Brand Experience and WOM: The Mediating Effects of Brand Love, Brand Image, and Brand Loyalty

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

ABSTRACT

Word of mouth (WOM) can significantly affect overall marketing efforts because it influences the company's reputation and the products' brand. To foster positive WOM, marketers should manage the consumer experience. This study applies brand love, brand image, and brand loyalty to the effect of brand experience on WOM. These brands are posited as mediators. This study employed 293 respondents from a Japanese pharmaceutical brand's consumers. The researchers use face-to-face WOM (f-WOM) and electronic WOM (e-WOM), and the results reveal that the brand experience is positively associated with f-WOM and e-WOM. Furthermore, brand experience is associated with both f-WOM and e-WOM through these three brands. Through brand management, organizations can expect positive WOM from their consumers to generate a good spontaneous promotion of their brands.

Keywords: Brand Experience, Brand Image, Brand Love, Brand Loyalty, E-WOM, F-WOM

**JEL Classification**: M37, M31, D91

INTRODUCTION

Delivering top-notch products to customers can help marketing initiatives promote overall organizational effectiveness. However, the activation of marketing initiatives does not occur in a vacuum. The target audience for the programs, namely the consumers, can actively engage with multiple parties using various media methods. They can share their positive or negative experiences with the public. It is obvious that such a response might either increase or decrease the efficiency of marketing campaigns. Consumer behavior researchers have put their attention on observing Word of Mouth (WOM) (Gómez-Suárez & Veloso, 2020; Karjaluoto, Munnukka, & Kiuru, 2015). Moreover, customers can select from a wide range of media platforms in the digital age to communicate their experiences. Anyone else can simply access any stated experiences and influence their attitude configuration about a company and its product. Therefore, the company will be impacted by the customer's opinion.

The current study emphasizes the investigation of several attitudes that may produce favorable WOM. In this study, WOM is defined as a form of marketing communication performed voluntarily by experienced consumers, naturally unmanageable (Gómez-Suárez & Veloso, 2020). WOM can influence the effectiveness of company's marketing program. Positive WOM can affect how consumers feel about a certain brand's goods because it can be spread as a positive message from one consumer to others. Therefore, WOM can affect the marketing program's success because it can shape the image of the product and company in the audience's mind. Positive WOM is likely to support marketing success because a consumer who performs this can persuade others, intentionally or unintentionally, to do positive behaviors (i.e., searching to buy) that may generate a positive impact on the organization. Vice versa, if the consumer expresses negative WOM. It was suggested that WOM as consumer behavior could be better explained by assessing the mechanism of how WOM can occur. This study aimed to propose the mediation mechanism of brand experience and WOM, namely evaluating the mediating effects of brand love, brand image, and brand loyalty between the variables (Figure 1). In measuring the relationships, this study used the theory of planned behavior as the underlying theory. The theoretical viewpoint will explain how consumer attitudes might lead to a specific behavior, namely WOM.

This study has the potential to generate both theoretical and practical contributions. The main theoretical contribution is that this study unfolds the mediation mechanism of the three variables between brand experience and WOM. This study can significantly advance understanding of the related variables in the existing literature. For instance, this study stresses the use of positive WOM and employs two kinds of WOM: first, face-to-face WOM (f-WOM), which refers to when a consumer performs WOM in direct verbal communication with others; and second, electronic WOM (e-WOM) is the WOM that is performed through online media. According to B, Lubis, Rini, and Silalahi (2020), The difference between WOM and e-WOM can be distinguished based on the media used. Traditional WOM usage is usually face-to-face marketing, while e-WOM is online through cyberspace.

Consequently, this study reveals the relationships in a broader context of WOM. To put into practice, marketing managers would obtain information about how to maintain the consumer experience in product consumption (brand experience) to develop brand love, brand image, and positive WOM. The following sections of this paper examine theories and reviews of the study variables, the development of hypotheses, methods, the results of the analysis, discussion, and conclusion.

