

Antecedents and consequences of Apple brand love

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Abstract

For many years, satisfaction was the main goal of marketing strategy. However, subsequent studies revealed that merely satisfying consumers was not sufficient for a company to succeed in a highly competitive market. Therefore, the concept of brand love emerged. Consequently, the study of the factors that lead consumers to feel love for a brand has become increasingly important, as nowadays consumers develop emotional and passionate relationships with brands. The purpose of our study is to identify the main antecedents and consequences of Apple brand love. Based on a sample of 215 respondents, we employed the structural equation model. The antecedents of Apple brand love considered were hedonic product, brand experience, and brand satisfaction. As consequences of Apple brand love, brand loyalty and brand word-of-mouth were analyzed. The results showed that purchasing a hedonic product, brand experience, and brand satisfaction are essential for consumers to nurture Apple brand love. In turn, the hedonic product is also an antecedent of brand experience and brand satisfaction, while brand experience also proved to be crucial in achieving Apple brand satisfaction. Moreover, Apple brand love and satisfaction with this brand generate loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. Finally, loyal consumers speak positively about the Apple brand.

Keywords: Brand Love, Brand antecedents and consequences, Apple.

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1. Introduction

In the context of brand love, researchers have applied similar concepts from Rubin's (1973) work, which focused on interpersonal relationships, to explore emotional attachments between consumers and brands. Love, considered as a highly complex relationship, encompasses various feelings toward another. When discussing consumer-brand relationships, Fournier (1998) suggested that love exists as a higher-order bond that helps to create strong and positive relationships that can lead to loyalty. By extrapolating interpersonal theory to assess interaction with 'objects of love', Shimp and Madden (1988) initiated the investigation of brand love. Since then, research on consumers' love for brands has flourished (Cacho-Elizondo et al., 2020). Brand love, or the amount of passionate, emotional attachment a consumer has for a particular brand, includes desire and affection for the brand, positive brand evaluation, and emotions towards the brand, as well as declarations of love for the brand (Ahuvia, 2005a, 2005b; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

Satisfaction, the core of the marketing concept, has been seen as the key objective of marketing strategy for many years. Oliver (1999) defined satisfaction by emphasizing the cognitive and emotional aspects of customer experience evaluation with a product or service. Wirtz and Bateson (1999), in the context of services, also proposed that satisfaction consists of both cognitive and affective aspects in a customer's experience. Satisfaction incorporates cognitive judgments and affective reactions during consumption (Oliver, 1993). Satisfaction has assumed a crucial and dominant position in marketing theory and practice because, as the primary outcome of marketing activities, it transforms initial consumption and purchase into post-purchase phenomena such as repurchase and brand loyalty (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982). However, there have been studies suggesting that consumer satisfaction may not be enough to maintain success in competitive markets (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), hence brand love, being a more recent marketing construct, helps explain variations in post-consumption behaviors of satisfied consumers.

Brand love is different from satisfaction for several reasons (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Firstly, satisfaction is generally conceptualized as a cognitive judgment, whereas brand love has a much stronger affective focus. Secondly, satisfaction is typically seen as an outcome of a specific transaction, whereas brand love oftentimes is the result of a consumer's long-term relationship with the brand. Thirdly, satisfaction is frequently related to the expectancy disconfirmation paradigm, whereas brand love requires neither expectancy nor disconfirmation (e.g., the consumer experiences an emotional response to the brand in the absence of cognition; the consumer knows what to expect from the brand, so little, if any, disconfirmation occurs). Finally, brand love includes a willingness to declare love (e.g., 'I love this brand!') and involves integration of the brand into the consumer's identity, neither of which is requisite in satisfaction.

The purpose of our study is to analyze the antecedents and consequences of Apple brand love. To do so, we propose a model in which we consider, as antecedents of brand love, hedonic product, brand experience, and brand satisfaction, and, as consequences of brand love, brand loyalty and brand word-of-mouth. Finally, brand loyalty was understood to be a precursor of word-of-mouth about the Apple brand.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

In this section, the theoretical framework supporting the construction of our research model is presented, centered around Apple brand love. Consumers find satisfaction with a brand when they have positive experiences and perceive the brand as hedonic. A hedonic brand also contributes to consumers considering their experience with the brand as memorable. On the other hand, consumers seem to develop emotional and passionate relationships with a brand, cultivating brand love, when the brand provides them with a pleasant experience, is perceived as hedonic, and when they are satisfied with the brand. Satisfied and brand-loving consumers, in turn, develop brand loyalty and engage in positive word-of-mouth. Lastly, loyal customers speak positively about the brand to others.

2.1. Apple Brand Love: Antecedents and Consequences

Hedonic product, brand experience, and brand satisfaction were chosen as antecedent variables of Apple brand love. On the other hand, brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (WOM) regarding the brand were selected as consequences of Apple brand love, as they are fundamental variables in the marketing literature. Consequently, if a consumer purchases a hedonic product from the Apple brand, has a positive experience with that product, and becomes satisfied, he or she will likely develop Apple brand love. In turn, satisfaction and brand love will translate into the consumer's loyalty to the Apple brand and positive brand word-of-mouth. Finally, loyalty to the Apple brand will lead to word-of-mouth about the brand.

