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Measuring the effects of retail brand experiences and brand love on word of mouth: a cross-country study of IKEA brand

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate, for the first time, the mediating effect of brand love on word of mouth through brand experience, by using a comparative study of the IKEA brand in Sweden and Portugal. It also explores how the perceived functional and hedonic brand values mediate the effects of brand experience and brand love. The data collection was done via an online survey of real users of the brand IKEA in Portugal and Sweden. The paper suggests that brand love mediates the relationship between brand experience and word of mouth in both countries. This study also identifies differences in the effects of the sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual brand dimension in brand love. Additionally, it is suggested that consumer-brand relationship duration, genre, and education levels influence brand love. This paper contributes to the fast-growing consumer-brand relationships literature by exploring the role of brand love in the context of retail brands. It also intends to provide a better understanding of how to build and nurture effective brand experiences in order to elicit intense and passionate feelings towards retail brands.

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Brand love; brand experience; retail; IKEA; word of mouth

Introduction

Retail brands have been a focus of branding and retail theory following the success of new retail concepts and changes in consumer behaviour. Most of the relevant studies investigated store choice criteria, buying motives, as well as determinants and outcomes of retail experiences from economic, sociocultural, and psychological perspectives (Terblanche and Boshoff 2001; Burns and Neisner 2006; Carpenter and Moore 2009; Jain and Bagdare 2009; Johnson et al. 2015). Some scholars have also discussed the shift of retail branding concepts from product-as-a-brand to store-as-a-brand, and more recently, to retailer-as-a-brand (e.g. Burt, Johansson, and Thelander 2010), in which the retailer becomes the brand itself (Pralhad and Ramaswamy 2004) in the value-generation process (Khan and Rahman 2016).

The growing debate on the shifting retail branding concept sheds light on the relevance of store-as-a-brand as a heuristic device (Collins et al. 2015) which strengthens both rational and emotional consumer-brand relationships, by combining an effective shopping process with a fun and memorable retail brand experience (Kumar and Kim

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2014). This assumption is aligned with the extensive research on the experiential aspects of retailing, and stores as vehicle of meaning transfer (Bäckström 2006). Indeed, the emergence of the experience economy and experiential marketing paradigm (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Pine and Gilmore 1998; Schmitt 1999) stressed the importance of perceived hedonic shopping value linked to the emotional aspects of consumption (Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994; Jones, Reynolds, and Arnold 2006; Carpenter and Moore 2009). Those studies highlight how hedonic shopping value plays a key role in shaping retail experiences (Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994; Jones, Reynolds, and Arnold 2006; Carpenter and Moore 2009) in clear opposition to utilitarian shopping value, which is described as task-oriented and cognitive in nature (Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994). In other words, it has been demonstrated that retail brands have evolved from being centered in the utilitarian aspects of products and services (Mascarenhas, Kesavan, and Bernacchi 2006) to a focus on creating value (Ravald and Gronroos 1996) through distinct and memorable retail brand experiences (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009; Pine and Gilmore 1998; Andreini et al. 2018). In this domain, the concept of experience store has gained increasing attention from both academics and retailers (e.g. Jones et al. 2010). The experience store format is believed to encourage customers to form emotional bonds and develop strong brand relationships with retail brands as a result of appealing customer experiences, during which customers can try out products and services without feeling pressured to purchase (Jones et al. 2010).

The evolution of the retail brand concept has also raised interest on how retailers may benefit from a strong corporate brand image. Tarnovskaya (2015) notes that retail corporate brands create value by magnifying levels of customers' confidence in the company's offering by expressing its ideas and values (Pace 2017). Therefore, a strong corporate brand image may result in customer satisfaction and store loyalty (Mårtenson 2007) and facilitate the emergence of the retailer-as-a-brand concept (Burt, Johansson, and Thelander 2010). In other words, retail concepts illustrate how a retail brand can position itself in the market through its tangible and symbolic meanings (product-as-a-brand), experiential meanings (store-as-a-brand) and its corporate brand image (retailer-as-a-brand).

IKEA is an outstanding example of a global retailer which pursues a standardized approach to every international market it enters (Burt, Johansson, and Thelander 2011) with a high degree of brand internalisation across markets (Tarnovskaya and de Chernatony 2011). The IKEA brand was created in Sweden in 1926 and currently has 433 stores worldwide (ikea.com). The retail brand is perceived as one of the global front-runners of corporate social responsibility (Morsing and Roepstorff 2015), which strongly shapes its corporate brand image worldwide. More importantly, 'the IKEA corporate brand provides the company with a strategic direction, based on its vision and brand values, which, in combination with the product range and people involved in delivering these values, create a powerful brand identity as a driving force for shaping the market' (Tarnovskaya, Elg, and Burt 2008, 958). IKEA is also a brand relationship builder that combines sensory, intellectual, affective, and behavioral aspects of brand experiences. Moreover, there is anecdotal evidence that the IKEA brand has been able to engage consumers emotionally over the years in terms of its revolutionary retail brand experience, technological and sustainable innovations, as well as with its memorable marketing campaigns (marketingweek.com). In other words, IKEA's disruptive approach to branding

has been a powerful gateway for staying ahead of the game and thriving in an increasingly competitive global retail landscape.

It is worth noting that consumer perceptions of IKEA are influenced by the interactions and relationships of three branding elements: the products, the store, and the company (Burt and Davies 2010; Burt, Johansson, and Thelander 2010). As Burt (2010) explains *'we do not talk about IKEA as a product as most of the products on sale have sub-brand names (Billy, Ivar, Klippan, and so on), rather we talk about IKEA as a store (we go "to IKEA", not to "the big blue and yellow furniture store") and we talk about IKEA as a corporate concept (take-away furniture, self-assembly, the catalogue, and so on)'*. More specifically, the retail store *'represents the visible, tangible, intangible and experimental expression of the retailer as a brand'* (Burt 2010, 18). Benefiting from a strong corporate brand image, the world's largest home furnishing retailer has built its brand around offering design furniture, kitchenware and appliances that are affordable, stylish, and modern (i.e. perceived functional value) to offer *'a better everyday life for the many people'* (i.e. perceived hedonic value). In other words, Ikea's vision and culture is perceived as a combination of the awareness towards societal problems (improving people's lives) with making financial profits and minimizing production costs (Tarnovskaya and de Chernatony 2011).

Consequently, this study focuses on IKEA, as an example of a retailer-as-a-brand that strategically combines three branding elements, namely the products, the store, and the company (Burt and Davies 2010; Burt, Johansson, and Thelander 2010), so as to measure the mediating effects of brand love on positive word of mouth through retail brand experiences. Brand love, as a relational construct, is conceptualized as *'the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade mark'* (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006, 81).

