

Brand experience and brand attachment as drivers of WOM in hospitality

Brand experience and attachment

231

Experiencia de marca y vinculación afectiva como antecedentes de las recomendaciones boca-oído (WOM)

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to develop a model to measure the impact of brand experience in the hotel industry, on word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations while accounting for the possible mediating role of people's emotional attachment with the brand.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected through an online survey of 416 hotel customers. The proposed model was tested with structural equations modelling (SEM).

Findings – The results suggest that brand experience in the hotel sector is a consequence of four dimensions: location, ambience, staff and Web, in that order of influence. In addition, the study confirms the mediating role of emotional attachment in the relationship between experience and WOM recommendations. However, the experience itself has a greater direct impact than the attachment.

Practical implications – By knowing the dimensions that comprise the hotel brand experience, managers can design more impactful experiences that create strong links with guests, thereby increasing WOM recommendations.

Originality/value – This paper enriches the existing literature on brand experience in the hospitality sector and provides evidence of the mediating role of emotional bonding. Previous research has proven that linking is a consequence of experience, but not yet examined its mediating role.

Keywords Hotel, WOM, Brand experience, Brand attachment

Paper type Research paper



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Resumen

Propósito – El objetivo principal de esta investigación es desarrollar un modelo para medir el impacto de la experiencia de marca en la industria hotelera, sobre las recomendaciones boca-oído, teniendo en cuenta el posible rol mediador de la vinculación afectiva con la marca.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque – Los datos se recogieron mediante una encuesta online a 416 clientes de hoteles. La contrastación del modelo propuesto se ha realizado mediante el desarrollo de un modelo con ecuaciones estructurales (SEM).

Hallazgos – Los resultados sugieren que la experiencia de marca en el sector hotelero, es consecuencia de cuatro dimensiones (ubicación, ambiente, personal y web), siendo ubicación, ambiente y personal más influyentes que la web en la generación de experiencias. Se confirma el rol mediador de la vinculación afectiva en la relación entre la experiencia y las recomendaciones boca-oído. No obstante, la experiencia tiene mayor impacto directo que el vínculo afectivo en esta relación.

Implicaciones prácticas – Conocer las dimensiones que integran la experiencia de marca en el hotel, permite a los gerentes diseñar mejores experiencias que impacten a sus huéspedes y consigan y crear fuertes vínculos con ellos, incrementando así las recomendaciones boca-oído.

Originalidad/valor – El presente trabajo enriquece la literatura existente sobre experiencia de marca en el sector turístico y aporta evidencias del rol mediador de la vinculación afectiva. Investigaciones previas han probado que la vinculación es consecuencia de la experiencia, pero no su papel mediador.

Palabras clave Experiencia de marca, Vinculación afectiva, Recomendaciones boca-oído, Hotel

Tipo de artículo Artículo de investigación

1. Introduction

Brand experience is a relatively new concept in marketing. Concerning the generation of unique, pleasant and memorable experiences, this notion has begun capturing the attention of both academics and practitioners (Jain *et al.*, 2017). According to Pine and Gilmore (1998, 2002b), two pioneers in research on the “experience economy,” the evolution of the commodity economy has increased the economic value of experiences, up to a fourth stage called experience economics, in what is known as the progression of economic value. This transition has forced service businesses to differentiate themselves from the competition. Hotels are a useful microcosm of this shift and thus constitute our core focus in this paper.

The hotel is a fundamental element in the tourism sector, often providing a hub for the experiences that promote tourists’ psychological well-being (García *et al.*, 2018). In this regard, it is important to note that, while people generally evaluate experiences on both a cognitive and emotional level, this process is predominantly emotional in the tourism sector (Serra-Cantalops *et al.*, 2018) because tourists are basically traveling for pleasure. Consequently, hotel brands are important for adding value to both customers and the hotel itself. Therefore, academics and professionals agree that hotels need to generate unique, emotional and unforgettable experiences that facilitate desirable consumer behaviors (Kang, 2015; Khan and Rahman, 2015; Sukhu *et al.*, 2018). The positive emotions and memories from the experience (Serra-Cantalops *et al.*, 2018) then contribute to emotional bonds between consumers and brands (Huang, 2017).