Figure 1. Research Model
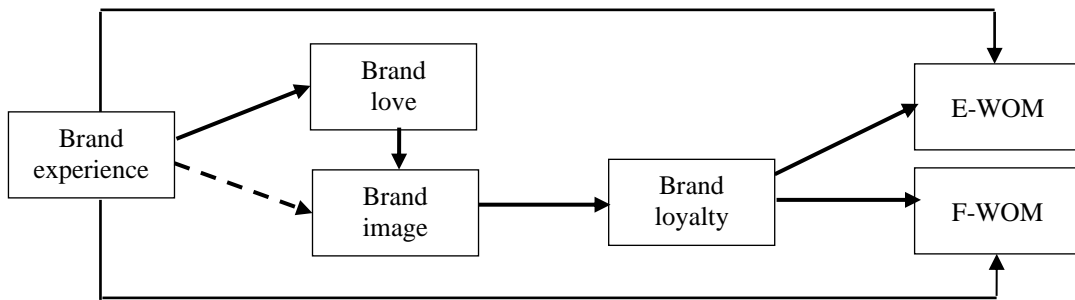
Note: Dashed lines were not hypothesized links

LITERATURE REVIEW

Attitude in Consumers

Attitude is an essential factor in measuring consumers' behavior. A lot of theories have been validated by academics aimed at explaining individual attitudes. For instance, the theory of planned behavior describes an individual attitude as an important factor in describing a person's behavior (Ajzen, 1991; 2018). This theory insists on "intention" to carry out behavior that is affected by attitude towards the behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavior control. Argyriou and Malewar (2011) argued that when a decision is made about an object (such as a positive talk about a product brand), the corresponding attitude will be activated so as to comply with the decision. However, Aviva and Goldman (1990) suggested that the relationship between past attitudes and future consumers' behavior can be more complicated than that. A satisfactory consumer experience would not always lead to repeat purchases. In the context of this study, a positive WOM would not be just the outcome of a favorable attitude of a product brand. Therefore, it is important to investigate more deeply into what a consumer may think after receiving great feedback about a product brand. This study anticipates that a pleasant brand experience will enable other positive attitudes before motivating customers to spread positive WOM. This study also proposes that brand experience would be followed sequentially by brand love, brand image, and brand loyalty before it generates good WOM.

Brand Experience and WOM

A purchase incident could result in a consumer's post-purchase attitude (Argyriou & Melewar, 2011). This attitude can be either positive (e.g., pleasant, like) or negative (e.g., unpleasant, dislike). The consumer will have a positive attitude toward a brand when they have positive feelings about it. For instance, the consumer might have a favorable brand experience with the brand. This is in line with Hersetyawati, Arief, Furinto, and Saroso (2021), who state that WOM is affected not only the customer's purchase but also the company. Brand experience is an evaluative assessment by consumers regarding how the identity, design, package, functionality, and communication style of the brand can influence their cognition, sense, and feeling (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). Gómez-Suárez and Veloso (2020) found that brand experience is positively linked to WOM. Using the hotel industry as their research context, they found that when passengers of hotels have memorable moments while staying in the hotels (e.g., in terms of personnel, location, web, and ambiance), they can be either hotel brands' promoters or influencers to other potential passengers. They are voluntarily willing to spread positive WOM, either personally or through online media. It should be noted that in the age of virtual communication, consumers can select online media as a means of expression. Thus, this study forms the hypotheses as follows:
H1: Brand experience positively influences e-WOM.
H2: Brand experience positively influences f-WOM.

Mediating Roles of Brand Love, Brand Image, and Brand Loyalty
Brand experience is a multidimensional concept that includes four kinds of experience: sensory (i.e., visual aspects of the brand), affective (i.e., mild/strong feelings toward the brand), intellectual (i.e., analytical or imaginative thoughts that stimulate curiosity), and behavioral (i.e., physical actions evoked by the brand exposure) (Gómez-Suárez & Veloso, 2020). Brand love is an emotional bond formed following successful experiences associated with using a certain brand of product (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Therefore, it is plausible that brand experience may promote brand love. This study anticipates that brand love can enhance brand image. Brand image is an existing view of consumers about a brand (Rubini, 2010). When consumers develop a bond with a brand, this brand should be firmly perceived as a unique object in their minds. Further, with a strong image in mind over the course of time, a brand may receive loyalty from the consumers, namely to encourage the consumers to regularly purchase the brand (Kinuthia et al., 2012; Wel, Alam, & Nor, 2011). Finally, brand loyalty can promote further constructive behaviors, such as positive WOM. Overall, it seems like brand love, brand image, and brand loyalty play the mediation mechanism on the influence of brand experience on WOM. Therefore, the following hypotheses are formed:
H3a: Brand love, brand image, and brand loyalty sequentially mediate the brand experience e-WOM link.
H3b: Brand love, brand image, and brand loyalty sequentially mediate the brand experience f-WOM link.