The present study differs from previous ones in three ways. Firstly, whereas earlier studies on retail brand experience have focused mainly on strategic elements such as packaging, own label brand, customer billings, order and applications forms, points-of-sale and recommendations of a salesperson (e.g. Khan and Rahman 2016), the present study focuses on the emotional, sensory, behavioural, and intellectual dimensions of the retail brand experience (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009). Moreover, this investigation is the first empirical study to focus on understanding positive retail consumer-brand relationships from the consumer's experiential view. Despite extensive research conducted in the field of brand love over the last three decades, little is known about what generates a brand love relationship in the context of global retail brands and its behavioural consequences. Indeed, the majority of studies on brand love has mainly investigated consumption objects, bikes, pets, destinations (Ahuvia 1993; Ahuvia 2005; Whang et al. 2004), fashion (Cho 2018) and more recently luxury goods (Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019; Rodrigues, Brandao, and Rodrigues 2018). One notable exception is a study conducted by Nikhashemi, Jebarajakirthy, and Nusair (2019) which investigates the roles of retail brand experience and brand love in the fashion industry. However, these authors do not investigate how the experiential shopping outcomes are explained by a combination of cognitive, behavioural, emotional and sensory consumer responses (Bagdare and Jain 2013), and adopt the holistic perspective of retail brand experience proposed by Khan and Rahman (2016). As such, the present study attempts to clarify the mediating role of brand love on positive word of mouth through retail brand experiences. Secondly, although perceived utilitarian or hedonic shopping value have been investigated extensively in

retailing (e.g. Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994; Jones, Reynolds, and Arnold 2006; Carpenter and Moore 2009) there is a severe paucity of studies that explore its mediating effect on brand love. Consequently, our study aims to clarify these causal relationships. Thirdly, there is a lack of retail-brand experience-related studies that investigate the relevance of the duration of the consumer-brand relationship and individual variables (sex, age, and education) on creating brand love. The present study addresses this lacuna by choosing Sweden, as the country of IKEA birth and Portugal, where the brand was introduced only in 2004. It is worth noting that the deep drivers of Portuguese and Swedish culture are very distinct, according to the Hofstede Insights (2019), which may impact on how consumer-brand relationships are created and nurtured.

The main aim of the present study was to test a general framework for creating brand love from a retail experiential perspective. In addressing this issue, our study tested research hypotheses by empirically cross-validating the proposed conceptual model in a cross-country context. In other words, the research hypotheses were focused primarily on brand experience dimensions (sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual) that influence positive word of mouth through the mediating effect of brand love. Moreover, we aim to demonstrate how the consumer-retail brand relationship is created and evolves over time and how it is evaluated in terms of its experiential dimensions.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Firstly, relevant research literature on brand experience, perceived functional and hedonic value, as well as brand love, is reviewed and followed by an explanation of the proposed theoretical model. Secondly, the methodology and findings are presented. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of both academic and managerial implications, suggestions for future research, and limitations.

Theoretical background

According to Ailawadi and Keller (2004, 332), '*a retail brand identifies the goods and services of a retailer and differentiates them from those of competitors*'. Research also suggests that a retail brand can be experienced through a combination of its products, stores and company (Burt and Davies 2010; Burt, Johansson, and Thelander 2010). As such, consumer perceptions are influenced strongly by the interactions and relationships of these three elements (Burt and Davies 2010; Burt, Johansson, and Thelander 2010) and how they contribute, individually or collectively, to create memorable and impactful brand experiences.

Brand experience, as a concept, has been widely investigated and discussed in the marketing and branding literature and has drawn much attention from both scholars and practitioners (e.g. Keller and Lehmann 2006; Khan and Rahman 2016). Indeed, the concept of brand experience has emerged as directly related to the holistic and hedonic brand proposition (Klaus and Maklan 2007) when consumers are looking for or purchasing products and services (Brakus et al. 2009). Interestingly, this concept reflects a relational brand-building approach in which the brand becomes the overall experience (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; Payne et al. 2009), which emphasizes how vital is to manage both the emotional and functional brand components, when engaging with consumers in several encounters.

The conceptualization of brand experience sheds light on the relevance of all brand-related stimuli in terms of products, marketing communications and atmospherics, so as to convey a unique and memorable sensorial brand identity (Rodrigues 2018). Consequently,

some scholars have proposed that brand experience consists of delivering the brand promise consistently across all the touchpoints (Frow and Payne 2007; Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009), so as to enhance consumer-brand relationships from an emotional perspective (Brodie, Glynn, and Little 2006; Iglesias, Singh, and Batista-Foguet 2011; Prentice, Wang, and Loureiro 2019). Against this background, it can be expected that if retail brand experiences are positive and pleasant, consumers are prone to repeat them and become more loyal to the brand (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009). Moreover, the relationship between brand experience and positive word of mouth appears to be mediated by brand love (Giovannini, Xu, and Thomas 2015; Karjaluoto, Munnukka, and Kiuru 2016), showing that the pleasure and excitement felt by consumers can may serve as drivers for word-of-mouth activities (Lovett, Peres, and Shachar 2013), because consumers are likely to share fun, news and experiences with their peers (Berger 2014).

Interestingly, research conceptualizes retail brand experience mainly as a set of store elements and marketing activities, such as brand name; customer billing, order and application; point-of-sales assistance; recommendations by a salesperson; mass media impressions; experience/event marketing; and brand stories (Khan and Rahman 2016; Nikhashemi, Jebarajakirthy, and Nusair 2019). Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence suggests that retail brands are more than mere identifiers of goods and services (Ailawadi and Keller 2004). Retail brands deliver their brand promise through the brand experiences they provide to their customers in the value-generating process. For example, IKEA differentiates itself from other retail brands by positioning itself as an experience store that stimulates the five senses and brings fun, amusement and sensory pleasure through its innovative approach to the customer journey (Helmefalk and Hultén 2017). The layout of the IKEA stores paved the way for a circular design and one-way system that guide shoppers through their stores and thus stimulates impulse buying behaviour. Moreover, IKEA stimulates interaction and relies on environments perceived to be mysterious, in order to elicit emotional responses in their customers. The simple act of touching IKEA's products during the customer journey and through assembling a piece of furniture is part of the retail brand strategy aimed at increasing the overall perceived value of the product and building emotional resonance with its customers. IKEA is also an outstanding example of the circular economy and sustainability mega-trend which induces good feelings and sentiments towards a brand that cares for the environment. In 2017, IKEA improved its action-oriented ability by introducing an augmented reality app that allows consumers to try out their products virtually, thus reinventing traditional marketing communication. Lastly, IKEA brand is worldwide known by its ability to arouse curiosity, critical thinking and problem-solving through its marketing communications. One of the most striking examples is the brand-challenging attitude to literally get customers between IKEA's sheets and have them experience 'a night to remember' in their stores and to share with their peers.

The conceptual model and the four hypotheses presented in this study are reported in [Figure 1](#). In our study, we conceptualize retail brands from a holistic perspective by considering the product, the store and the company level (Burt and Davies 2010; Burt, Johansson, and Thelander 2010). More specifically, we argue that a comprehensive approach to retail branding concepts, such as retailer-as-a-brand, enables researchers to more effectively investigate the impact of overall brand-related stimuli in the consumer-brand relationship. Drawing on previous empirical studies from Brakus, Schmitt, and