The concept of brand love emerged in marketing literature thanks to the pioneering work done by Shimp and Madden (1998), which was based on theories of psychology. They adapted Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love to the context of marketing and branding, arguing that brand love encompasses the dimensions of passion, intimacy, and commitment. However, it was

Ahuvia who, in 2005, initiated empirical research into the concept, using an interpretive paradigm, which revealed that consumers can develop intense emotional relationships with a variety of consumer objects, including brands (Ahuvia, 2005a, 2005b). Ahuvia's work (2005b) showed significant similarities between love in interpersonal relationships and in the consumer context. In 2006, Carroll and Ahuvia defined brand love, in a unidimensional way, as the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied customer has for a brand.

A more complex interpretation of the phenomenon was suggested by Albert et al. (2009) when brand love was considered a multidimensional concept. These authors showed that brand love consists of two macro-dimensions, affection, and passion, which, in turn, include several dimensions. Another multidimensional view of the concept was proposed by Batra et al. (2012), who used the notion of 'prototype' to define brand love because, according to these authors, it better describes complex phenomena, such as love, which are difficult to capture using rigorous and precise definitions.

A different interpretation of brand love was also provided by Rossiter (2012), who emphasized the need to define brand love in a way that allowed researchers to distinguish it from love for a person. This author defined brand love by the simultaneous presence of a consumer's deep affection for the branded product and the anxiety felt in anticipation of separation if the product is not available. He measured brand love in contrast to other brand-related emotions, namely liking, neutral feeling, dislike, and hate.

The concept of brand experience has been attracting the attention of marketing managers as consumers seek brands that provide them with unique and memorable experiences (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010; Moreira et al., 2017). According to Schmitt (1999), traditional marketing appeals to functional connections with the customer. However, customers now look for more exciting activities and experiential marketing, by creating distinctive experiences, can provide significant economic value for companies (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Brand experience was defined by Brakus et al. (2009, p. 53) 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". Whenever consumers engage in these activities, they are exposed not only to the attributes of the product itself but also to other specific brand-related stimuli, such as brand-identifying colors, actions, design elements, slogans, mascots, and brand characters (Brakus et al., 2009). These brand-related stimuli constitute the major source of internal subjective consumer responses, which are at the very essence of brand experiences (Brakus et al., 2009).

Brand experiences can vary in strength, intensity, and valence. Furthermore, some experiences happen spontaneously and are short-lived, while others occur intentionally and are long-lasting (Brakus et al., 2009). Brand experience is formed from a sensory dimension (related to visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory stimuli provided by a brand); an affective dimension (including the feelings created by brands and their emotional connections with consumers); a behavioural dimension (referring to bodily experiences, lifestyles, and interactions with the brand); and finally, an intellectual dimension (including the brand's ability to engage consumers in convergent and divergent thinking). Depending on the number of dimensions and the strength evoked by a stimulus, brand experiences can be more or less intense. These brand-related stimuli are part of the brand's identity and design (name and logo), packaging and marketing communications (advertising and brochures), or the environments where the brand is marketed (stores) and are the main source of internal subjective consumer responses or brand experiences (Brakus et al., 2009).

For Dhar and Wertenbroch (2000), consumer choices are driven by considerations related to utilitarian and hedonistic aspects. For instance, when purchasing a car, consumers might be concerned about utilitarian features (e.g., gas mileage) as well as hedonic aspects (e.g., sporty design). Given the relevance of this division regarding consumer behavior, it is the marketer's task to understand the weight of each variable at the moment of purchase decision. Hedonic products are products associated with the concepts of fun and pleasure, as their consumption is expected to evoke strong emotional responses in consumers (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

Hedonic goods provide more experiential consumption, fun, pleasure, and excitement; in other words, they are related to a pleasant consumption experience (e.g., designer clothes, sports cars, luxury watches), whereas products with utilitarian features are more related to functional aspects (e.g., microwaves, personal computers) (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998). While for utilitarian products, the salient benefits are more cognitively oriented than emotional, for hedonic products, emotional responses will be more important in the formation of brand evaluation than cognitions (Kempf, 1999). Consequently, when the emotional elements of pleasure are high and positive for a product category, consumers should experience more favorable affect toward the brand consumed (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Customer satisfaction has occupied a prominent place in the fields of marketing and services. According to the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm, satisfaction is the result of the discrepancy between expectations and perceived performance (Oliver, 1980). As highlighted by Tse and Wilton (1988, p. 204), some researchers define satisfaction as "the consumer's response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption".

Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) emphasized that satisfaction is an evaluation made by the customer, regarding a product or service, indicating whether it meets the customer's needs and expectations, and Kotler and Keller (2012) underlined that satisfaction is the feeling of pleasure that results from the comparison between the perceived performance (or outcome) of a product and the buyer's expectations. Customer satisfaction depends on the product's perceived performance relative to a buyer's expectations

(Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). However, two general conceptualizations of satisfaction exist in the literature: transaction-specific satisfaction and overall or cumulative satisfaction (Johnson et al., 1995; Olsen & Johnson, 2003). Transaction-specific satisfaction dominated the marketing and consumer behavior literature up through the early 1990s. This approach defines satisfaction as a customer's evaluation of his or her experience with and reactions to a particular product transaction, episode, or service encounter.

