliers, it tends to increase the final price of the product.

Although studies have focused on the relationship between brand love and word-of-mouth (WOM), few have been conducted in the retail industry (Ferreira et al., 2019). This study presents a narrative literature review that describes the concepts of brand experience, brand love, and WOM. Along with the literature review, several hypotheses are formulated in light of the following research questions: i) What is the role of brand experience and brand love in generating positive WOM among LIDL customers? And ii) Do these consumers behave differently according to their socio-demographic characteristics? This study examines the relationships between brand experience and brand love, brand love and WOM, and brand experience and WOM. It also examines whether brand love mediates the relationship between brand experience and brand love, and how these variables and sociodemographic characteristics affect WOM. For this purpose, a cross-sectional quantitative study was designed based on a survey questionnaire about the brand LIDL using items drawn from the literature. Section II addresses the literature and develops the hypotheses of this study, section III describes methods, section IV documents the results obtained with a sample of 1,049 cases, and section V presents a discussion and the conclusions.

II. Literature review and hypotheses

A. Brand experience

Brand experience is defined by all the touchpoints that coexist between a customer and the brand. Unlike customer experience, which is the customer's perception of the brand based on their personal experience, brand experience is not about the customer or the company – it is about the brand itself (van de Sand et al., 2020). At its core, brand experience is about delivering the brand promise through all possible channels, keeping the message consistent and enhancing the customer-brand relationship (Rodrigues & Brandão, 2021).

As defined by Brakus et al. (2009, p. 52), brand experience is understood as “subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications and environments”. The intensity of the

brand's experience depends on the consumer profile, based on those who value holistic experiences and those who value utilitarian aspects (Ferreira et al., 2019). Several studies on brand experience focus on how it can directly influence positive emotions such as brand love, especially in the retail sector (Ferreira et al., 2019).

A study conducted by Joshi and Garg (2021) analyzed the relationship between brand experience and brand love, as well as the role of brand experience in the formation process of brand love. As stated in their study, marketers need to understand that it takes time to develop a brand and that brand experience is essential. Gumparthi and Patra (2020) believe that achieving a feeling of brand love requires a satisfying brand experience. Karjaluoto et al. (2016) claim that brand experience can be considered as a requirement for brand love and positive word-of-mouth (+WOM), and an excellent experience is needed to achieve brand love. In addition, purchase intention, brand loyalty and other outcomes have been associated with various positive effects of brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Ferreira et al., 2019).

B. Brand love

Fournier (1998) was one of the first researchers to demonstrate that the most substantial relationships between a consumer and a brand are similar to a relationship between two or more individuals. However, unlike interpersonal love, brand love is unidirectional, as suggested by Joshi and Garg (2021). The difference between someone who loves a particular brand and another person who loves the same brand is based on their personal experience, which is known as brand experience, a concept that is correlated with both feelings of interpersonal love and brand love. Therefore, brand love not only represents a more intense feeling than liking, but brand love and liking are different theoretical concepts (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

Brand love is a concept that has been widely studied and discussed in recent years, and it is related to the holistic and hedonic brand proposition that ultimately leads to purchase. However, brand love creates a deeper connection between the customer and the brand (Rodrigues & Brandão, 2021). It is about creating and maintaining a solid relationship between the customer and the brand, since, according to Gumparthi and Patra's recent research (2020, p. 3), brand love is born from "passionate feelings and emotional attachment that satisfied consumers have for brands".

According to Carroll and Ahuvia's (2006) research, brand love does not have the same meaning as satisfaction; the main difference between the two feelings is that satisfaction is known as a cognitive feeling, while brand love has a practical background. In addition, satisfaction is transactional, while brand love results from a long-term relationship or exposure to the brand. Furthermore, brand love illustrates the willingness to publicly demonstrate the feeling (e.g., "I love Apple!"), which means integrating the brand into the individual's sphere, whereas satisfaction does not require this. Both brand and consumer interact on multiple levels, from the most superficial to the deepest, the latter involving a high degree of passion and emotional attachment, which can be considered brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Ferreira et al., 2019; Joshi & Garg, 2021).

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) concluded that a satisfactory brand experience could be responsible for the creation of brand love. In addition, Rodrigues and Brandão (2021)

also measured the impact of brand experience on brand love using the IKEA brand as a reference, which also provided insight for this study. Therefore, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1: Brand experience is positively associated with brand love.