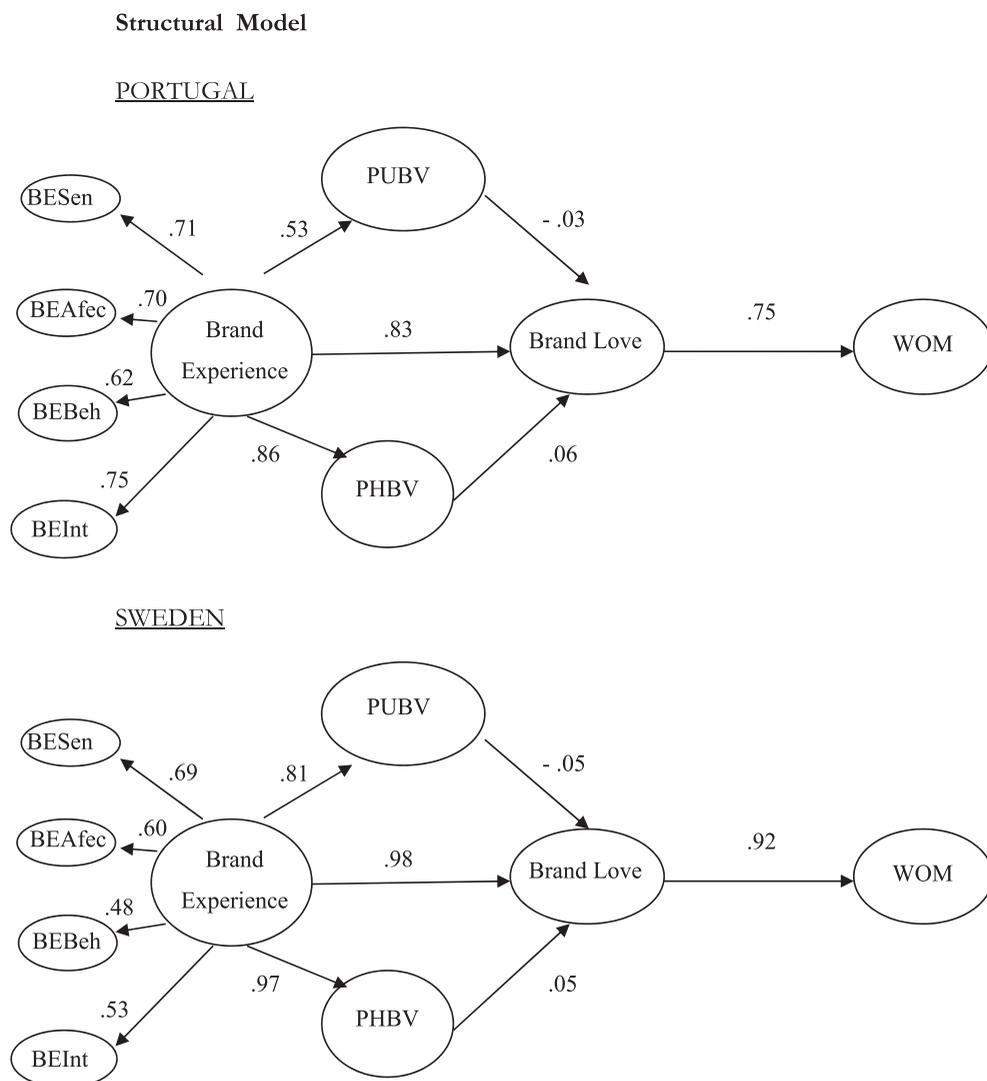


Figure 1. Structural model.

Zarantonello (2009) and Bagozzi, Batra, and Ahuvia (2017), the authors propose that affective, sensory, intellectual, and behavioral retail brand experience dimensions are key antecedents to brand love. Perceived functional and hedonic brand values mediate the effects of brand experience on brand love, since the literature suggests that both functional and symbolic/emotional aspects of brands are positively associated with brand love (Bairrada, Coelho, and Coelho 2018). As such, we adopted a two-dimensional conceptualization of shopping value in order to incorporate the joyful (hedonic) and instrumental (utilitarian) nature of retail brand experience (Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994). Furthermore, positive word of mouth serves as the behavioral outcome of brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Fetscherin 2014; Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019). IKEA is the world's largest home furnishing retailer and was ranked among the best global brands in 2018 (Interbrand.com). According to Interbrand's brand strength evaluation score,

IKEA benefits worldwide from high levels of commitment, authenticity, and consistency. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence shows that the strength and valence of consumer-brand relationships may vary according to the length of years that the brand has been operating in a country, as well as its origin. We therefore believe that it is useful to reveal the role of brand experience in eliciting brand love, by comparing Sweden (the brand origin country) to a southern European country like Portugal where the brand was introduced only in 2004.

The relationship between brand experience and brand love

Brand experience has been widely debated among scholars and academics due to its positive outcomes such as brand loyalty (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009; Ramaseshan and Stein 2014; Iglesias, Singh, and Batista-Foguet 2011), brand credibility (Shamim and Mohsin Butt 2013), brand attitude (Zarantonello and Schmitt 2013), brand satisfaction (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009), affective commitment (Iglesias, Singh, and Batista-Foguet 2011), brand attachment and brand commitment (Ramaseshan and Stein 2014), and brand equity (Zarantonello and Schmitt 2013). Against this background, scholars suggest that companies should stage brand experiences by incorporating both the functional and emotional aspects of brands in its regular interactions with consumers (Morrison and Crane 2007; Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009; Iglesias, Singh, and Batista-Foguet 2011) in a consistent manner across several brand touchpoints (Meyer and Schwager 2007)

The pioneering article of Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009, 53) conceptualized brand experience as a multi-dimensional concept and defined it 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*'. Notably, four dimensions of brand experience were proposed, namely sensory, affective, behavioural and intellectual (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009). The sensory dimension concerns how strongly the brand appeals to vision, taste, smell, sound, and touch, and whether the brand has a strong impact on consumers' five senses. On the other hand, the affective dimension refers to the degree to which the brand is able to induce feelings and sentiments and therefore generate strong emotional ties. The behavioral dimension, by contrast, is about the action-oriented ability of the brand to engage with consumers in physical activities. Lastly, the intellectual dimension is linked to the degree to which a brand arouses curiosity, critical thinking, and problem-solving through its marketing activities. In a broader sense, brand experiences may be staged in a variety of online and offline encounters and result from direct or indirect interactions with products (Hoch 2002), retail environments (Spence et al. 2014) marketing communications (Zarantonello and Schmitt 2013) and places (Agapito, Valle, and Mendes 2014; Rodrigues et al. 2019).

Brand experiences have been studied in multiple retailing contexts. For example, Nysveen, Pedersen, and Skard (2013) tested the brand experience scale of Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009) in the services context and proposed the relational experience as an additional brand experience dimension. A similar study was conducted by Huang et al. (2015), who examined how sensory, cognitive, and affective experiences impact on relational brand experiences in online and store channels, and accounted for the mediating effect of relational brand experience on brand awareness and brand loyalty through brand experience. Furthermore, an empirical study from Cleff, Lin, and Walter

(2014) of Starbucks in Taiwan showed a positive and strong impact of the retail brand experience on brand image, and a weaker and positive effect on brand awareness. It was demonstrated that a pleasurable retail brand experience infused with sensory stimulation plays a central role in creating brand equity over time (Cleff, Lin, and Walter 2014). In another strand of research, Lin (2015) provided evidence that meaningful, innovative brand experiences may influence brand equity and brand satisfaction. More recently, Huang (2017) demonstrated that sensory experience is the key driver of brand love in the context of mobile brands, whereas Iglesias, Markovic, and Rialp (2019) accounted for the relevance of the sensory brand experience in the context of services.