Satisfaction research has grown to include an emphasis on cumulative satisfaction, defined as a customer's overall evaluation of a product or service provider to date, that is, describes customers' total consumption experience with a product or service. According to Olsen & Johnson (2003, p. 185) "one advantage of cumulative evaluations is that they should better predict customers' intentions and behavior". Consequently, the emphasis on cumulative satisfaction or overall satisfaction reflects a growing interest in understanding customer evaluations and relationships over time.

In the literature, many works establish a positive relationship between brand love and some psychological variables linked to brand performance, which include, among other variables, brand loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Batra et al., 2012), purchase intention (Sarkar & Sreejesh, 2014), and word-of-mouth (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Batra et al., 2012; Albert & Meruka, 2013). In this study, we considered brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (WOM) about the brand to be the most relevant consequences of brand love.

Brand loyalty is more than repurchasing; it is a long-term psychological relationship (Oliver, 1999). Loyalty was described as a "deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior" (Oliver, 1999, p. 34). The concept of loyalty is strongly related to relational marketing, as it requires developing a customer-brand relationship for the individual to become loyal (Sheth, 1971). Loyalty has been extensively investigated, not only because it is a fundamental issue in companies' marketing strategies, but also because customers have become more volatile and have reasons to be less loyal. Before any strategy is defined, the organization must understand its customers, their preferences, and how to serve them better, in order to establish a long-term relationship (Dick & Basu, 1994).

Researchers began to consider two dimensions in brand loyalty: behavioral and attitudinal (Dick & Basu, 1994), due to the limitations of the behavioral approach. Dick and Basu (1994) stressed upon the need to extend the concept of brand loyalty to include attitudinal influences. As highlighted by Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001), the definition of loyalty by Oliver (1999) emphasizes the two different aspects of brand loyalty, behavioral and attitudinal, that have been described in previous work on the concept, such as those by Day (1969), Jacoby and Kyner (1973), Jacoby and Chestnut (1978), and Aaker (1991). Behavioral loyalty consists of repeated purchases of the brand, whereas attitudinal brand loyalty includes a degree of dispositional commitment in terms of some unique value associated with the brand.

Word-of-mouth was defined as "informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization or a service" (Harrison-Walker, 2001, p. 63). Word-of-mouth, which can be negative or positive, refers to personal and impersonal communication about goods and services (Godes & Mazlin, 2004). East et al. (2008) underlined that positive word-of-mouth encourages brand choice, and in contrast, negative word-of-mouth discourages brand choice. Positive word-of-mouth concerns the degree to which the consumer praises the brand to others (Westbrook, 1987; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). It is worth noting that positive word-of-mouth is "the primary factor behind 20 to 50 percent of all purchasing decisions. Its influence is greatest when consumers are buying a product for the first time or when products are relatively expensive, factors that tend to make people conduct more research, seek more opinions, and deliberate longer than they otherwise would" (Bughin et al., 2010, p. 2).

Prior research shows the impact of the hedonic and utilitarian values on satisfaction (Carpenter, 2008; Irani & Hanzae, 2011). Several studies, such as those by Hsu and Chen (2018), Lee and Kim (2018), El-Adly (2019), Vijay et al. (2019), Li et al. (2021), and Pang (2021) have demonstrated that hedonic product has a positive impact on brand satisfaction. Consequently, we developed the following research hypothesis:

H1: Hedonic product positively influences brand satisfaction.

For Carroll & Ahuvia (2006), as hedonic products tend to generate stronger emotional responses, the consumers will find them more lovable. More hedonic products have nontangible, symbolic benefits and are likely to encourage a greater potential for positive brand affect. In recent studies, hedonic product has a positive impact on brand love (Karjaluoto et al., 2016; Hsu & Chen, 2018; Liu et al., 2018; Junaid et al., 2019; Hossain et al., 2023). Thus, we propose the following research hypothesis:

H2: Hedonic product positively influences brand love.

The brand experience is influenced by the perception of utilitarian and hedonic products, although hedonic products had a greater influence on brand experience (Yu & Yuan, 2019). According to Klein et al. (2016), hedonic shopping value have an impact on brand experience. High levels of atmospherics create fascination with the brand, which might translate into brand experiences (Hollenbeck et al., 2008). Given the beforementioned, we developed the following research hypothesis:

H3: Hedonic product positively influences brand experience.

For Brakus et al. (2009), brand experiences provide value to consumers and, consequently, confer a higher level of satisfaction with the brand. As in the study by Brakus (2009), Ishida and Taylor (2012), Beckman et al. (2013), Barnes et al. (2014), and Moreira et al. (2017) tested the influence of sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual dimensions of experiences on brand satisfaction. Good experiences when consumers interact with a particular brand are more likely to make them feel satisfied (Nysveen et al., 2013). Experience results from a stimulus. Once it can cause enjoyment, if a brand can offer various experiences, it can be expected that the consumers will want to repeat the experience and, thus, the brand can enhance customer satisfaction (Kim et al., 2015).