C. Word-of-mouth

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) define +WOM as the degree to which consumers are willing to spread positive and complimentary messages about a brand. Word-of-mouth is considered to be an interpersonal and informal act of exchange communication between two or more individuals and an essential element of marketing communication because it influences consumer behavior (Dam, 2020). According to Karjaluoto et al. (2016), WoM can be considered as either a positive or negative statement made by an individual who has had at least one touch point with a product or company, either online or offline.

When an individual has a positive or even long experience with a brand, he or she tends to eventually recommend it, either to a known or unknown person (Rodrigues & Brandão, 2021). This type of communication is more credible than, for example, an advertisement on television. In addition, people tend to trust someone's opinion more when it is given freely or without any request or reward (Dam, 2020).

It is also possible to consider that +WOM is the result of a remarkable experience that was once created through brand love. This feeling has turned into an indirect promotion of the brand to others, as suggested by several studies exploring the relationship between brand love and WOM (e.g., Giovannini et al., 2015).

A fundamental term related to marketing communication is brand advocacy, which is the act of spontaneously recommending a brand without being asked, using +WOM (Keller, 2007). As Bairrada, Coelho and Coelho (2018) state, brand love can be associated with brand loyalty and word-of-mouth, and even make consumers less sensitive to price; they also believe that solid brand love is a factor that can lead to brand loyalty, +WOM and purchase intention.

As Bagozzi et al. (2017) describe, not all people have a strong love for some brands, nor are all brands likely to evoke feelings of love in consumers – neutral or low-love brands. However, according to an empirical study of neutral brands by Batra et al. (2012) most respondents expressed at least some love for a brand, which was found to be predictive of brand loyalty and +WOM. Karjaluoto et al. (2016) suggest that a long experience with a brand could lead to +WOM; moreover, they also examined the effect of brand experience on brand love and word-of-mouth.

Ferreira et al. (2019) analyzed the relationship between brand love and WOM with brand image dimensions of sensuality, mystery, and intimacy. Moreover, according to Joshi and Garg (2021), brand experience and satisfaction can be considered as a precursor of brand love. When the customer reaches a certain level of satisfaction, it is likely to lead to brand love and +WOM.

Today, brands encourage +WOM because it can increase the number of customers. To encourage more +WOM, companies use various strategies such as reward strategies, money-back guarantees, and coupons. Obviously, satisfying the customer helps to generate this behavior.

The primary key to WOM is the employee-customer relationship, which conveys personal confidence in an employee's trustworthiness and integrity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). As customer trust increases, +WOM communication about the product or service should increase. Trust is a measure of three interpersonal relationship dimensions: customer-employee awareness, employee-customer interaction, and employee care and concern (Yasin, 2013). Customer trust in a particular employee is expected when the employee knows and understands them well. Productivity and profitability of the brand result from +WOM communication (Yasin, 2013).

As several authors claim, brand love is positively related to +WOM (e.g., Rodrigues & Brandão, 2021; Roy et al., 2016), and may play a mediating role between brand experience and +WOM (e.g., Gómez-Suárez & Veloso, 2020; Rodrigues & Brandão, 2021). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

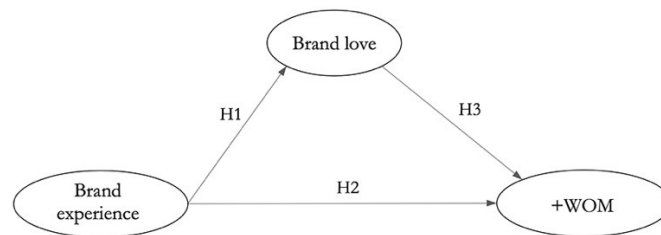
H2: Brand experience is positively associated with +WOM.

H3: Brand love is positively associated with +WOM.

H4: Brand love mediates the relationship between brand experience and +WOM.

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model of this study.

Figure 1
Conceptual model



D. Sociodemographic variables

Consumers are not considered a homogeneous segment, as there are several differences in gender, age, income and education (Chawla & Joshi, 2020). In this respect, brand love tends to be higher among women, which will positively influence their willingness to advocate their preferred brands to others. Research has shown that gender can have an impact on brand love, with brands that have a strong gender identity tending to encourage brand love and consumer-brand engagement (Machado et al., 2019), with brand love in turn influencing WOM communication (Ünal & Aydın, 2013). Additionally, brand experience, particularly sensory, emotional, and social experiences, can have a significantly impact on brand love (Zhang, 2019). There must be some factors such as gender, education, and age that play an important role in influencing +WoM, but few researchers have addressed them (Song, 2021). Therefore, one would expect to find differences in +WoM in control variables.