From a retail perspective, brand experience can be considered as the initial step in the relationship between brand and consumer, that ultimately leads to consumer–brand interaction (Oliver, Rust, and Varki 1997). By consistently designing and delivering positive brand experiences, retailers may help consumers to identify with the brand both from an individual (self) and collective (social) perspective (Jones and Runyan 2013). In this context, Jones and Runyan (2013) demonstrated that the strength of consumer-brand identification is driven by the strength and depth of their experience with the brand. As noted by Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009), the strength, duration, and valence of brand experiences may differ. More specifically, retail brand experiences may occur with or without premeditation in online and offline encounters, and could endure over time or be short-lived. In other words, retail brand experiences offer a holistic evaluation of the brand that ultimately results in a gestalt of experiences (Khan and Rahman 2015). Consequently, memorable retail brand experiences may drive brand love as the result of negative or positive interactions with sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual brand-related stimuli.

Brand love, as a relational construct, is conceptualized as ‘the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade mark’ (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006, 81). During the last three decades, the brand love construct has been investigated in terms of its conceptualization (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Ahuvia 1993), antecedents and outcomes (e.g. Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019; Bairrada, Coelho, and Coelho 2018; Rauschnabel and Ahuvia 2014; Fetscherin 2014; Albert and Merunka 2013; Ismail and Spinelli 2012) and finally its measurement (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Bagozzi, Batra, and Ahuvia 2017). Notably, several predictors of brand love have been recognized in the marketing literature with a focus on constructs, such as brand uniqueness and brand prestige (Bairrada, Coelho, and Coelho 2018), brand image (Ismail and Spinelli 2012), brand identification (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2010; Albert and Merunka 2013), brand anthropomorphism (Rauschnabel and Ahuvia 2014), brand trust (Albert and Merunka 2013), as well as a sense of community with other brand users (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2010).

In the same line of research, several behavioral outcomes have also been identified, namely brand loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2010; Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Albert and Merunka 2013; Bairrada, Coelho, and Coelho 2018), positive word of mouth (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Albert and Merunka 2013; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Ismail and Spinelli 2012; Bairrada, Coelho, and Coelho 2018); Albert and Merunka (2013); Fetscherin (2014); Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019), willingness to pay premium prices (Albert and Merunka 2013; Bairrada, Coelho, and Coelho 2018); Bauer, Heinrich, and Albrecht 2009), and purchase intention (Fetscherin 2014; Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019). Additionally, brand commitment (Albert and Merunka 2013) and active engagement (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2010) have also been proposed as

emotional brand love outcomes. It is worth noting that Huang (2017) has recently demonstrated that brand love, as a relational construct, mediates the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. In particular, evidence was presented that mobile phone sensory experience is the key driver of brand love, which stresses the relevance of the sensory aspects of brands in eliciting passionate feelings towards brands.

Given that consumers tend to place great emphasis on retail brand experience when looking for or purchasing products and services, we anticipate a positive retail brand experience to elicit passionate feelings towards a retail brand. More specifically, we hypothesize that the four dimensions of brand experience impact differently on brand love. Formally, we state that:

H1: Sensory (a), affective (b), behavioral (c), and intellectual (d) brand experience will positively affect brand love

The mediating effect of perceived utilitarian and hedonic brand values between brand experience and brand love

Value has been extensively investigated by marketing scholars (e.g. Gentile, Spiller, and Noci 2007; Zeithaml 1988) as a way to assist brands in creating and delivering value through its marketing activities. According to Levy (1999), customers are value-driven when they search for or buy products and services. This assumption is in line with the categorization (Sujan 1985) and schema theory (Lurigio and Carroll 1985) which postulates that consumers form categories according to the stimuli that surround them and use these product categories to evaluate brands. Consequently, consumers are prone to evaluate the functional and hedonic values, as abstract representations of types of knowledge, based on their prior knowledge that is evoked by a particular category (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). In this regard, perceived value can be conceptualized as a 'consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product (or service) based on perceptions of what is received and what is given' (Zeithaml 1988, 14).

This study adopts Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) hedonic and utilitarian value approach in order to capture shopping's joy aspects (hedonic) and the instrumental (utilitarian) nature of brand experience. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) defined hedonic value as the potential pleasure that consumers derive from a particular product or service, whereas functional value is conceptualized as the ability of a product or service to perform functions in consumers' everyday lives. This value dichotomy is grounded on the assumption that hedonic products and services contain subjective and nontangible features able to elicit pleasure responses from consumers, whereas functional products and services are characterized by objective and tangible features (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). Babin, Darden, and Griffin (1994) explain that hedonic value is more personal and subjective than utilitarian value. Moreover, utilitarian value refers to shopping as an aim to be fulfilled (e.g. buying a specific product with maximum efficiency), whereas the hedonic value refers to shopping as an emotional and recreational aim in itself (Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994). Nevertheless, research demonstrates that both utilitarian and hedonic values are essential to the retail experience, although one may be dominant on the other in different settings (Carpenter, Moore, and Fairhurst 2005; Childers et al. 2001).

An empirical study conducted by Cottet, Lichtlé, and Plichon (2006) in the context of grocery stores demonstrates that product availability has an impact on utilitarian value, while hedonic value is influenced by the atmosphere, interactions with store employees, as well as crowding and other peripheral services. Interestingly, a qualitative study of Canadian Wall-Mart stores suggests that perceived shopping value is dependent on store location in towns or cities. In other words, the perceived hedonic value is greater for downtown shoppers, due to store atmospherics and the availability of products and services (Teed et al. 2010). This assumption is aligned with the notion that consumers expect retailers to consistently deliver a minimum level of utilitarian value, and recognize the hedonic value of a shopping experience as an effective source of differentiation for stores as a brand (Carpenter, Moore, and Fairhurst 2005).

A large body of retail literature demonstrates that hedonic and utilitarian values determine the shopping experience outcome. In particular, previous research investigated perceived shopping value in the fashion context (Carpenter, Moore, and Fairhurst 2005), malls and department stores (e.g. Teller, Reutterer, and Schnedlitz 2008; Olsen and Skallerud 2011), fast-casual restaurant industry (Ryu, Han, and Jang 2010), airports (Han, Lee, and Kim 2018) and online shopping (Overby and Lee 2006; Parker and Wang 2016). Additionally, numerous researchers have demonstrated the significant relationship among perceived value, consumer satisfaction and behavioral loyalty in the business and hospitality fields (e.g. Jones, Reynolds, and Arnold 2006; Cottet, Lichtlé, and Plichon 2006; Carpenter 2008). More specifically, it is evident that there is a direct relationship between hedonic shopping value and retail store loyalty (Jones, Reynolds, and Arnold 2006; Cottet, Lichtlé, and Plichon 2006). As Olsen and Skallerud (2011) noted, hedonic shopping represents the emotional worth of the overall shopping experience that activates shopper pleasure. Nevertheless, other researchers have argued that shopping value is dependent on shopper traits and characteristics and is culturally grounded (Wang et al. 2000). For instance, one of the studies in this domain is particularly interesting in that it demonstrates how the level of hedonic value derived by Hungarian consumers is less pronounced than in many other countries, and they tend to approach shopping in malls as work (Millan and Howard 2007). One possible explanation is that leisure shopping requires free time and is dependent on how consumers prioritize their leisure pursuits (Millan and Howard 2007). Another empirical study conducted in Portugal among Millennials has identified seven main dimensions that explain shopping motivations. Specifically, the authors identified two utilitarian dimensions (achievement and efficiency) and five hedonic dimensions (pleasure and gratification shopping, idea shopping, social shopping, role shopping, and value shopping). Additional empirical evidence is provided that are significant differences in perceived hedonic values across shoppers in terms of age, gender, marital status and educational qualifications (Karim, Kumar, and Rahman 2013).