As the concept of brand experience has gained traction, the literature has underscored several developmental issues. The first problem is the indiscriminate use of the theoretical perspective from the studies of Schmitt (1999) and Brakus *et al.* (2009). Most authors apply them without providing any additional criticism or theoretical elaboration (Andreini *et al.*, 2018). In this research, we have tried to provide a critical vision by using a scale and dimensions that, in our opinion, more realistically represents the brand experience in the hotel sector.

Second, the marketing literature has hardly examined the mechanisms that mediate the relationship between brand experience and its possible consequences (Huang, 2017).

Scholars have yet to perform an in-depth analysis of the mediating role of emotions in the relationship between experience design and customer evaluation (Pullman and Gross, 2004). Only recently have some authors, such as Huang (2017), Aro *et al.* (2018) and Ramirez and Merunka (2019), begun to consider the mediating role of other variables, such as brand love, trust or brand credibility, in the relationship between brand experience and its consequences. Authors such as Delgado Ballester and Fernández (2011) have verified the effects of experience in word-of-mouth (WOM) communications, while others have shown that previous experience in the tourism field shapes tourists' evaluations (Beerli and Martín, 2004; Del Barrio García *et al.*, 2012). However, we are not aware of any cases establishing the mediating effect of brand attachment in the hotel environment. We will seek to confirm this relationship in the Spanish hotel context.

In short, this article contributes to the literature on brand experience in the tourism-hotel sector. Our objectives are twofold: first, we aim to show that the brand experience in the hotel sector has a positive and direct effect on WOM recommendations. Second, we examine the relationship between experience and WOM recommendations through the mediation of brand attachment – a relationship that has yet to be tested in the literature. To these ends, we developed a model that measures the impact of hotel brand experience on WOM recommendations while accounting for the possible mediating role of brand attachment.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Brand experience

Although Brakus *et al.* (2009) coined the term brand experience, Pine and Gilmore (1998, 2002b) stressed the importance of differentiating oneself from the competition, as well as attracting and retaining customers through experience. Therefore, they urged firms to abandon the service mentality, which is based on customer acquisition, and adopt an experience mentality that encourages consumers to spend more time in the hotel.

Brakus *et al.* (2009, p. 53) conceptualized brand experience as “sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments.” Experience should be understood as the subjective and internal responses of each consumer toward brand-related stimuli at each point of interaction. This contact can occur directly or indirectly (Ramirez and Merunka, 2019) during the purchase process, as the experience occurs at the moment in which “consumers search for products, when they shop for them and receive service, and when they consume them” (Brakus *et al.*, 2009, p. 52).

According to Brakus *et al.* (2009), brand experience consists of four dimensions:

- (1) *Sensory*: This includes the sensory stimulations provided by the brand. The visual aspects are more relevant, as they are easy to remember and help to configure the aesthetic sense of the environment (Beckman *et al.*, 2013; Ramirez and Merunka, 2019).
- (2) *Affective*: This includes emotions that may be mild (mood; consumers are not fully aware of the stimulus generated by such emotion) or intense (feelings; the stimulus is usually identified) (Schmitt, 1999; Beckman *et al.*, 2013; Ramirez and Merunka, 2019).
- (3) *Intellectual*: This is formed by analytical and imaginative thoughts, which stimulate people's curiosity and make them reflect (Schmitt, 1999; Beckman *et al.*, 2013; Ramirez and Merunka, 2019).
- (4) *Behavioral*: This includes physical actions caused by exposure to brand stimuli (Beckman *et al.*, 2013; Ramirez and Merunka, 2019).

Although this scale by Brakus *et al.* (2009) measures experience with a wide variety of product- and service-related brands, it features a small variety of hotel brands, which has led some authors (Walls, 2013; Khan and Rahman, 2017; Andreini *et al.*, 2018) to question the scale's ability to measure experience in sectors such as hotels. For that reason, Khan and Rahman (2017, p. 281) defined the hotel brand experience as:

[...] a set of feelings, sensations, thoughts and behavioral responses toward hotel brand-related stimuli that are integral to the hotel brand's location, ambience, staff competence, website and social media presence and guest-to-guest interaction.