The literature provides an understanding of customer satisfaction as an outcome of brand experience for services (Barnes et al., 2014), retail brands (Khan & Rahman, 2015), and online brands (Lee & Jeong, 2014). Recent works by Hussein (2018), Kharat et al. (2018), Iglesias et al. (2019), Shanti and Rofiq (2019), Asghar et al. (2020), Lacap and Tuncab (2020), Singh and Söderlund (2020), and Slaton et al. (2020) have proven that brand experience has a positive impact on brand satisfaction. Therefore, we formulated the following hypothesis:

H4: Brand experience positively influences brand satisfaction.

Zhang (2019) considers three dimensions of brand experience to influence brand love: sensory, emotional, and social. Sensory experience enables individuals to have a unique “emotional capability” of their favorite products, that is, they can obtain a sense of pleasure and satisfaction, which means that consumer atmosphere will promote individuals to actively experience the environment or products with strong sensory colors and deepen their impression and favorable impression of the brand through unique feelings (Zhang et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2010, Zhang, 2019).

Hepola et al. (2017) stated that sensory element is a central component of brand experience and argues that the sensory dimension of brand experience can capture customers’ attention toward the brand. In emotional experience, pleasant consumption experience will promote consumers to have positive, active, and effective cognition, use and communication of products or services. That is, if between the consumer and the brand an engagement results, characterized by a strong emotional attachment, a love relationship can be built between the two (Thomson et al., 2005; Park & Macinnis, 2006). In social experience, being the highest stage of experience, through dreaming and unexpected consumption experience, consumers can enjoy the unique and surreal environment to the fullest, improve their cognition and evaluation of the brand, and promote the generation of their beloved emotion.

For Roy et al. (2013), in the literature, the link between brand experience and brand love only explored the relationship between affective experience and brand love. However, as Garg et al. (2015, 2016) pointed out, when researching the relationship between brand experience and brand love, it is necessary to consider the four dimensions of brand experience: sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual.

Many studies have recognised that positive brand experience is a necessary element in the development of brand love (Sarkar et al., 2012). Recently, Bıçakcıoğlu et al. (2018), Ferreira et al. (2019), Madeline and Sihombing (2019), Prentice et al. (2019), Shanti and Rofiq (2019), Trivedi (2019), Anwar and Jalees (2020), Khamwon and Masri (2020), Amaro et al. (2021), Cacho-Elizondo et al. (2021), Fernandes and Inverneiro (2021), Rodrigues and Brandão (2021), and Singh et al. (2021) proved that brand experience has a positive impact on brand love. Thus, we formulated the following hypothesis:

H5: Brand experience positively influences brand love.

Brand love, being a construct that has gained relevance in the marketing literature (Vernuccio et al., 2015, Kaufmann et al., 2016; Hegner et al., 2017) is formed due to higher levels of satisfaction obtained through brands (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Zhang (2019, p. 899) emphasized that Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) “proposed that brand love was the emotional dependence on the brand of highly satisfied consumers, which includes positive emotional response, positive brand evaluation, brand attachment and declaration of brand love”. Consistent with the thinking of Fournier and Mick (1999), brand love is “a response experienced by some, but not all, satisfied consumers” (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81). As Aro et al. (2018, p. 73) underlined, for Roy et al. (2013), as in Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), satisfaction is considered a requirement for brand love, although not all satisfied consumers feel brand love.

Fournier and Mick (1999, p. 11) suggest that “satisfaction-as-love probably constitutes the most intense and profound satisfaction of all”. Therefore, for Fournier and Mick (1999), the most intense satisfaction was experienced when the satisfaction of a consumer for a product or a brand turned into love (Unal & Aydin, 2013). In the same line of thought, Unal and Aydin (2013) defend that satisfaction levels forms a basis for the creation of brand love. It establishes and strengthens the bond between the brand and the customer. Therefore, consumers who love a brand are highly satisfied with it and often develop a sustainable relationship with the brand.

Recent studies such as those by Hsu and Chen (2018), Anwar and Jalees (2020), Bigné et al. (2020), Diniso and Duh (2020), Nawaz et al. (2020), Slaton et al. (2020), and Joshi and Garg (2021) have proven that brand satisfaction has a positive impact on brand love. In this sense, we formulated the following research hypothesis:

H6: Brand satisfaction positively influences brand love.

If consumers are satisfied with their experiences, they are likely to be willing to purchase a product and recommend it to others (Menidjel et al., 2020). Brand loyalty may be defined as the degree to which the consumer is committed to repurchase the brand (Oliver, 1999, Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Loyalty leads to repeated purchase of the brand, even if situational influences and marketing efforts cause changes in behaviour (Oliver, 1997). Loyalty may be defined as “the degree to which a customer exhibits repeat purchasing behaviour from a service provider, possesses a positive attitudinal disposition toward the provider, and considers using only this provider when a need for this service arises” (Gremler & Brown, 1996, p. 173). Past research demonstrates a link between satisfaction and loyalty (Oliver, 1980; Fornell, 1992).