Research also acknowledges that hedonic products and services with nontangible, symbolic benefits are more likely to elicit brand loyalty (Kuikka and Laukkanen 2012), post-purchase intention (Han, Lee, and Kim 2018), and positive brand effect (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). Specifically, Bairrada, Coelho, and Coelho (2018) demonstrated that brand attributes, such as functional and symbolic/emotional, are positively linked to brand love feelings. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that the effect of brand satisfaction on attitudinal loyalty is significantly stronger among consumers with higher levels of hedonic value (Kuikka and Laukkanen 2012). Hence, there is ample evidence that customers perceive different types

of value linked to the retail brand experience. As such, we assume that perceived hedonic and utilitarian values might impact differently on brand love. Hence, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Perceived utilitarian brand values mediate the relationship between brand experience and brand love.

H3: Perceived hedonic brand values mediate the relationship between brand experience and brand love.

The relationship between brand love and word of mouth

Word of mouth is conceptualized as interpersonal and informal communication about services and goods (Godes and Mayzlin 2004; Richins and Root-Shaffer 1988). Through direct and indirect interaction with brands, consumers may gather information which is vital to deciding whether or not to recommend or not particular products and services (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1993). More specifically, Karjaluoto, Munnukka, and Kiuru (2016) argue that an affordable and long experience with the brand (measured in terms of years of use) increases positive word of mouth. Retail research shows that the perception of other customers influences an individual's service brand experience, which in turn results in positive word of mouth behaviour (Ngo et al. 2016). Several studies have indeed demonstrated that brand love is a predictor of positive word of mouth (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Ismail and Spinelli 2012; Fetscherin 2014; Albert and Merunka 2013). Retail research shows that customer love partially mediates the effect of service quality on positive word of mouth and willingness to pay more (Kim et al. 2010). Research also demonstrates that brand love mediates the relationship between the three dimensions of brand image (sensuality, mystery and intimacy) and word-of-mouth (Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019), as well as between hedonic brand value and word of mouth (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). Another stream of research has supported the notion that consumers are more prone to share experiences if they are passionate and 'evangelical' about brands (Giovannini, Xu, and Thomas 2015). Thus, we expect consumers to feel a passionate and strong connection to retail brands and to demonstrate this with positive word of mouth. Hence:

H4: Brand love will positively affect positive word of mouth

Methodology and method

Sample and procedure

In order to test our research model, Study 1 was operationalized by using a self-administered survey on Ikea brand. Firstly, three marketing professors were asked to assess the survey questions in order to avoid potential misinterpretation by respondents. Secondly, the survey was translated into Swedish and Portuguese and, lastly, ten Portuguese and ten Swedish respondents were asked to evaluate the survey in terms of its general comprehension.

After validating the research model, Study 2 was conducted in both Sweden and Portugal between October and November 2017, using a purpose sampling technique (Table 1). Data on Ikea in Sweden (N = 249) and Portugal (N = 421) was collected through

Table 1. Demographic profiles of the respondents.

Category	N		Percentage %	
	Sweden	Portugal	Sweden	Portugal
Male	87	140	35	33.3
Female	160	281	65	66.7
Age				
18–25	110	190	44.3	45.1
26–33	56	61	22.4	14.6
34–41	14	84	5.6	19.9
42–73	69	86	27.7	20.4
Education				
Elementary School	1	2	0.4	0.5
Gymnasium	32	72	12.9	17.1
University/Business School	216	347	86.7	82.4
	249	421	100	100

an online questionnaire. In both countries, the majority of the respondents are between 18 and 33 years followed by respondents who are between 42 and 73. Regarding the gender, the majority of respondents are female.

Measures

The development of the questionnaire instrument began with a literature review aiming to identify relevant measures in the context of 'brand experiences' and 'consumer-brand relationships'. The survey was divided into five sections: the first section refers to 'brand love'; the second section relates to 'brand experience'; the third and fourth section refers to 'perceived brand values (functional and hedonic)', the fifth section refers to 'positive word of mouth' and finally we collect socio-demographics. Validated scales from previous empirical studies were used to measure the constructs of 'brand experience' (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009), "brand love" (Bagozzi, Batra, and Ahuvia 2017), "perceived functional brand values" (Sweeney and Soutar 2001), "perceived hedonic brand values" (Sweeney and Soutar 2001), and "positive word of mouth" (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). A detailed list of items is provided in [Appendix A](#). Moreover, the authors used a five-point Likert-type response format, with 1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 = "strongly agree" for all the items at the exception of brand love (1 = "not to all" to 5 = very much') to measure the five constructs.

Measurement model

Convergent and discriminant validity was tested using confirmatory factor analysis for the IKEA brand by following the procedures proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), [Table 2](#) shows the standardized regression weights for 'brand experience', 'brand love', 'perceived hedonic brand values', 'perceived functional brand values' and 'positive word of mouth'. All estimated coefficients are statistically significant ($p < .001$) and ranged between .46 and .98. Overall, the fitness of the measurement models for Portugal is: $\chi^2/df = 2.397$, $p < .001$, CFI = .933, RMSEA = .031, 90% IC [.029, .033], $P(\text{RMSEA} \leq .05) < .001$, whereas for Sweden is $\chi^2/df = 1.896$, $p < .001$, CFI = .915, RMSEA = .060, 90% IC [.055, .065], $P(\text{RMSEA} \leq .05) < .001$, which is a very good measurement fitness (Black et al. 2006).

Table 2. Standardized regression weights – measurement model.

Path Analysis	B Portugal	B Sweden
Brand Experience (BE)		
Be Sensory	0,72	0,72
Be Affective	0,71	0,65
Be Behavioral	0,63	0,46
Be Intellectual	0,77	0,56
Perceived Utilitarian Brand Values (PUBV)		
Item 1	0,78	0,91
Item 2	0,80	0,87
Item 3	0,82	0,85
Perceived Hedonic Brand Values (PHBV)		
Item 1	0,71	0,82
Item 2	0,82	0,78
Item 3	0,83	0,75
Item 4	0,86	0,80
Item 5	0,79	0,78
Path Analysis	B Portugal	B Sweden
Brand Love (BL)		
Item 1	0,75	0,67
Item 2	0,78	0,62
Item 3	0,79	0,69
Item 4	0,81	0,74
Item 5	0,81	0,65
Item 6	0,76	0,51
Item 7	0,78	0,73
Item 8	0,80	0,74
Item 9	0,40	0,54
Item 10	0,52	0,55
Item 11	0,79	0,79
Item 12	0,77	0,75
Item 13	0,63	0,60
Item 14	0,67	0,58
Item 15	0,85	0,80
Item 16	0,80	0,71
Item 17	0,88	0,74
Item 18	0,86	0,75
Item 19	0,75	0,71
Item 20	0,75	0,77
Item 21	0,80	0,68
Item 22	0,83	0,69
Item 23	0,73	0,58
Item 24	0,73	0,59
Positive word-of-mouth (WOM)		
Item 1	0,88	0,84
Item 2	0,91	0,85
Item 3	0,87	0,88
Item 4	0,72	0,87

Obs: Significant items with $p < .001$

Furthermore, the reliability of the scales was assessed through the coefficient Alpha of Cronbach and the nomological validity of the constructs was assessed by the average variance extracted (AVE) and the composite reliability (CR). As shown in Table 3, we have construct reliability for all the constructs (CRs $\geq .70$), as well as convergent validity (AVE $\geq .50$) and discriminant validity (CR \geq AVE).