On this basis, they developed a new, validated scale that could capture these specificities within the framework established by Brakus *et al.* (2009).

Both sets of authors agree that experience is a subjective response caused by external stimuli. While Brakus *et al.* (2009) focused on the general level, Khan and Rahman (2017) tried to identify the specific and controllable stimuli that have an impact on consumers. The key to creating these memorable experiences is not to improve the functionality of the service, but to offer pleasant experiences by leveraging existing resources and services (Gilmore and Pine, 2002a). After a series of studies, Khan and Rahman (2017) identified these variables related to the hotel brand:

- *Hotel location*: The degree to which the location of the hotel brand fascinates to an individual's senses.
- *Hotel stay and ambience*: The extent to which a guest feels that the stay at the hotel brand is pleasant and ambience (e.g. clean rooms and bathrooms, parking space, architectural design, etc.) has put impression on his/her senses.
- *Hotel staff competence*: The degree to which a guest feels that staff's efficiency, friendliness and professionalism stimulate their senses.
- *Hotel website and social media experience*: The degree to which a hotel brand's website provides correct information and the presence of hotel brand on social media induces feelings.
- *Guest-to-guest experience*: The extent to which a guest is affected by the presence of other guests.

We will use these dimensions and their associated scale (Khan and Rahman, 2017) herein.

2.2 Brand attachment

The first investigations into brand attachment came from the field of psychology. Bowlby (1977) put forth that basic needs are covered by affective bonds, which begin with the bond between mother and child, and continue with kinship, friendship and romantic relationships (Thomson *et al.*, 2005; Whan Park *et al.*, 2010). A later research by Bowlby (1982), Ugalde *et al.* (2017) distinguished between the feeling of attachment (with few variations over time) and the behavior of attachment (which occurs sporadically), which mainly differ in terms of the duration of these feelings.

Following these first contributions, scholars analyzed the concept from other perspectives. Thomson *et al.* (2005) and Whan Park *et al.* (2010) laid the foundations for this concept in the field of marketing. Both investigations provided different definitions, based on different perspectives, and thus generated different dimensions. However, both of the resulting scales have been commonly accepted and used in subsequent investigations. Consequently, the literature has established that brand attachment encompasses emotional links with brands (Park *et al.*, 2006; Whan Park *et al.*, 2010; Thomson *et al.*, 2005), destinations (Gross and Brown, 2006; Scannell and Gifford, 2010; Tsai, 2012) and even institutions like banks (Levy and Hino, 2016; Taghipourian and Bakhsh, 2016).

Thomson *et al.* (2005, p. 78) defined attachment as “an emotion laden target-specific bond between a person and a specific object.” They treated this construct as a second-order factor composed of three first-order factors: affection, connection and passion. On the other hand, Whan Park *et al.* (2010, p. 2) defined it as “the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self.” In this case, there are two critical factors that reflect the conceptual properties of the construct: brand connection (cognitive and emotional connection with the brand) and brand prominence (importance of the cognitive and affective link with the brand, reflected in the frequency with which people remember thoughts and feelings about the brand).

Other authors such as Japutra *et al.* (2018) or Jiménez and Voss (2014) have proposed alternative measures that seek to concretize and simplify the abstract nature of the construct (Japutra *et al.*, 2018). We decided to use Japutra *et al.*'s scale for this study, as hotel services are rather intangible, and we thought this scale will be easier for respondents to understand.

2.3 Hypotheses development

Khan and Rahman (2017) proposed five dimensions that reflect the hotel brand experience: hotel location, hotel stay and ambience, hotel staff competence, hotel website and social media experience and guest-to-guest experience. However, we have only considered four of them, as we believe that the interaction between clients introduces a component that depends more on external agents (the clients themselves)[1] than on hotel management. Thus, we tested the following hypotheses:

- H1a.* Hotel location is an antecedent dimension of the brand experience in the hotel.
- H1b.* Hotel stay and ambience is an antecedent dimension of the brand experience in the hotel.
- H1c.* Hotel staff competence is an antecedent dimension of the brand experience in the hotel.
- H1d.* Hotel website and social media experience is an antecedent dimension of the brand experience in the hotel.