RESEARCH METHOD

Sample Context and Procedure
The population of this study was consumers of Subarashi & Utsukushii products produced by a pharmaceutical company called AFC Life Science Japan. This company produces healthy food supplements, treatments, and cosmetics. The respondents were Indonesian consumers of the company. An online survey was distributed to the targeted respondents. A total of 293 respondents were willing to participate. In terms of gender, 53.92% of the respondents were female. They were in the interval age of >21–25 (29.69%) and >25–30 years old (28.67%). The majority of them hold an undergraduate degree (53.58%) and work as employees in public/private enterprises (38.91%). Specifically, 147 persons (50.17%) were non-member respondents of Subarashi and Utsukushii's products, and 143 respondents (48.80%) were member respondents who reported that they had been using the products of the brand for 1–3 years.

Study Variables
This study involves brand experience, brand love, brand image, brand loyalty, e-WOM, and f-WOM. Prior to data collection, we carefully translated the English version scales so that the translated version scales were equivalent to the original. All items were administrated in the Indonesian language. The respondents were asked to fill in an online questionnaire. The respondents evaluated each item sentence with a 5-point Likert scale by choosing the agreement levels from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The detailed information on the variables is presented as follows:

For Brand Experience, to adjust to the context of this study, we modified the 4-item brand experience scale of Rahmat and Marso (2020). A sample item is "the product that is consistent with my lifestyle and personality". Meanwhile, Brand Love was assessed with the 7-item scale adopted by Karjaluoto et al. (2015). Again, a sample item is "I am passionate about this brand". For Brand Image, We adopted the 3-item brand image scale from Rahmat and Marso (2020) out of four original numbers. In addition, we adopted the 6-item of a brand image from Low and Lamb (2000), which originally had seven items. A sample item is "I think that the product in this advertisement is friendly".

Furthermore, We modified the 4-item scale of brand loyalty from Rahmat and Marso (2020). A sample item is "I recommend this product to my friends and family members". Additionally, E-WOM was assessed with the 3-item scale of e-WOM adopted by Karjaluoto et al. (2015). A sample item is "I promote this brand in an online environment". Finally, the F-WOM was assessed with the 4-item scale of f-WOM adopted by Karjaluoto et al. (2015). A sample item is "I promote this brand to my friends".

RESULTS

Preliminary Assessment for Study Variables

All study instruments were evaluated by performing validity and reliability testing using SPSS 22 and Smart LPS 3.0. Table 1 shows that all items reach a high score of loadings (> 0.70). All of the scores of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are more than 0.50 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). All constructs also reached a high value of Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (> 0.70) (Hair et al., 2010). Based on the results, the validity and reliability of the study variables are met. Prior to hypotheses testing, we also evaluated the goodness of fit model. The results show that the standardized root means square residual (SRMR) is 0.049 (note: threshold value is 0.08). The SRMR value shows the average magnitude of the discrepancies between observed and expected correlations as an absolute measure of the (model) fit criterion (Kline, 2005).

Table 1. Validity Assessment (*N* =293)

Construct	Item Code	Loading	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Decision
Brand experience	BEX1	.818	.684	.845	.896	Valid and Reliable
	BEX2	.824				
	BEX3	.857				
	BEX4	.810				
Brand love	BLV1	.824	.707	.913	.935	Valid and Reliable
	BLV2	.834				
	BLV3	.875				
	BLV4	.858				
	BLV5	.879				
	BLV6	.769				
Brand image	BIM1	.808	.715	.928	.909	Valid and Reliable
	BIM2	.765				
	BIM3	.797				
	BIM4	.837				
	BIM5	.813				
	BIM6	.814				
	BIM7	.817				
	BIM8	.748				
	BIM9	.782				
Brand loyalty	BLY1	.866	.637	.867	.940	Valid and Reliable
	BLY2	.852				
	BLY3	.883				
	BLY4	.778				
E-WOM	EWO1	.922	.859	.918	.948	Valid and Reliable
	EWO2	.933				
	EWO3	.925				
F-WOM	FWO1	.862	.771	.899	.931	Valid and Reliable
	FWO2	.894				