Our findings also show that most of the scales meet the cut off criteria previously identified, corroborating that the latent variables in the first order model have

discriminant validity and represent differentiated constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Additionally, the construct validity was confirmed according to Bagozzi and Yi (2012). The exception were the variable pairs 'Brand Experience' and 'Perceived Hedonic Brand Value', 'Brand Love' and 'Positive Word of Mouth'. So, the 'Brand Experience' scale has a square root of the AVE less than its correlation coefficients with the 'Brand love', 'Perceived hedonic brand value' and 'Word of mouth' measures. The reason why could be from a statistical approach, since the 'Brand Experience' construct presents a very high correlation with both 'Perceived Hedonic Brand Values' and 'Brand Love' constructs, as well as 'Word of Mouth' construct. Consequently, we proceed with the estimation of an alternative model by fixing the correlation between these three pairs of variables at 1 (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). Then, the test of Chi-Square differences, between both models, the unconstrained and the constrained model, suggests a significantly poorer fit in this case ($\Delta\chi^2 = 105.353$; $p < .001$; $\Delta\text{CMIN/DF} = 0.2$; $\Delta\text{RMSEA} = 0.02$; $\Delta\text{CFI} = -0.05$), thus indicating the existence of discriminant validity.

Moreover, we have included more two indices fit- Hoelter's .05 and .01 Critical N (CN) which represent a fit index independent of sample dimension. For both the .05 and .01 CN values for the model were > 200 (645 and 668, respectively). Hence, the findings demonstrate that our sample dimension ($N = 335$) is good since Hoelter's indicate that the CN should be upper 200 limit.

Structural model

In order to test our specified hypotheses, we examined the proposed model using AMOS 24.0 and followed the Anderson and Gerbing (1988) methodology (Figure 1). The model fit is very good for both countries: Portugal $\chi^2/\text{df} = 2.542$, $p < .001$, $\text{CFI} = .926$, $\text{RMSEA} = .033$, 90% IC [.031, .035], $P(\text{RMSEA} \leq .05) < .001$ and Sweden $\chi^2/\text{df} = 2.025$, $p < .001$, $\text{CFI} = .902$, $\text{RMSEA} = .064$, 90% IC [.060, .069], $P(\text{RMSEA} \leq .05) < .001$.

As shown in Figure 1, the path coefficients regarding the relationship between the four dimensions of 'brand experience' are significantly different. An overall finding is that the

Table 3. Constructs analysis – Portugal.

Construct	α	AVE	CR	Discriminant Validity				
				BE	PUBV	PHBV	BL	WOM
1. BE	.80	.50	.80	.71				
2. PUBV	.91	.64	.84	.47	.80			
3. PHBV	.90	.64	.90	.84	.57	.80		
4. BL	.95	.58	.97	.86	.43	.75	.76	
5. WOM	.92	.72	.91	.79	.54	.75	.74	.85

Table 4. Constructs analysis – Sweden.

Construct	α	AVE	CR	Discriminant Validity				
				BE	PUBV	PHBV	BL	WOM
1. BE	.71	.37	.69	.61				
2. PUBV	.84	.77	.91	.36	.87			
3. PHBV	.90	.62	.89	.81	.54	.79		
4. BL	.97	.46	.95	.85	.29	.65	.68	
5. WOM	.91	.74	.92	.80	.42	.73	.67	.86

'intellectual dimension' ($\gamma = .75, p < 0.001$) is the most relevant dimension of 'brand experience' in Portugal, whereas in Sweden is the 'sensory experience' ($\gamma = .69, p < 0.001$). Moreover, the influence of 'brand experience' in 'brand love' is highly significant for both countries, thus supporting H1. Notably, the influence is greater for Sweden ($\gamma = .98, p < 0.001$) when compared to Portugal ($\gamma = .83, p < 0.001$). Moreover, results also demonstrate that 'brand love' influences 'positive word of mouth', thus supporting H4. Nevertheless, the influence of 'brand love' on 'positive word-of-mouth' is higher for Sweden ($\beta = .92, p < 0.001$) when compared to Portugal ($\beta = .75, p < 0.001$). In sum, the results account for the mediation effect of 'brand love' on 'positive word of mouth' through 'brand experience'. Additionally, we have also analysed the multicollinearity regarding the high correlation between 'Brand Experience' and 'Brand Love'. The results demonstrated a very low collinearity among the indicators, with VIF of all items ranging between 1 and 3, which is below the common cut off of 5. So, the assumption of multicollinearity it was respected (Chin 2010).

Regarding H2 and H3, our study has not confirmed the impact of 'perceived utilitarian brand values' on 'brand love', for both Portugal ($p = .44$) and Sweden ($p = .11$). Additionally, it is demonstrated that the impact of the 'perceived hedonic brand values' on 'brand love' is not statistically significant in Portugal ($p = .57$) and Sweden ($p = .35$). Nevertheless, the results show that 'brand experience' has a significant and relevant impact on both 'perceived utilitarian' and 'hedonic brand values'. Overall, results demonstrate that 'brand experience' has the strongest effect on 'perceived hedonic brand values' either in Portugal ($\gamma = .86, p < 0.001$) and Sweden ($\gamma = .97, p < 0.001$). However, whereas in Portugal the 'brand experience' has the strongest effect on 'perceived hedonic brand values' ($\gamma = .86, p < 0.001$) when compared to 'perceived utilitarian brand values' ($\gamma = .53, p < 0.001$), in Sweden the effects are almost equally relevant. Hence, H2 and H3 are partially confirmed.

In order to investigate all of the standardized indirect effects, a test was performed using the process by Hayes (2018). The results demonstrate that both in Portugal and Sweden, 'brand experience' is the most important and predictive antecedent of 'positive word of mouth' accounting for an impact of .662 and .623 (see Tables 5 and 6). Additionally, the results also show that in Portugal both 'perceived utilitarian and hedonic brand values' reveal a very poor and negative impact of $-.038$ and a $-.018$, respectively. Nevertheless, in Sweden 'perceived hedonic brand values' is the second most predictive antecedent of 'positive word of mouth' with a .305 impact, followed by 'perceived utilitarian brand values' with a .106 impact (see Table 6).

A regression analysis was conducted regarding the influence of sociodemographic characteristics on 'brand experience' and 'brand love', for both Portugal and Sweden. The results reveal that and education ($p < 0.05$) and gender ($p < 0.000$) are statistically significant to predict the 'brand experience' in Sweden (see Table 7). Hence, the 'brand

Table 5. Standardized indirect effects – Portugal.

	BE	PUBV	PHBV	BL	WOM
PUBV	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
PHBV	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
BL	-,048	,000	,000	,000	,000
WOM	,662	-,038	-,018	,000	,000

Table 6. Standardized indirect effects – Sweden.

	BE	PUBV	PHBV	BL	WOM
PUBV	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
PHBV	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
BL	-,464	,000	,000	,000	,000
WOM	,623	-,106	-,305	,000	,000

Table 7. Regression analysis results of sociodemographic characteristics on brand experience – Sweden.