By experiencing the brand in a positive way, consumers create memories and a sense of connection with it, which could favor the creation of emotional bonds (Reihani, 2019). Some research (Bıçakcıoğlu *et al.*, 2016; Garg *et al.*, 2016) has affirmed that the experience promotes the development of emotional ties with the brand. According to Huang (2017), brand love – and by extension, brand attachment (Moussa, 2015; Gómez-Suárez, 2018) have a strong emotional component. Similarly, a study by Japutra *et al.* (2014) revealed that brand attachment is a consequence of experience. Therefore, experience determines the strength of the link between consumer and brand. These internal and positive responses, generated from a favorable experience, will become positive memories, which result in the creation of links with brands (Huang, 2017; Japutra *et al.*, 2018; Ramirez and Merunka, 2019; Reihani, 2019). We hypothesize that this same process applies to hotel brands. Formally:

- H2.* The brand experience in the hotel has a direct and positive influence on the hotel brand attachment.

WOM communications are understood as an informal process by which individuals transmit information about an object, brand or service. Because of its informal and non-commercial nature, WOM has high credibility and persuasive power. As such, companies – especially those that are service-oriented, such as hotels – are interested in promoting these communications to attract customer traffic (Delgado Ballester and Fernández, 2011).

In this sense, brand experience can favor the generation of WOM. Emotionally charged consumption situations can create psychological tension, which people can relieve through WOM communication (Delgado Ballester and Fernández, 2011). By providing unique and unforgettable experiences, hotels can obtain brand promoters and co-creators of value through positive recommendations (Serra-Cantalops *et al.*, 2018). With this in mind, we propose:

H3. The brand experience in the hotel has a direct and positive influence on WOM recommendations.

Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) defined WOM as “the degree to which the consumer praises the brand to others.” Following this definition, Bıçakcıoğlu *et al.* (2016) proposed that consumers who love the brand are more willing to say “good words” to their friends compared to unloved brands. Because some authors like Moussa (2015) consider brand love to be analogous to brand attachment, we propose:

H4. Brand attachment has a direct and positive influence on WOM recommendations.

The hypotheses formulated above assume that both experience and attachment (or its analog, brand love) have a positive effect on WOM. We want to further predict that brand attachment mediates the relationship between experience and positive WOM (Ishikawa, 2013; Bıçakcıoğlu *et al.*, 2016; Roy *et al.*, 2016; Aro *et al.*, 2018; Hwang and Lee, 2018). Therefore, we propose:

H5. Brand attachment is a mediator of the relationship between brand experience and WOM.

Unlike Khan and Rahman’s model (2017), our proposed conceptual model comprises four background factors (location, staff, ambient and Web), as presented in Figure 1.

3. Methodology

3.1 Questionnaire design

We first presented the participants with a set of introductory questions involving demographic and contextualization issues; these were followed by questions about experience, attachment and recommendations, all measured in a global way. We used a scale

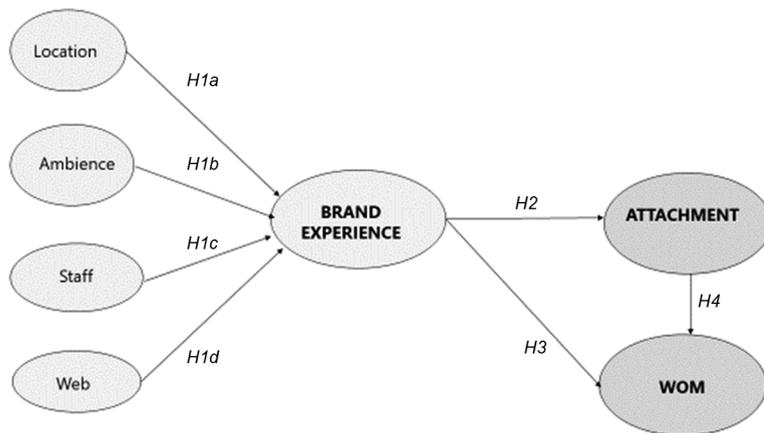


Figure 1.
Theoretical model:
antecedents and
consequences of
brand experience

from 0 to 10 for these measurements, in line with expert suggestions that this scale is better suited to global valuations than a 1-7 scale. We used a seven-point Likert scale for the block of questions related to each of the dimensions, as this scale demonstrates optimum reliability (Croasmun and Ostrom, 2011). In this study, we adapted the formula suggested by Preston and Colman (2000):

$$(\text{Value} - 1) / (\text{Number of response categories} - 1) \times 100$$

In our case, we decided to multiply and divide by 10 (instead of 100) to obtain a common score of 10 (Dawes, 2018).