III. Methods

A. Procedures

The questionnaire was designed using items from the literature, namely from Kahn & Rahman (2016), and Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). The respective authors were contacted and gave their permission to use their scales. The items were translated into Portuguese, and then the questionnaire protocol was created, including a section with socio-demographic questions. Finally, the questionnaire was distributed over the Internet using Survey Monkey software, following a convenience and snowball sampling method; only respondents with recent experience of shopping at LIDL participated. Therefore, the sample cannot be considered to be representative of the Portuguese population. A total of 1,049 valid and complete responses were collected between March 15 and May 15, 2021.

All study procedures were conducted in accordance with the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki of 1964 and subsequent amendments. Each participant in the study was informed in advance of the objectives of the study and of the guarantee of anonymity and data confidentiality, and only accessed the questionnaire itself after agreeing to the terms and conditions of participation.

B. Instrument

The sociodemographic questionnaire included questions about gender (female; male), age, degree of education completed or attended (basic and secondary/vocational education; higher education), occupation (inactive, active), and income level (insufficient: “the household needs short-term lending, because the monthly income is not enough”; low: “basic household needs are covered, but we must be savvy and limit our spending”; sufficient: “the house-hold can cover all basic needs – such as food, living costs, clothing; the remaining needs must be limited”; satisfactory: “the household can cover all needs in sufficient level”; high: “possibility of investments and purchases of luxury products”).

Fourteen items from Khan and Rahman’s work (2016) were used to characterize brand experience (Bexp), comprising questions concerning brand name influence, customer billing, order and application forms, mass media impression, point-of-sales assistance, and recommend-dation by a salesperson. Eight brand love (Blove) items were adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Finally, +WOM was addressed and measured with four items adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement for all items using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (“I strongly disagree”) to 7 (“I strongly agree”).

C. Data analysis

The data collected were processed using SPSS, version 28. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize the sample and the items. The nominal variable Generation was created from the variable Age, with four possible values (Beresford Research, 2023): Generation Z (respondents under the age of 28), Generation Y (Millennials; under the

age of 43), Generation X (under the age of 59), and Baby Boomers (BB; over the age of 58). Data normality was assessed for the 26 Likert items by examining kurtosis and skewness values. Factor analysis was then performed using principal component analysis with varimax rotation. The reliability of these scales was then examined by calculating Cronbach's alpha and assessing convergent and discriminant validity by determining the correlations between the constructs, CR and AVE. A p -value less than 0.05 was considered significant.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then performed in SPSS Amos, confirming that the data fit the conceptual model by analyzing the calculated values of χ^2/df , TLI, CFI, SRMR and RMSEA for each scale (*Bexp*, *Blove* and *+WoM*). Path analysis was used to test hypotheses H1, H2, H3, and H4. Student t -test and ANOVA were used to test for differences in gender, age group, education level, occupation, and income level.

D. Sample characteristics

The sample consisted of 1,049 cases, of which 384 were male (36.6%) and 665 were female (63.4%). Respondents ranged in age from 13 to 81 years old (36.4 ± 15.6) and were categorized into four age groups: up to 28 years old (Generation Z or GenZers; 39.7%), between 28 and 42 years old (Generation Y or Millennials; 19.4%), between 43 and 58 years (Generation X or GenXers; 29.1%), and over 58 years old (Baby Boomers; 10.2%). Most respondents had a primary/secondary education, were employed, and reported having a satisfactory income, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-demographics.

Notes: M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; $Min.$ = Minimum; Max = maximum.