Word-of-mouth, on the other hand, includes any information about a target object (e.g., company, brand) transferred from one individual to another either in person or via some communication medium (Brown et al., 2005). Word-of-mouth (WOM) communications “consist of informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers” (Westbrook, 1987, p. 261). Consumers often recommend their favourite brands to friends and family (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Ismail & Spinelli, 2012). Similarly, those who are satisfied with their products, services or brands often engage in positive WOM (Mittal et al., 1999; Sweeney & Swait, 2008).

Carroll & Ahuvia (2006) showed that satisfied customers tend to be more loyal to a brand and to undertake more positive word-of-mouth about the brand. Recent studies have highlighted the impact of brand satisfaction on both brand loyalty and brand word-of-mouth (Popp & Woratschek, 2017; Santini et al., 2018; Shimul & Phau, 2018; Leri & Theodoridis, 2019; Singh & Söderlund, 2020; Khan et al., 2021). Thus, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H7: Brand satisfaction positively influences brand loyalty.

H8: Brand satisfaction positively influences positive word-of-mouth.

There are three distinctive approaches to measure loyalty: behavioural measurements; attitudinal measurement; and composite measurements (Bowen & Chen, 2001, Yoo & Bai, 2013). The behavioural measurements consider consistent, repetitious purchase behaviour as an indicator of loyalty. Attitudinal measurements use attitudinal data to reflect the emotional and psychological attachment inherent in loyalty. The third approach, composite measurements of loyalty, combine the first two dimensions (Bowen & Chen, 2001). According to Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001), attitudinal and behavioural loyalty can be developed through brand affect, which refers to positive emotional responses to a brand. Furthermore, Razzaq et al. (2019) show that positive emotions increase consumers' loyalty intentions. These perceptions are likely to strengthen the positive impact of brand love on brand loyalty.

Westbrook (1987) and Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), as we have seen, defined positive word-of-mouth as the degree to which consumers praise the brand to others. Arndt (1968, p. 190) described this communication as simply “oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, or a service”. Gremler and Brown (1999, p. 273) consider WOM communication to be “communication about a service provider offered by someone who is perceived not to obtain monetary gain from so doing”.

Consumers prefer to rely on informal and personal communication sources (e.g., other consumers) in making purchase decisions instead of on formal and organizational sources such as advertising campaigns (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). Consumers appreciate WOM because it is seen as more reliable and trustworthy than other information sources (Day, 1971). Albert and Merunka (2013) demonstrated the influence of brand love on word-of-mouth. That is, if consumers feel they love their brands that in turn may translate into a desire of the recommend it to friends and relatives (Ismail & Spinelli, 2012).

For Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), satisfied consumers who also love the brand are expected to be more committed to repurchase and more eager to spread “the good word” to others. Batra et al. (2012) also confirmed that loyalty and positive word-of-mouth is an important consequence of brand love. Several studies have proven that brand love exerts a positive impact on both brand loyalty and positive brand WOM (Bıçakcıoğlu et al., 2018; Hsu & Chen, 2018; Coelho et al., 2019; Rodrigues & Rodrigues, 2019; Anwar & Jalees, 2020; Cho & Hwang, 2020; Martín et al., 2020; Amaro et al., 2021; Madadi et al., 2021; Trivedi & Sama, 2021). Thus, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H9: Brand love positively influences brand loyalty.

H10: Brand love positively influences positive word-of-mouth.

Loyalty is often associated with a positive shopping experience that individuals like to share with their friends, so loyalty can be directly related to word-of-mouth (Watson et al., 2015). As noted by Dick and Basu (1994), loyal customers are more likely to provide positive word-of-mouth. Reynolds and Arnold (2000) defended the influence of loyalty on word-of-mouth, based on previous studies, in which loyalty leads to referrals, endorsement, and positive word-of-mouth. Loyal customers are more likely to intensively use WOM towards their favourite brands (Srinivasan et al., 2002). Loyal customers usually promote the firm by emphasizing the main attributes of its products (Casaló et al., 2008).

Recent studies have confirmed the influence of loyalty on word-of-mouth (Bıçakcıoğlu et al., 2018; Mukerjee, 2018; Coelho et al., 2019; Larregui-Candelaria et al., 2019; Ali et al., 2020). In view of the above, we developed the following research hypothesis:

H11: Brand loyalty positively influences positive word-of-mouth.

3. Research Methodology

The conceptual model proposed in the present study is depicted in Figure 1. This research model investigates brand satisfaction and brand love as mediating variables between the variables hedonic product and brand experience and between the variables brand loyalty and brand WOM. We also propose the impact of hedonic product on brand experience and the effect of brand satisfaction on brand love. Finally, brand loyalty has an impact on brand WOM. Consequently, it is a pioneering model in the Apple brand field, since WOM, being important, is equally crucial in the divulgation of this brand.