Before we distributed the main questionnaire, we had it reviewed by a committee of four experts (two academic specialists in tourism and two sector executives) who suggested modifications. We then pre-tested the survey with a convenience sample of 24 people. The scales used have been tested in previous research: brand experience (Khan and Rahman, 2017), attachment (Jiménez and Voss, 2014) and WOM recommendations (Khan and Rahman, 2017).

3.2 Data gathering and sampling

To obtain the main sample, we used a convenience method. Between April and May 2019, we distributed the questionnaires through Google Forms, which guaranteed the anonymity of the sample. This process produced 426 questionnaires. We eliminated those who did not meet our requirements (failing the control questions, not including description of experience and missing data in key questions), leaving a sample of 416 valid Spanish respondents.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. The higher response rate among women compared to men generally aligns with the sex breakdown of Spain, according to the INE (Instituto Nacional de Estadística) (Statista, 2019).

4. Results

4.1 Global model adjustment

The descriptive measures and all items can be found in Appendix. The results of the principal component factor analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation appear in Table 2. We eliminated one of the items related to personnel (STAFF2), as its commonality was less than 0.6. These results coincide with the theoretical proposal, as the four factors (location,

	(%)
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	61
Male	39
<i>Age</i>	
< 22 years	37
23-43 years	31
> 43 years	32
<i>Education level</i>	
Primary school	3
Secondary school	38
University degree	59

Source: Own elaboration

Table 1.
Demographic profile
of the respondents

Description	Staff	Location	Web	Ambience
I feel good at this hotel brand because of the staff personnel's attentiveness	0.889			
The way in which the staff of this hotel brand serves is admirable	0.866			
The staff of this hotel brand is helpful and friendly	0.834			
I find location of this hotel brand appealing		0.873		
The location of this hotel brand is convenient that makes me feel relaxed		0.827		
The location of this hotel brand stimulates my senses		0.811		
I find online reviews of this hotel brand informative			0.900	
The presence of this hotel brand on social media appeals to my visuals			0.830	
The website of this hotel brand provides accurate results			0.813	
This hotel brand has attractive architectural design				0.844
The decor of this hotel brand is pleasing				0.781
Ambience of this hotel brand is very relaxing to me				0.525
% Explained Variance	21.987	20.626	19.229	15.194
α	0.843	0.828	0.850	0.778

Table 2.
PCA of brand
experience

Note: ***Significant at 1 per cent
Source: Own elaboration

environment, personal and Web) are composed of three items that are each related to these possible constructs. The model's goodness-of-fit, as measured by the total variance explained by the four factors (77 per cent), is adequate. In addition, the absence of a single factor implies that there is no common variance bias (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, we affirmed the reliability of the different scales using Cronbach's α : the values ranged from 0.778 to 0.900, higher than the critical value of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1979), which indicates the consistency of the proposed scales.

Before testing the hypothesis, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the reliability and validity of the scales. With this analysis, we confirmed that the experience scale meets all the psychometric properties related to validity and reliability. This model achieved acceptable goodness-of-fit indicators, especially when considering the large sample size ($\chi^2/g.l. = 2,723$, GFI = 0.955, CFI = 0.972, TLI = 0.958, RMSA = 0.064).

Table 3 shows the results of the first-order model. All constructs are reflective. All loads are greater than 0.6, and all items except one are even above 0.7. Additionally, the "critical ratio" (CR), which captures the final configuration of items representing individual values, is high at a significance level of less than 1 per cent. The composite reliability indicators are greater than 0.8, exceeding the cut-off point of 0.7 (Hair, 2006). Meanwhile, the AVE are all greater than 0.6, except for ambience, which still exceeds the critical value of 0.5 (Hair, 2006). Therefore, all scales achieved convergent validity.