		Frequency	Percent
Total sample		1,049	100.0
Gender	Female	665	63.4
	Male	384	36.6
Age	$M \pm SD$; $Min-Max$: 36.4 \pm 15.6; 13-81		
Age range	Up to 28 years old	433	41.3
	From 28 to 42 years old	204	19.4
	From 43 to 58 years old	305	29.1
	More than 58 years old	107	10.2
Education level	Basic/Secondary education	533	50.8
	Higher education	516	49.2
Occupation	Inactive	163	15.5
	Active	886	84.5
Income	Insufficient	14	1.3
	Low	133	12.7
	Sufficient	367	35.0
	Satisfactory	487	46.4
	High	48	4.6

IV. Results

A. Measurements

The internal consistency of the instruments and subscales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, whose values indicate good reliability (Table 2), ranging from 0.894 (*Bexp*) to 0.904 (+*WoM*). Before analyzing the data, the normality of the items was checked using the indices of asymmetry (*Sk*) and kurtosis (*Kr*). Absolute values of *Sk* less than three and *Kr* less than 10 indicate a normal data distribution (Kline, 2015), which is the case for the 26 items in question. The structural loadings are above 0.5 (Hair et al., 2013). Correlations between the items range from $r = 0.174$ ($p < 0.01$) to $r = 0.886$ ($p < 0.01$; Appendix, Table A1).

Regarding the shopping experience, LIDL stands out as it attracts the respondents' attention, and that they enjoy shopping in the store because the staff has the necessary knowledge required to address any queries and facilitates their shopping experience. When it comes to brand love, all items score high, indicating that most respondents find the brand wonderful. Finally, most respondents say they have spread +WOM about the brand.

Table 2: Item descriptives.

Note: *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *Sk* = skewness; *Kr* = kurtosis; *LD* = Structure coefficients.

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Sk</i>	<i>Kr</i>	<i>LD</i>
Brand experience <i>Bexp</i> – Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.904$.						
BE01	The LIDL brand name stimulates my senses	4.77	1.34	-0.60	0.23	0.69
BE02	I feel excited whenever I find LIDL brand name	4.47	1.41	-0.51	-0.24	0.72
BE04	I feel good with LIDL because of their simple invoices/receipts	4.69	1.26	-0.55	0.39	0.65
BE05	The receipts of LIDL are easy to understand	5.60	1.06	-0.87	0.40	0.51
BE06	I find it interesting to connect with LIDL through the Internet	4.47	1.23	-0.12	0.55	0.55
BE07	I feel good when I get any message or news about LIDL	4.42	1.31	-0.40	0.22	0.62
BE08	Any ads about LIDL grab my attention	5.07	1.35	-0.93	0.71	0.61
BE09	The way LIDL organizes their shelves is attractive	4.81	1.49	-0.69	-0.20	0.74
BE10	Product display arrangement makes product search easier	4.93	1.47	-0.86	0.02	0.74
BE11	Proper arrangement of shelves at this retail brand makes me feel good	4.90	1.46	-0.84	-0.04	0.75
BE12	I enjoy shopping with LIDL because salespersons make it easy for me	5.07	1.23	-1.02	1.16	0.69
BE13	I feel good in dealing with LIDL because their staff have the required knowledge	5.02	1.15	-0.91	0.90	0.73
BE14	Helping nature of staff at LIDL has contributed to a better shopping experience	4.89	1.16	-1.07	1.10	0.70
Brand love <i>Blove</i> – Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.935$.						
BL01	LIDL is a wonderful brand.	5.13	1.15	-0.79	0.99	0.83
BL02	LIDL makes me feel good.	4.92	1.19	-0.64	0.53	0.86
BL03	LIDL is totally awesome.	4.89	1.20	-0.53	0.33	0.90
BL04	LIDL makes me very happy.	4.49	1.26	-0.43	0.41	0.87
BL05	I love the LIDL brand.	5.18	1.15	-0.80	0.92	0.81
BL06	LIDL is a pure delight.	4.24	1.34	-0.39	0.30	0.82

BL07	I am passionate about LIDL.	4.16	1.61	-0.38	-0.50	0.80
BL08	I am very attached to LIDL.	4.07	1.52	-0.33	-0.37	0.81
+WOM – Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.894$.						
WOM1	I have recommended LIDL to lots of people.	4.85	1.47	-0.85	0.28	0.91
WOM2	I 'talk up' LIDL to my friends.	4.83	1.52	-0.93	0.24	0.89
WOM3	I try to spread the good word about LIDL.	4.11	1.59	-0.31	-0.65	0.85
WOM4	I give LIDL tons of word-of-mouth advertising.	5.14	1.24	-1.09	1.57	0.85

B. Instrument validity

Goodness of fit indices were determined for each scale (Table 3), after establishing some residual correlations. All scale models show good fit indicators, namely the value of χ^2 divided by degrees of freedom below 5 (Wheaton et al., 1977), the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Tuck-Lewis index (TLI) above 0.95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) below 0.6 (MacCallum et al., 1996), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) below 0.05 (Byrne, 2016).