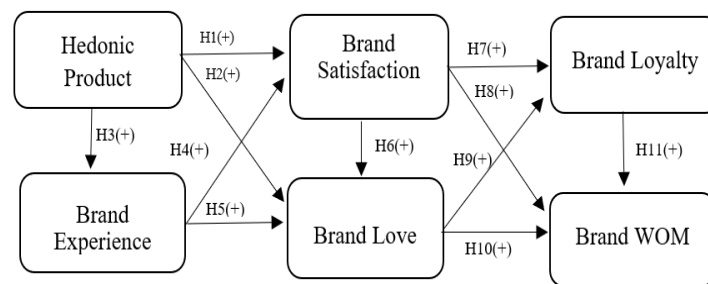


Figure 1 - Proposed Conceptual Model

Source: Elaborated by the authors

3.1. Sample selection and data collection

This research study used a structured and self-administered questionnaire that addressed all the information needed. Thus, to obtain all the data needed, a sample of convenient elements was obtained by using a non-probabilistic convenience sample. Data were collected mainly through email and the social media Facebook. A total of 215 valid responses were obtained. The demographic characteristics indicate that a diverse group of respondents was recruited. Regarding the gender of the respondents, 125 responses were obtained from females (58.1%) and 90 from males (41.9%). Regarding the age of the respondents, 58.2% of the sample is aged between 18 and 30 years. Regarding academic qualifications, 52.1% of the respondents had a university degree and 24.2% had secondary education.

3.2 Measurement scales

The measurement scales of the constructs were based on the literature and adapted to the academic literature. All variables, presented in Table 2, were measured on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1- strongly disagree to 7- strongly agree. The hedonic product, brand love, brand loyalty and brand word-of-mouth measures were adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). The scale to measure brand experience was adapted from Brakus et al. (2009). The scale to measure brand satisfaction was adapted from Russell-Bennett et al. (2007).

4. Results

4.1 Measurement Model

An initial screening of each scale was conducted using item-total correlations, and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using SPSS 26.0. Following Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach, a measurement model was estimated before testing the hypotheses, using a structural model. The analysis of data was realized through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) using the statistical software AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures) version 26.0. Maximum likelihood estimation procedures were used since these afford more security in samples that might not present multivariate normality. First, we examined the most relevant fit indices of the measurement models recommended by Chin and Todd (1995) and Hu and Bentler (1999).

The measurement model fits the data well. To test a model's fit, the chi-square (X^2) test statistic concerning degrees of freedom (df) can be used. If the X^2/df value is less than 3, the model is considered a good fit. The chi-square (X^2) was 553.244 with 260 degrees of freedom at $p < 0.001$ ($X^2/df = 2.13$). Because the chi-square is sensitive to sample size, we also assessed additional fit indices: (1) normed fit index (NFI), (2) incremental fit index (IFI), (3) Tucker-Lewis's coefficient (TLI) and (4) comparative fit index (CFI). All these fit indices are higher than 0.9 (NFI=0.91, IFI=0.95, TLI=0.95 and CFI=0.95). Because fit indices can be improved by allowing more terms to be freely estimated, we also assessed the RMSEA, which is 0.073.

CFA enables the performance of tests regarding the convergent validity, discriminant validity and reliability of the study constructs. A commonly used method for estimating convergent validity examines the factor loadings of the measured variables (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Following the recommendations by Hair et al. (2006), factor loadings greater than 0.5 are considered very significant.

Also, we used the AVE to contrast convergent validity. Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggested adequately convergent valid measures should contain less than 50% error variance (AVE should be 0.5 or above). Convergent validity was achieved in this study because all the factor loadings exceeded 0.5 and all AVEs were greater than 0.5. Next, CFA was used to assess discriminant validity. If the AVE is larger than the squared correlation between any two constructs, the discriminant validity of the constructs is supported (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Discriminant validity was also assessed for each pair of constructs by constraining the estimated correlation between them to 1.0, and a difference test was performed on the values obtained from the constrained and unconstrained models (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Discriminant validity of the scales was also supported, as none of the confidence intervals of the phi estimates included 1.0 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Finally, Gaski (1984) suggests the existence of discriminant validity if the correlation between one composite scale and another is not as high as the coefficient alpha of each scale. These tests demonstrated that discriminant validity is present in this study.

Table 1 – Factor Correlation and Measurement Information Matrix

Construct	CR	AVE	X ₁	X ₂	X ₃	X ₄	X ₅	X ₆
Hedonic Product (X ₁)	.92	.74	.92					
Brand Experience (X ₂)	.91	.66	.79	.91				
Brand Satisfaction (X ₃)	.97	.88	.65	.60	.97			
Brand Love (X ₄)	.95	.80	.80	.81	.79	.95		
Brand Loyalty (X ₅)	.92	.75	.67	.67	.76	.84	.93	
Brand WOM (X ₆)	.93	.81	.75	.68	.89	.83	.80	.92

Note: The Cronbach's alpha coefficients are found on the diagonal (italic).
Abbreviations: AVE (average variance extracted), CR (composite reliability).

To assess reliability, the composite reliability (CR) for each construct was generated from the CFA. The CR of each scale must exceed the 0.7 thresholds (Bagozzi, 1981). As Table 1 shows, the composite reliability coefficients of all the constructs are excellent, being larger than 0.9. Cronbach's alpha indicator was also used to assess the initial reliability of the scales, considering a minimum value of 0.7 (Cronbach, 1970; Nunnally, 1978). As shown in Table 1, coefficient alpha values are all over 0.9, exhibiting high reliability. Table 1 also shows the AVE for each construct, and a correlation matrix of constructs is also shown. In Table 2, we can also see the standardized loadings and t-value of all scale items.