To check for discriminant validity, we followed the procedure proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), which involves comparing the inter-construct correlation squared with the AVE. If the latter is higher than the former, then we can assume the model possesses discriminant validity. As Table 4 indicates, the AVE is included in the main diagonal and the inter-construct squared correlations are shown in each column below the main diagonal.

To empirically validate the proposed model, we applied an analysis of variance-covariance or structural equation modeling (SEM) using the maximum-likelihood procedure, carried out by the AMOS 24.0 program.

Dimension		Li	R ²	1 - R ²	AVE	α	Composite reliability	CR	p-value
UBI1_1	LOCATION	0.734	0.539	0.461	0.637	0.828	0.852		
UBI2_1	LOCATION	0.873	0.762	0.238				15.747	***
UBI3_1	LOCATION	0.782	0.612	0.388				15.014	***
WEB1_1	WEB	0.782	0.612	0.388	0.655	0.850	0.855		
WEB2_1	WEB	0.852	0.726	0.274				16.564	***
WEB3_1	WEB	0.792	0.627	0.373				16.031	***
AMB2_1	AMBIENCE	0.688	0.473	0.527	0.561	0.778	0.835		
AMB3_1	AMBIENCE	0.760	0.578	0.422				13.267	***
AMB4_1	AMBIENCE	0.795	0.632	0.368				13.589	***
STAFF1_1	STAFF	0.812	0.659	0.341	0.731	0.843	0.868		
STAFF3_1	STAFF	0.853	0.728	0.272				19.908	***
STAFF4_1	STAFF	0.898	0.806	0.194				20.837	***

Brand experience and attachment

239

Table 3.
First-order model (CFA) of brand experience

Source: Own elaboration *** significant at 1 per cent

	Location	Ambience	Staff	Web
Location	0.637			
Ambience	0.402	0.561		
Staff	0.199	0.456	0.731	
Web	0.097	0.199	0.115	0.655

Table 4.
Discriminant validity of the first-order model

Source: Own elaboration

As proposed in the theoretical framework, our estimate is based on an antecedent dimensions model. However, we also tested two other possible models (reflective and formative). The model shown in Figure 2, the antecedents model, presented the best goodness of fit and low factor loads. Therefore, the four dimensions related to experience (location, environment, personal and Web) are antecedents of the experience, which is reflected in two global items (importance of experience and memory of it).

The SEM model achieved acceptable goodness-of-fit indicators, thus confirming all the proposed causal relationships. The location is reflected in three items (appealing, convenient and stimulates one's senses); the environment features three items (attractive architectural design, relaxing atmosphere and pleasant decoration), and the staff refers to three items (helpful, admirable attention and feeling good because of the attention). The last dimension of experience refers to the internet, which involves three items (a website offering accurate results, useful online comments and social networks that attract attention).

The results confirmed all hypotheses. We indeed found that the experience encompasses four dimensions: location (0.359), ambience (0.335), staff (0.249) and Web (0.162), which substantiates *H1a* through *H1d*. *H2* and *H3* were also confirmed, as brand experience had a direct, significant and positive standardized effect on attachment (0.656) and WOM (0.657). In turn, attachment is reflected by three items (attached, emotionally connected and affection), while WOM is reflected in three others (relay the experience, recommend the hotel and say positive things about it). The standardized effect of attachment on WOM was low, but also statistically significant (0.173), thus verifying *H4*. Therefore, with this result, the hypothesis regarding the mediating effect of the attachment between brand experience and the WOM recommendations (*H5*) is verified.