Convergent and discriminant validity were then assessed. As documented in Table 4, $CR > 0.7$ (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and $AVE > 0.5$ confirm convergent validity, and the variance shared between the variables does not exceed the square root of the AVE, confirming discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 3: Confirmatory factorial analysis: model fit indexes.

Note: *Bexp* = Brand experience; *Blove* = Brand love; *+WOM* = +WOM; χ^2 = chi-square; *df* = degrees of freedom; *CFI* = comparative fit index; *TLI* = Tucker-Lewis index; *RMSEA* = root mean square error of approximation; *CI* = confidence interval; *SRMR* = standardized root mean square residual.

Scale	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	χ^2/df	<i>TLI</i>	<i>CFI</i>	<i>RMSEA (90%CI)</i>	<i>SRMR</i>
<i>Bexp</i>	191.468	61	< 0.001	3.139	0.978	0.985	0.045 (0.038-0.052)	0.041
<i>Blove</i>	35.004	11	< 0.001	3.182	0.991	0.997	0.046 (0.029-0.063)	0.010
<i>+WoM</i>	6.822	2	0.033	3.411	0.994	0.998	0.048 (0.012-0.09)	0.009

Table 4: Correlations between *Bexp*, *Blove*, and *+WOM*, AVE, AVE square roots and CR.

Note: ** $p < 0.001$; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *AVE* = average variance extracted; *CR* = composite reliability; **bold** = *AVE* square roots.

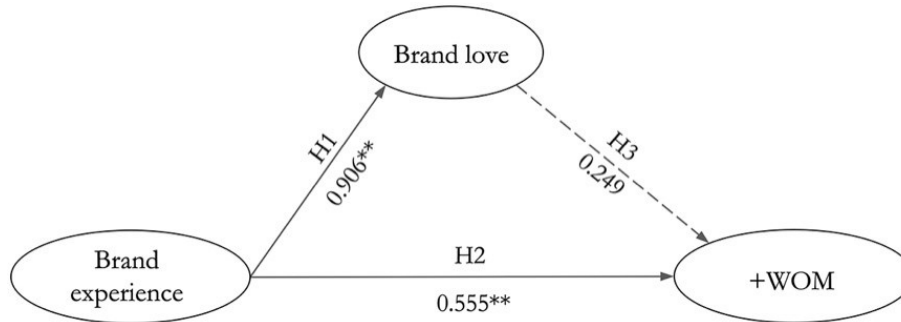
	Variable	Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Pearson correlations			<i>CR</i>	<i>AVE</i>
					<i>Bexp</i>	<i>Blove</i>	<i>+WoM</i>		
<i>Bexp</i>	Brand experience	1-7	4.8666	0.869	0.669			0.918	0.448
<i>Blove</i>	Brand love	1-7	4.6333	1.089	.762**	0.838		0.950	0.702
<i>+WoM</i>	Positive word-of-mouth	1-7	4.7328	1.270	.639**	.682**	0.873	0.928	0.763

C. Path analysis

A path analysis based on the structural equation model (SEM) was performed, presenting good fit indexes: $\chi^2(244) = 377$, $\chi^2/df = 2.892$, $TLI = 0.970$, $CFI = 0.978$, $RMSEA = 0.042$ (90%CI: 0.039-0.046), $SRMR = 0.038$. As seen in Figure 2, brand

experience is significantly positively associated with brand love ($\beta_1=0.906$, $p = 0.006$) and with +WOM ($\beta_2=0.555$, $p = 0.002$). However, the association between brand love and +WOM is not statistically significant (Table 5; $p = 0.118$). As a result, hypotheses H1 and H2 are corroborated, but hypotheses H3 and H4 are not.

Figure 2
SEM – Path analysis



Note: ** $p < 0.01$. Dashed arrow: non-significant path.

Table 5: SEM: Standardized regression weights.

Note: ** $p < 0.001$; *Bexp* = brand experience; *Blove* = brand love.