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	1.364375	0.357312	3.818443	0.0001
GENDER	0.264932	0.060345	4.390287	0.0000
EDUCATION	0.146021	0.072894	2.003206	0.0456
AGE	0.009759	0.016578	0.588682	0.5563
AGE^2	-0.000179	0.000226	-0.791185	0.4291

Table 8. Regression analysis results of sociodemographic characteristics on brand experience – Portugal.

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	2.390958	0.311036	7.687078	0.0000
GENDER	0.094358	0.063967	1.475109	0.1409
EDUCATION	0.065493	0.083088	0.788244	0.4310
AGE	0.013939	0.013588	1.025821	0.3056
AGE^2	-0.000200	0.000185	-1.082483	0.2797

experience' value for female respondents is on average .265 higher than for male respondents. Moreover, the findings show that the higher the education level of respondents, the greater the valuation of the 'brand experience' in Sweden. Additionally, results confirm that age has no statistically significant impact on 'brand experience' in Sweden ($p = .55$). Interestingly, the findings also demonstrate that the sociodemographic characteristics are not statistically significant to explain the "brand experience" in Portugal (gender $p = .14$, education $p = .43$, and age $p = .31$) (see Table 8).

Finally, the regression analysis conducted regarding the influence of the sociodemographic characteristics on 'brand love' suggests that gender ($p = .06$) and education level ($p = .08$) are statistically significant in Portugal, whereas only the gender is statistically significant in Sweden. In other words, Portuguese and Swedish female consumers as well as Portuguese consumers with higher education levels, reveal a higher degree of intense and passionate feelings about the brand IKEA (see tables 9 and 10)

Conclusions and discussion

Research on positive consumer-brand relationships has highlighted the relevance of brand love as an emotional and relational construct in consumer-brand relationships (e.g. Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019). Nevertheless, most of the studies have neglected retail brands, with one notable exception from Nikhashemi, Jebarajakirthy, and Nusair (2019) who revealed the role of the

Table 9. Regression analysis results of sociodemographic characteristics on brand love – Portugal.

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	1.364563	0.472930	2.885339	0.0041
GENDER	0.155676	0.082788	1.880408	0.0608
EDUCATION	0.162933	0.091645	1.777876	0.0762
AGE	0.012479	0.024467	0.510035	0.6103
AGE^2	-0.000152	0.000355	-0.427639	0.6691

Table 10. Regression analysis results of socio-demographic characteristics on brand love- Sweden.

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
C	2.243287	0.562973	3.984714	0.0001
GENDER	0.442353	0.082954	5.332491	0.0000
EDUCATION	0.016381	0.116226	0.140943	0.8880
AGE	-0.028067	0.023647	-1.186926	0.2364
AGE^2	0.000203	0.000296	0.684160	0.4945

retail brand experience and brand love for fashion brands. In addition, the impact of the four dimensions of the retail brand experience (affective, intellectual, sensory, and behavioral) on brand love has scarcely been investigated. Against this background, our study measures the effects of both brand experience and brand love on positive word of mouth in the retail industry. To this end, the global retail brand IKEA has been chosen in order to understand how consumers experience the brand and form passionate relationships with it by comparing the country where the brand was created in 1926 (Sweden) to Portugal, where the brand was introduced only in 2004.

Our empirical findings account for the moderating role of brand love on word of mouth communication through the retail brand experience. As expected, these results are consistent with the study from Nikhashemi, Jebarajakirthy, and Nusair (2019) conducted in the apparel industry. Specifically, the results reinforce the central role of brand love, conceptualized as intense passionate brand feelings (Bagozzi, Batra, and Ahuvia 2017) in generating positive word-of-mouth. One possible explanation is that if retail brands are able to create positive brand experiences along the consumer-brand relationship spectrum, consumers will feel passionate and evangelical and be willing to share their experiences with their peers (Giovannini, Xu, and Thomas 2015). The results also show that the effect of the retail brand experience on brand love and the effect of brand love in positive word of mouth is greater for Sweden, which confirms that positive brand experiences (measured in years of use) increase positive word of mouth (Karjaluoto, Munnukka, and Kiuru 2016). Nevertheless, our findings demonstrate that the level of brand love is also very high in Portugal, despite the brand having only been introduced there approximately one decade ago. This signals that IKEA strives to create passionate brand feelings immediately on entering a new market, and strategically nurtures the consumer-brand relationship to keep those passionate feelings alive, by acting simultaneously at product, store and corporate levels.

Our study also accounts for the relevance of experiential aspects of retailing and stores as a vehicle of meaning transfer (Bäckström 2006). It sheds light on how each retail brand experience impacts differently on brand love. Overall, our findings demonstrate that both Swedish and Portuguese customers are impacted by IKEA's sensory brand dimension to almost the same degree. One possible explanation is that design informs everything the

company does – from product to customer journey design, and marketing communications – in pursuit of fulfilling the brand mission to ‘create a better everyday for many people’. The brand’s personal, intimate approach to understanding customers around the globe enables IKEA to design democratic products that are aesthetic and innovative. Another interesting finding is that Portuguese consumers are influenced by the intellectual brand dimension to a greater extent, whereas Swedish consumers are mainly impacted by the sensory brand dimension. We argue that IKEA has explored the positive interactions with intellectual brand-related stimuli in the Portuguese market as a way to infuse mystery and embed empathy in the consumer-brand relationship. The IKEA approach to its heritage, sustainability and innovation serves as the foundation for brand-marketing tactics that arouse curiosity, problem-solving and critical thinking. Interestingly, the affective and behavioural dimensions are weaker in Sweden, which might be linked to a potential saturation level resulting from a longer presence in the Swedish market, despite the strong levels of corporate reputation. These results call attention to the need for regularly accessing the levels of brand love generated by each brand experience dimension, so as to nurture existing consumer-brand relationships more effectively. We claim that a thorough understanding of the impact of each retail brand experience on brand love is key to determining which aspects of brand experience should be revised in a long-term perspective.

The second aim of our study is to empirically test the mediating effect of perceived utilitarian and hedonic brand values between brand experience and brand love. The results, however, did not confirm this positive relationship, thus contradicting the previous research conducted by Bairrada, Coelho, and Coelho (2018), which demonstrated a positive relationship between the functional and symbolic/emotional aspects of brands and brand love. Nevertheless, our findings show that the four dimensions of IKEA brand experience positively influence the manner in which consumers perceive the brand in both countries from utilitarian and hedonic perspectives. More specifically, the results account for the key role of retail brand experience dimensions in shaping perceived brand hedonic value in both countries. These results are explained by the assumption that customers are more prone to buy products due to the experiential value linked to the retail brand, instead of merely relying on product value (Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon 2001). Additionally, our findings confirm previous studies which demonstrate that shopping value is culturally grounded (Wang et al. 2000). Indeed, it is evident that the brand experience dimensions have a lower impact on the utilitarian perceived brand value for Portuguese customers, most probably because shopping is not recognized as task-oriented and cognitive in nature (Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994). Finally, our study also sheds light on the influence of sociodemographic characteristics on brand love, which have not been investigated in previous studies in the field of brand love. Overall, our study suggests that Portuguese and Swedish female consumers, as well as Portuguese with higher education levels, tend to be more passionate about the IKEA brand.