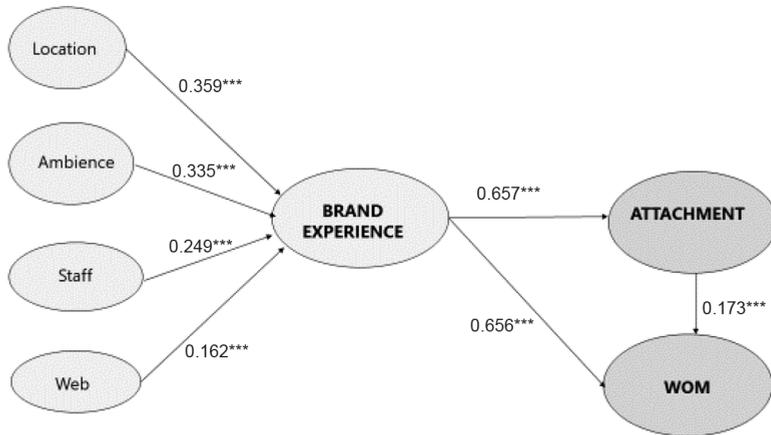


Figure 2.
Structural model:
antecedents and
consequences of
brand experience

Notes: $\chi^2/g.l. = 2.625$; GFI = 0.902; CFI = 0.942; TLI = 0.930; RMSA = 0.065;
***significant at 1%

Source: Own elaboration

5. Conclusions and implications

5.1 Theoretical implications

According to the obtained results, the brand experience in the hotel sector is a consequence of four dimensions: location, ambience, staff and Web, in that order of influence. As for the effects on WOM communications, experience has a greater direct impact than attachment.

Our research empirically substantiates what Khan and Rahman (2017) already advanced: The brand experience in a hotel differs from the brand experience that arises from more tangible goods or experiences. While both involve a subjective response to external stimuli, Brakus *et al.*'s (2009) definition is more abstract about intangible services; as a result, it is weakly applicable to the tourism market. The items that reflect the four dimensions of Brakus *et al.*'s (2009) model – sensory, cognitive, affective and behavioral – are difficult to understand in a study that depends on participants' memory rather than a previous experiment or particular stimuli exposure. For our more general study, the four dimensions of the Khan and Rahman scale (2017) – location, staff, atmosphere and Web – refer to more observable and easy-to-remember issues. That said, our proposed model and obtained results indicate that these dimensions are not a reflection of experience, but rather are shaped as antecedent constructs.

Additionally, we followed Khan and Rahman's (2017, p. 284) research proposal to validate and extend their scale in contexts other than luxury hotel brands. Specifically, our study verified this scale's validity for hotels of any category, as these are the spontaneously chosen by the respondents. The obtained results also confirm that experience has a positive and direct impact on WOM, which aligns with previous research about this relationship (Delgado Ballester and Fernández, 2011; Khan and Fatma, 2017; Khan and Rahman, 2017; Serra-Cantalops *et al.*, 2018).

Theoretically, the study addresses and empirically validates the mediating role of brand attachment in the relationship between brand experience and WOM. This is a novelty, as previous research had only shown that attachment is a consequence of experience (Ishikawa, 2013; Huang, 2017; Ramirez and Merunka, 2019; Reihani, 2019), or that affection

toward brands or tourist destinations increases WOM recommendations (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Bıçakcıoğlu *et al.*, 2016). However, no study has yet established brand attachment's mediating role, at least in the hotel context.

In short, the main contribution of our work is confirming that consumers are more likely to make WOM recommendations about a hotel when they develop emotional ties with said hotel through an experience that they consider intense and can easily recall.

5.2 Practical implications

Hotel managers should focus on providing unique experiences by strategically aligning their business with the four dimensions that comprise such experiences. These dimensions play an important role for both the development of emotional bonds and the likelihood of spurring WOM recommendations.

Regarding the location, for example, hotels can reach agreements with nearby restaurants or shops to offer promotions to guests. The hotels can then garner goodwill by informing customers about nearby accommodations. In cases where hotels are surrounded by nature or beaches, they can promote tours around the environment or even include photographs of the surroundings. Media could be shown on screens in common areas to raise awareness among guests.

It is worth highlighting the importance of hotel staff in the brand experience. In many cases, the correct management of an incident can transform a bad experience into a very positive one. Therefore, firms should incorporate coaching processes into their staff trainings in order to cover issues like emotional intelligence or managing complicated situations.