Hypotheses			Standardized regression weights β			Evaluation
			Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total	
H1	Bexp → Blove (+)	Brand experience is positively associated with brand love			0.906**	Supported
H2	Bexp → +WOM (+)	Brand experience is positively associated with +WOM			0.555**	Supported
H3	Blove → +WOM (+)	Brand love is positively associated with +WOM			0.249	Not supported
H4	Bexp → Blove → +WOM (+)	Brand love mediates the relationship between brand experience and +WOM	0.555**	0.226	0.781**	Not supported

D. Differences

This study also intended to look for differences in respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, namely gender, education level, occupation, generational group, and income regarding +WOM. There were no statistically significant differences between education and income groups. However, this was not the case for gender and occupation,

as there was a greater tendency for women than men to practice more WOM [$t(1047) = 4.876; p < 0.001; d = 0.313$], and for inactive respondents [$t(1047) = 2.897; p = 0.004; d = 0.237$]. The same tendency was confirmed between generational groups, with Generation Z more willing to practice WOM than their counterparts [$F(3, 1045) = 14.184; p < 0.001; \eta^2 = 0.039$].

V. Discussion and conclusions

As documented by the results, hypothesis H1 is supported, in line with Rodrigues and Brandão (2021) and (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), who suggested that brand experience can be considered as a precursor of brand love. As previously suggested by Giovannini et al. (2015), a remarkable brand experience can positively influence +WOM, suggesting a positive relationship between these two constructs; therefore, hypothesis H2 is also supported.

Brand love is positively correlated with +WOM, an association claimed by several authors (Bairrada et al., 2018; Ferreira et al., 2019; Giovannini et al., 2015; Karjaluoto et al., 2016; Machado et al., 2019; Roy et al., 2016); however, hypothesis H3 is not supported, nor is H4, which posited that brand love played a mediating role between brand experience and +WOM. This outcome differs from Rodrigues and Brandão's (2021), who found evidence of such mediation among Portuguese and Swedish IKEA consumers. Research on the prevalence of utilitarian and hedonic values in retail experience and brand love presents a complex picture. For example, Lim and Ang (2008) found that cultural conditioning can influence consumers' preferences for utilitarian or hedonic products; Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) and Vieira, Santini and Araújo (2018) found that brand love is stronger for hedonic products, with the latter also finding a positive association between hedonic and utilitarian values. It could be argued that in a retail store such as LIDL, utilitarian values predominate and therefore brand love is not as significant as in other contexts (product type and culture).

The analysis also revealed significant statistical differences by gender, occupation, and age group. Women value the brand experience more than men and develop stronger brand love feelings; they are also more likely to engage in +WOM. These findings are consistent with Rodrigues and Brandão (2021), Machado et al. (2019) and (Ünal and Aydın (2013), who found that female consumers tend to be more passionate about the retail market experience. Similarly, statistically significant differences in occupation indicate that unemployed participants consistently value more brand experience and +WOM, which is in line with Yilmaz and Koçoğlu (2018).

The results suggest that participants with primary/secondary education value the brand experience more and feel more love for LIDL than those with higher education; these results differ from Rodrigues and Brandão's (2021) findings, which suggest that consumers with higher education tend to value the brand experience more. The age groups considered in the study, GenZers, Millennials, GenXers, and Baby Boomers, showed differences in the willingness to practice +WOM: as age increases, the +WOM score also increases, i.e., consumers are more inclined towards +WoM as they get older.

As suggested by Parment's study (2013), Baby Boomers value the retail brand experience more and tend to be more involved in grocery shopping compared to GenY. A possible explanation could be the fact that they have more purchasing power and higher demand. The results show that older generations tend to spread +WOM more than younger generations; this finding is consistent with Karjaluoto et al. (2016), who postulate that age group strongly influences word-of-mouth, and older respondents are more active in +WoM. In addition, baby boomers tend to trust +WoM more than traditional advertising (Reisenwitz et al., 2007).

This study aimed to answer the following research questions: i) What is the role of brand experience and brand love in generating +WOM among LIDL customers? And ii) Do these consumers behave differently according to their socio-demographic characteristics? Accordingly, the relationships between brand experience, brand love and +WOM were examined. The results also showed significant differences among LIDL customers according to gender, occupational status, and generation.

Implications for the brand can be drawn from the findings, namely that LIDL would likely benefit from promoting an excellent shopper experience to build a long-lasting and positive relationship with consumers and generate consistent positive feedback. With a view to boosting +WOM, marketers should manage the experience consumers have when they consume a product brand. In addition, improving the quality of the consumer experience should strengthen the consumer-brand relationship. As a result, consumers would feel passionate (brand love) and evangelical (+WOM) about the brand.