Theoretical contribution

From a theoretical perspective, this paper advances the fast-growing consumer-brand relationships literature, by investigating the role of brand love in the context of retail brands. From a services category point of view, this is the first study to focus on a retail

brand, thus extending previous studies in the field of neo-luxury, fashion, destinations, and several consumption objects (e.g. Ahuvia 1993; Ahuvia 2005; Whang et al. 2004; Cho 2018; Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019; Nikhashemi, Jebarajakirthy, and Nusair 2019). Furthermore, this study focuses on the experience store format, which has not been investigated before in the retail research literature, and demonstrates, for the first time, the link between the four dimensions of retail brand experiences (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009) and brand love (Bagozzi, Batra, and Ahuvia 2017). This paper also addresses the emergence of the retailer-as-a-brand concept, expanding Burt and Davies (2010) and Burt, Johansson, and Thelander (2010) research through the retail brand experience dimensions. Thus, our study is relevant to understanding that retail brand experience is a multidimensional concept and that each dimension has a different impact on consumer-brand relationships. Additionally, it was shown for the first time that the consumer-relationship span might be affected in a long-term perspective if the retail brand experience dimensions are not strategically leveraged.

Similarly to previous empirical studies, positive word of mouth has been identified in our study as a brand love behavioural outcome in the services category (e.g. Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Albert and Merunka 2013; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Ismail and Spinelli 2012; Bairrada, Coelho, and Coelho 2018; Fetscherin 2014; Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019; Nikhashemi, Jebarajakirthy, and Nusair 2019., 2019). Finally, this paper expands on previous studies on the evolution of positive consumer-brand relationships (Huber, Meyer, and Schmid 2015; Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019) by highlighting the effects of brand relationship duration on brand love, as well as gender and education levels, which have not been investigated previously.

Practical contribution

From a managerial perspective, this paper challenges retailers to rethink the retail brand value proposition by recognizing the relevance of brand experience dimensions as an effective source of differentiation for retailers-as-a-brand. Our study highlights the importance of regularly accessing the four dimensions of the retail brand experience in order to create or nurture passionate and intense feelings in the overall span of consumer-brand relationships. Indeed, the competitive retail brand arena within the circular and digital economy calls for a reinvention of retailing that effectively combines the emotional, cognitive and behavioural aspects of consumption. Consequently, retailers are advised to consider brand experience as a multidimensional concept that acts at product, store and corporate levels. An important aspect to consider is that retail brand experiences dimensions should evolve over time in order to avoid brand erosion.

Our results also revealed that the manner in which consumers experience retail brands differs between countries. These findings allow marketers to customize or standardize the retail brand experience by allocating their marketing resources in an appropriate manner in order to elicit brand love for the retail brand worldwide. Marketers should also consider that each dimension of the retail brand experience impacts on how consumers perceive the retail brand in each international market, from a utilitarian or hedonic perspective. This allows for reaching different consumers segments by focusing marketing efforts on the intellectual, sensory, behavioral and/or affective dimensions of retail brand

experience. Our study also demonstrates that the sociodemographic characteristics of consumers impact on how consumers love brands. Hence, the key insights gained from this investigation can be used to improve retail brand experiences and help companies to develop compelling and memorable experiences, so as to target consumers more effectively and generate positive word of mouth.

Limitations

Being one of the first empirical studies that has attempted to explore the moderating role of brand love in the relationship between retail brand experience and positive word of mouth, it has some clear limitations. Firstly, the data was collected only for one retail brand that specializes in home décor. Future research might consider other brands within different product categories. It would be interesting to conduct research in both retail and service sectors, in which brand experiences are designed distinctively in order to engage emotionally with consumers. Another important limitation of the study is that is a comparative one between Sweden and Portugal. For further research, it would thus be interesting to include more countries in the data collection, covering several international markets where the brand operates. Finally, the presented model only includes positive word of mouth as a behavioral outcome of brand love. For this reason, future research could usefully include other outcomes such as brand loyalty, purchase intentions, brand commitment, brand trust, among many others identified as brand love outcomes in the marketing literature.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A

Measurement items

Brand Experience (Brakus et al., 2009)

BE1: IKEA makes a strong impression on my visual sense or other senses.

BE2: I find IKEA interesting in a sensory way.

BE3: IKEA does not appeal to my senses.

- BE4: IKEA induces feelings and sentiments.
- BE5: I don't have strong emotions for IKEA.
- BE6: IKEA is an emotional brand.
- BE7: I engage in physical actions and behaviours when I use IKEA.
- BE8: IKEA results in bodily experiences.
- BE9: IKEA is not action oriented.
- BE10: I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter IKEA.
- BE11: IKEA does not make me think.
- BE12: IKEA stimulates my curiosity and problems solving.

Perceived Utilitarian Brand Values (Sweeney and Soutar 2001)

- PUBV1: IKEA's products have consistent quality.
- PUBV2: IKEA's products are well made.
- PUBV3: IKEA's products perform consistently.

Perceived Hedonic Brand Values (Sweeney and Soutar 2001)

- PHBV1: I would enjoy IKEA's products.
- PHBV2: IKEA would make me want to use its products.
- PHBV3: I would feel relaxed about using IKEA's products.
- PHBV4: IKEA's products would make me feel good.
- PHBV5: IKEA's products would give me pleasure.

Brand Love (Bagozzi, Batra, and Ahuvia 2017)

- BL1: To what extent do you feel that IKEA says something 'true' and 'deep' about whom you are as a person?
- BL2: To what extent do you feel that IKEA is an important part of how you see yourself?
- BL3: To what extent is IKEA able to make you look like you want to look?
- BL4: To what extent is IKEA able to make you feel like you want to feel?
- BL5: To what extent is IKEA able to do something that makes your life more meaningful?
- BL6: To what extent is IKEA able to contribute something towards making your life worth living?
- BL7: To what extent to you find yourself thinking about IKEA?
- BL8: To what extent to you find that the IKEA keeps popping into your head?
- BL9: To what extent are you willing to spend a lot of MONEY improving and fine-tuning a product from IKEA after you buy it?
- BL10: To what extent are you willing to spend a lot of TIME improving and fine-tuning a product from IKEA after you buy it?
- BL11: To what extent do you feel yourself desiring to use the products from IKEA?
- BL12: To what extent do you feel yourself longing to use the products from IKEA?
- BL13: To what extent have you interacted with IKEA in the past?
- BL14: To what extent have you been involved with IKEA in the past?
- BL15: Please express the extent to which you feel there is a natural 'fit' between you and IKEA.
- BL16: Please express the extent to which IKEA seems to fit your own tastes perfectly.
- BL17: Please express the extent to which you feel emotionally connected to IKEA?
- BL18: Please express the extent to which you feel you have a 'bond' with IKEA.
- BL19: To what extent do you feel that IKEA is fun?
- BL20: To what extent do you feel that IKEA is exciting?
- BL21: Please express the extent to which you believe that you will be using IKEA for a long time.
- BL22: Please express the extent to which you expect that IKEA will be part of your life for a long time to come.
- BL23: Suppose that IKEA were to go out of existence, to what extent would you feel anxiety?
- BL24: Suppose IKEA were to go out of existence, to what extent would you feel apprehension?

Positive WOM (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006)

WOM1: I have recommended IKEA to lot of people.

WOM2: I 'talk up' IKEA to my friends.

WOM3: I try to spread the good word about IKEA.

WOM4: I give IKEA tons of positive word of mouth advertising.