Table 2 - Measurement scales, results of standardized estimated parameters and t-values of the measurement model

Measures	Standardized Loadings	t-value
<i>Hedonic Product</i>		
Apple products are enjoyable.	0.884	16.223
Apple products provide satisfaction.	0.864	15.634
Apple products are fun.	0.826	14.571
Apple products are a sensory experience.	0.870	15.812
<i>Brand Experience</i>		
This brand stimulates me both visually and with my other senses.	0.749	12.558
This brand induces feelings and emotions.	0.852	15.229
This brand is an emotional brand.	0.785	13.453
I engage in a lot of thoughts when I encounter this brand.	0.877	15.963
I engage in thoughts when I come across this brand.	0.797	13.759
<i>Brand Satisfaction</i>		
I am satisfied with my decision to buy this brand.	0.961	19.099
My choice in buying this brand was the best.	0.974	19.164
I feel good that I consider this brand to be my favourite brand.	0.876	16.240
I think I did the right thing when I decided to buy products from this brand.	0.944	18.487
<i>Brand Love</i>		
This brand is completely amazing.	0.861	15.721
This brand makes me feel very happy.	0.910	17.248
I love this brand.	0.929	17.885
I have a particular feeling for this brand.	0.875	16.155
I am in love with this brand.	0.887	16.531
<i>Brand Loyalty</i>		
This is the only brand I will consider in the future when buying this product.	0.908	17.013
When I go shopping, I don't even look at competing brands.	0.881	16.177
If the shop I usually go to doesn't have the brand available, I either postpone my purchase or look for it in another shop.	0.841	15.010
I prefer to be deprived of the brand than to buy another brand.	0.841	15.004
<i>Brand WOM</i>		
I talk about this brand with my friends.	0.838	15.062
I try to spread the good name of this brand.	0.971	19.357
I am constantly doing good publicity for this brand.	0.889	16.582

4.2. Structural Model

The structural model fits the data very well ($X^2=565.373$, $df=264$, $p<0.01$, $X^2/df=2.141$, $NFI=0.91$, $IFI=0.95$, $TLI=0.94$, $CFI=0.95$, $RMSEA=0.073$). This model is represented in Figure 2.

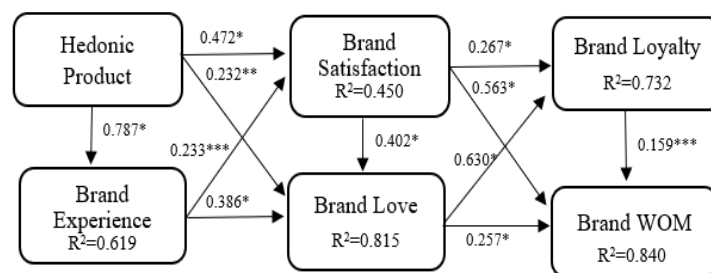


Figure 2 – Structural Model

Note: * $p<0.001$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.05$; R^2 =Squared Multiple Correlations.

The results in Table 3 show the relationships proposed in the structural model. The model supports the eleven proposed hypotheses.

Table 3 - Estimation results of the structural model

Path	Standardized Loadings	t-value	Hypothesis
Hedonic Product --> Brand Satisfaction	0.472*	4.573	H1 (+): S
Hedonic Product --> Brand Love	0.232**	3.260	H2 (+): S
Hedonic Product --> Brand Experience	0.787*	10.508	H3 (+): S
Brand Experience --> Brand Satisfaction	0.233***	2.284	H4 (+): S
Brand Experience --> Brand Love	0.386*	5.353	H5 (+): S
Brand Satisfaction --> Brand Love	0.402*	7.581	H6 (+): S
Brand Satisfaction --> Brand Loyalty	0.267*	3.676	H7 (+): S
Brand Satisfaction --> Brand WOM	0.563*	8.543	H8 (+): S
Brand Love --> Brand Loyalty	0.630*	8.071	H9 (+): S
Brand Love --> Brand WOM	0.257*	3.429	H10 (+): S
Brand Loyalty --> Brand WOM	0.159***	2.202	H11 (+): S

Note: * $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.05$ (one tail tests).

According to Bollen (1989), it is very important to analyze the effects of total effects (direct and indirect effects) because an examination of only the direct effects could be misleading. The analysis of indirect effects highlights the importance of mediating variables in explaining social media adoption. Thus, in Table 4, we can observe the standardized direct, indirect and totals effects.

Table 4 - Standardized direct, indirect, and total effects

Paths	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects
Hedonic Product → Brand Experience	0.787*		0.787**
Hedonic Product → Brand Satisfaction	0.472*	0.183***	0.655*
Hedonic Product → Brand Love	0.232**	0.567*	0.799*
Hedonic Product → Brand Loyalty	-	0.678*	0.678*
Hedonic Product → Brand WOM	-	0.682*	0.682*
Brand Experience → Brand Satisfaction	0.233***	-	0.233***
Brand Experience → Brand Love	0.386*	0.094***	0.480*
Brand Experience → Brand Loyalty	-	0.364*	0.364*
Brand Experience → Brand WOM	-	0.312**	0.312**
Brand Satisfaction → Brand Love	0.402*	-	0.402*
Brand Satisfaction → Brand Loyalty	0.267**	0.253*	0.520*
Brand Satisfaction → Brand WOM	0.563*	0.185*	0.748*
Brand Love → Brand Loyalty	0.630*	-	0.630*
Brand Love → Brand WOM	0.257**	0.100***	0.357*
Brand Loyalty → Brand WOM	0.159***	-	0.159***

Note: * $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.05$.