The results also underscore the need to improve the online experience. The average values obtained in the Web-related items were lower than the rest. According to Brakus *et al.* (2009, p. 52), consumers' brand experience encompasses their search, purchase, receipt and consumption activities. Therefore, websites should be designed around providing clear and precise information, as well as a good shopping experience. In addition, hotels need to better incorporate social networks into their strategies in attract new customers and increase WOM recommendations through them (eWOM). Tourists often take photos during their trips and upload them to their social networks so as to exhibit their experiences, feelings and identity (Luna-Cortés, 2017). For instance, many younger consumers are migrating from Facebook to Instagram (Marcelino Mercedes, 2015) because of the latter's stronger ability to capture and share moments of everyday life (Belanche *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, hotels must work to integrate "instagrammable everyday moments" into the design of their environments, thereby encouraging customers to capture and share these experiences. In this way, hotels can reach a wider audience in a less intrusive way, as these efforts are not ostensibly about advertising and are carried out by people whom users voluntarily follow.

5.3 Limitations and future research

The main limitation of this study is our choice to use a convenience sample, which is why some caution should be taken when generalizing the results. Our results could have been impacted by potential biases related to the three classification variables (sex, age and studies). Future studies on this moderating effect should control for these variables, as well as stratify the sample before performing the fieldwork. For instance, it would be interesting to control for whether the respondent had previous experience with the hotel.

Meanwhile, our results open two major areas of research. First, the same model can be applied in other geographic markets. A cross-cultural investigation would provide stronger empirical evidence about the experience scale, as well as the nature of the relationships

between the main dimensions. Second, scholars could adapt the model to other services (e.g. distribution, financial markets, the collaborative economy, etc.) where the experience is largely intangible, and regular brand experience models cannot be applied directly. These efforts might lead to more specific scales, based on tangible dimensions, that clarify the relationship between experience, attachment and recommendations.

Finally, this study explored the effect of experience on WOM recommendations, but did not consider its impact on online recommendations. Thus, future research could prove the relationship between positive experience and online recommendations. As mentioned above, tourists take photos during their stay to share these memories on their social networks, so testing this relationship would be especially valuable.

Note

1. However, this fifth dimension was included in the pre-test. The results of the exploratory analysis and the respondents' comments led us to exclude it from the final questionnaire.

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Further reading

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246

Item	Scale	Mean	SD
I feel attached to this hotel	Jiménez and Voss (2014)	4.09	1.931
I feel emotionally connected to this hotel	Jiménez and Voss (2014)	4.20	1.926
I feel affection for this hotel	Jiménez and Voss (2014)	4.86	1.857
The location of this hotel brand stimulates my senses	Khan and Rahman (2017)	5.30	1.707
I find location of this hotel brand appealing	Khan and Rahman (2017)	5.77	1.458
The location of this hotel brand is convenient that makes me feel relaxed	Khan and Rahman (2017)	5.86	1.356
This hotel brand has attractive architectural design	Khan and Rahman (2017)	5.18	1.568
Ambience of this hotel brand is very relaxing to me	Khan and Rahman (2017)	5.96	1.228
The decor of this hotel brand is pleasing	Khan and Rahman (2017)	5.78	1.216
The staff of this hotel brand is helpful and friendly that brings out emotions	Khan and Rahman (2017)	6.21	1.096
Appearance of this hotel brand staff is impressive	Khan and Rahman (2017)	4.62	1.752
The way in which the staff of this hotel brand serves is admirable	Khan and Rahman (2017)	5.94	1.218
I feel good at this hotel brand because of the staff personnel's attentiveness	Khan and Rahman (2017)	5.99	1.171
The website of this hotel brand provides accurate results	Khan and Rahman (2017)	4.86	1.716
I find online reviews of this hotel brand informative	Khan and Rahman (2017)	4.96	1.840
The presence of this hotel brand on social media appeals to my visuals	Khan and Rahman (2017)	4.78	1.908
To what degree would you tell your friend/family member about your hotel brand experience?	Khan and Rahman (2017)	5.71	1.504
To what degree would you recommend this hotel brand to a close friend?	Khan and Rahman (2017)	5.34	1.883
To what degree would you tell others positive things about this hotel brand?	Khan and Rahman (2017)	5.93	1.417

Table A1.
Descriptive statistics of the items brand attachment, brand experience and WOM

Source: Own elaboration

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