As a limitation, although the study uses a sample that provides valuable data, its size and the data collection procedure do not allow the conclusions to be representative of the Portuguese population. Future research could replicate the study in other retail chains and further explore different consumer behavior outcomes mentioned in the literature, such as brand commitment, loyalty, and trust. It would also be interesting to study the brand in other countries to consider possible cultural effects.

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APPENDIX

Table A1: Item correlations.

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

	BE01	BE02	BE03	BE04	BE05	BE06	BE07	BE08	BE09	BE10	BE11	BE12	BE13	BE14	BL01	BL02	BL03	BL04	BL05	BL06	BL07	BL08	WOM1	WOM2	WOM3	WOM4			
BE01	1																												
BE02	.644**	1																											
BE03	.521**	.648**	1																										
BE04	.396**	.442**	.472**	1																									
BE05	.279**	.276**	.267**	.406**	1																								
BE06	.294**	.335**	.366**	.351**	.262**	1																							
BE07	.382**	.464**	.514**	.382**	.273**	.521**	1																						
BE08	.392**	.481**	.465**	.369**	.282**	.376**	.580**	1																					
BE09	.361**	.375**	.455**	.389**	.321**	.358**	.330**	.329**	1																				
BE10	.332**	.369**	.413**	.394**	.331**	.304**	.258**	.282**	.794**	1																			
BE11	.343**	.391**	.433**	.383**	.322**	.304**	.291**	.304**	.804**	.886**	1																		
BE12	.321**	.328**	.385**	.340**	.291**	.231**	.300**	.302**	.400**	.461**	.453**	1																	
BE13	.373**	.369**	.427**	.364**	.303**	.285**	.334**	.339**	.437**	.469**	.468**	.799**	1																
BE14	.332**	.319**	.365**	.403**	.320**	.287**	.316**	.295**	.416**	.443**	.418**	.757**	.752**	1															
BL01	.510**	.614**	.596**	.402**	.282**	.277**	.412**	.464**	.459**	.483**	.491**	.454**	.471**	.414**	1														
BL02	.545**	.632**	.568**	.450**	.303**	.346**	.496**	.495**	.474**	.457**	.471**	.450**	.472**	.439**	.743**	1													
BL03	.514**	.625**	.601**	.443**	.304**	.354**	.457**	.467**	.493**	.472**	.484**	.444**	.474**	.440**	.820**	.800**	1												
BL04	.473**	.557**	.535**	.459**	.257**	.353**	.474**	.442**	.465**	.427**	.447**	.375**	.386**	.392**	.748**	.736**	.736**	1											
BL05	.433**	.570**	.546**	.399**	.347**	.346**	.401**	.450**	.457**	.469**	.472**	.417**	.434**	.417**	.699**	.686**	.725**	.653**	1										
BL06	.407**	.510**	.539**	.438**	.233**	.342**	.449**	.430**	.434**	.415**	.404**	.329**	.355**	.357**	.556**	.616**	.653**	.739**	.569**	1									
BL07	.372**	.466**	.511**	.372**	.201**	.325**	.376**	.358**	.409**	.382**	.386**	.281**	.325**	.284**	.555**	.549**	.639**	.633**	.567**	.697**	1								
BL08	.420**	.507**	.539**	.402**	.207**	.338**	.448**	.405**	.422**	.375**	.396**	.305**	.364**	.314**	.527**	.609**	.613**	.668**	.557**	.694**	.764**	1							
WOM1	.457**	.530**	.548**	.321**	.219**	.270**	.456**	.468**	.365**	.330**	.355**	.388**	.424**	.335**	.562**	.575**	.554**	.516**	.565**	.475**	.422**	.533**	1						
WOM2	.393**	.514**	.448**	.319**	.197**	.272**	.410**	.432**	.341**	.280**	.298**	.294**	.326**	.253**	.496**	.513**	.510**	.470**	.502**	.438**	.394**	.484**	.751**	1					
WOM3	.380**	.507**	.486**	.380**	.174**	.277**	.500**	.460**	.364**	.310**	.337**	.309**	.351**	.289**	.469**	.530**	.520**	.553**	.454**	.520**	.457**	.547**	.705**	.682**	1				
WOM4	.425**	.513**	.515**	.326**	.281**	.302**	.419**	.456**	.382**	.373**	.359**	.372**	.405**	.358**	.531**	.545**	.557**	.485**	.575**	.459**	.409**	.474**	.696**	.675**	.592**	1			

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