We used the bootstrapping technique with a sample of 2,000 random observations generated from the original sample, and a confidence interval of 95% was also used in the estimation of the proposed model. This is because the analysis of total and indirect effects is only possible with the use of this method of estimation.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The hedonic product has a very strong effect on brand experience, then on brand satisfaction, and finally on brand love. In other words, the hedonism associated with the product motivates a stronger experience with the Apple brand. Additionally, the hedonic product enhances brand satisfaction. The influence of the hedonic product on brand love is weaker, although significant. Yu and Yan (2019) demonstrated a very strong effect of the hedonic product on brand experience. Li et al. (2021) also found a strong impact of the hedonic product on brand satisfaction. Finally, Bragagnolo et al. (2020) showed that the hedonic product has a significant influence on brand love.

The experience with the Apple brand strongly influences the love for this brand. Apple brand customers are also satisfied when their experience with the brand is favourable. Rodrigues and Brandão (2021) confirmed that experience with the brand has a positive impact on brand love. Meanwhile, Slaton et al. (2020) demonstrated a direct effect of brand experience on brand satisfaction.

Apple brand satisfaction has the strongest effect on brand word-of-mouth, followed by its impact on brand love, and then on brand loyalty. In the study by Sukhu et al. (2019), brand satisfaction has a significant impact on brand word-of-mouth. Slaton et al. (2020) highlighted that brand satisfaction positively influences brand love. According to Song et al. (2019), brand satisfaction has a positive effect on brand loyalty.

Apple brand love positively influences both brand loyalty and brand word-of-mouth. As in in our study, Martín et al. (2020) demonstrated that the relationship between brand love and brand loyalty is stronger than the relationship between brand love and brand word-of-mouth. Finally, in our work, as well as in the study by Coelho et al. (2019), brand loyalty has a positive effect on brand word-of-mouth.

In summary, when only the direct effects are analysed, the hedonic product has the strongest impact on the experience with the Apple brand, followed by its effect on brand satisfaction. The strongest direct impacts on Apple brand love come from brand satisfaction and experience with this brand. Experience with the Apple brand, in addition to its effect on brand love, also has a significant effect on brand satisfaction. Regarding Apple brand loyalty, love for this brand has a much stronger direct effect than brand satisfaction. When it comes to word-of-mouth about the Apple brand, satisfaction with this brand has a stronger direct effect than brand love. Apple Brand loyalty also has a significant but weaker direct effect on brand word-of-mouth.

It should be stressed, however, that the total effects (direct and indirect) should be investigated, because considering the total effects will give us a more rigorous assessment of the relationships between the variables under analysis. The strongest total effect (direct and indirect) on Apple brand love resulted from Apple having hedonic products, followed by experience with the brand, and finally, brand satisfaction. Once again, the hedonic product proved to be crucial for Apple brand satisfaction, as its total effect was very strong. Regarding total effects on Apple brand loyalty, the hedonic product is once again fundamental in achieving loyalty to this brand. Apple brand love and brand satisfaction also have a very strong total effect on loyalty to this brand. The impact of experience with the Apple brand on brand loyalty is weaker. Lastly, in Apple brand word-of-mouth, the strongest total impact comes from satisfaction with Apple brand, followed closely by the hedonic product, which also exerts a very strong influence. Experience with the Apple brand and brand love have a significant impact on brand WOM, though not as strong. As for the impact of Apple brand loyalty on brand word-of-mouth, the effect, while significant, was weaker.

In summary, Apple has always emphasized the hedonic nature of its products, which has been a successful marketing strategy. As we have seen, this feature of its products enhances the experience with the brand and fosters brand love, brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, and brand word-of-mouth.

6. Implications and Limitations

6.1. Theoretical Implications

Much of the interest of the present work lies in the analysis of the variables that are antecedents and consequences of Apple brand love. Apple products are considered hedonic, leading customers to experience unforgettable moments that will both satisfy them and make them love the brand. In turn, brand satisfaction and brand love encourage brand loyalty and word-of-mouth about Apple. Finally, loyal customers speak positively about the Apple brand. Therefore, our intention is to contribute to the analysis of the main determinants and consequences of Apple brand love.

6.2. Management Implications

The main objective of this research was to assess the antecedents and consequences of love for Apple brand products. This brand seems to be associated with hedonic and experiential aspects that are extremely important for its customers to feel satisfied with the brand and develop a deep love for the Apple brand. When this happens, Apple brand customers become brand loyal and recommend the brand to others.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

The results of the research should be interpreted taking into consideration certain limitations. Future studies may examine other determinants of Apple brand love. Other consequences of Apple brand love may also be researched.

Given that the present study used cross-sectional data, it would also prove of great interest for future research to use a longitudinal sample to assess the nature of loyalty and word-of-mouth over time.

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