Construct	Item Code	Loading	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Decision
	FWO3	.892				
	FWO4	.865				

Path Analysis
Direct Relationship Testing Results
Hypothesis testing for direct relationships was done by evaluating the direct effect and t-statistics. To note, the critical value for t-statistics is 1.96. A higher value than this value shows that the link is significant. The study proposes that brand experience positively influences e-WOM (H1). As expected, brand experience is positively related to e-WOM (β = 0.265, t-statistics = 3.071, see Table 2). Thus, H1 is supported. It is also proposed that brand experience positively influences f-WOM (H2). As it is shown, brand experience is also positively related to f-WOM (β = 0.263, t-statistics = 3.713). Thus, H2 is supported.

Table 2. Hypotheses Testing Results: Direct Relationships

Hypothesized Path	Direct Effect	t-statistics	Sig.
BEX --> E-WOM (H1)	.265	3.071	.002
BEX --> F-WOM (H2)	.263	3.713	.000

Note: N = 293, BEX = brand experience, E-WOM = electronic WOM, F-WOM = face-to-face WOM, BLV = brand love, BIM = brand image, BLY = brand loyalty

Mediation Relationship Testing Results
Hypothesis testing for mediation relationships was done by evaluating the indirect effect and t-statistics of the effect. H3a proposes that the influence of brand experience on e-WOM is sequentially mediated by brand love, brand image, and brand loyalty. As hoped, the indirect effect is 0.173 (t-statistics = 3.125). Thus, H3a is supported. H3b proposes that the influence of brand experience on f-WOM is mediated by brand love, brand image, and brand loyalty. The indirect effect of brand experience through the three variables is 0.193 (t-statistics = 3.485). Thus, H3b is supported.

Table 3. Hypotheses Testing Results: Mediation Relationships

Hypothesized Path	Indirect Effect	t-statistics	Sig
BEX --> BLV --> BIM --> BLY --> E-WOM (H3a)	.173	3.125	.002
BEX --> BLV --> BIM --> BLY --> F-WOM (H3b)	.193	3.485	.001

Note. N = 293, BEX = brand experience, E-WOM = electronic WOM, F-WOM = face-to-face WOM, BLV = brand love, BIM = brand image, BLY = brand loyalty.

DISCUSSION

This study explores the links between brand experience, brand love, brand image, brand loyalty, and WOM. As discussed before, positive WOM can elicit the effectiveness of marketing programs and the development of positive perceptions about the brand. This study aimed to assess the direct impacts of brand experiences on both types of WOM. Customers will share their positive brand experiences with a larger audience if they have a good one, e.g., with friends and family face-to-face or through online media. Therefore, evaluation by consumers can strengthen the possibility of favorable and unique experiences being promoted through a positive WOM. This finding is supported by previous studies (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). To look more deeply into the inclination of consumers to perform WOM, we did the t-paired test to determine whether the two types of WOM are statistically different in order to have a deeper understanding of consumer willingness to undertake WOM. We found that the average score of f-WOM is higher (mean = 0.694, SD = 0.026) than e-WOM (mean = 3.461, SD = 0.033), and the difference is significant ($p = 0.010$). This finding reveals that the consumer of the product brand engaged with both types of WOM and preferred to express WOM directly. The majority of the respondents to this study were females who might buy the cosmetics products of the brand. These factors may interact simultaneously to produce the outcome. This phenomenon can be studied further.

This study suggests that brand love, brand image, and brand loyalty can serve as mediators. This proposal is the novel part of this study. As a complement, we provide the fact that post-purchase behavior may be either straightforward or involve more complicated consumer black boxes (Geva & Goldman, 1990). It has been suggested that the brand experience may be less effective in improving positive behaviors, such as repurchase intention or positive WOM. The process might incorporate the development of consumers' emotions towards the brand (brand love), consumers' solid attitudes in minds toward the brand (brand image), and finally, consumers' eagerness to use the brand rather than others (brand loyalty). Future research could more solidly theorize the framework of the flow.
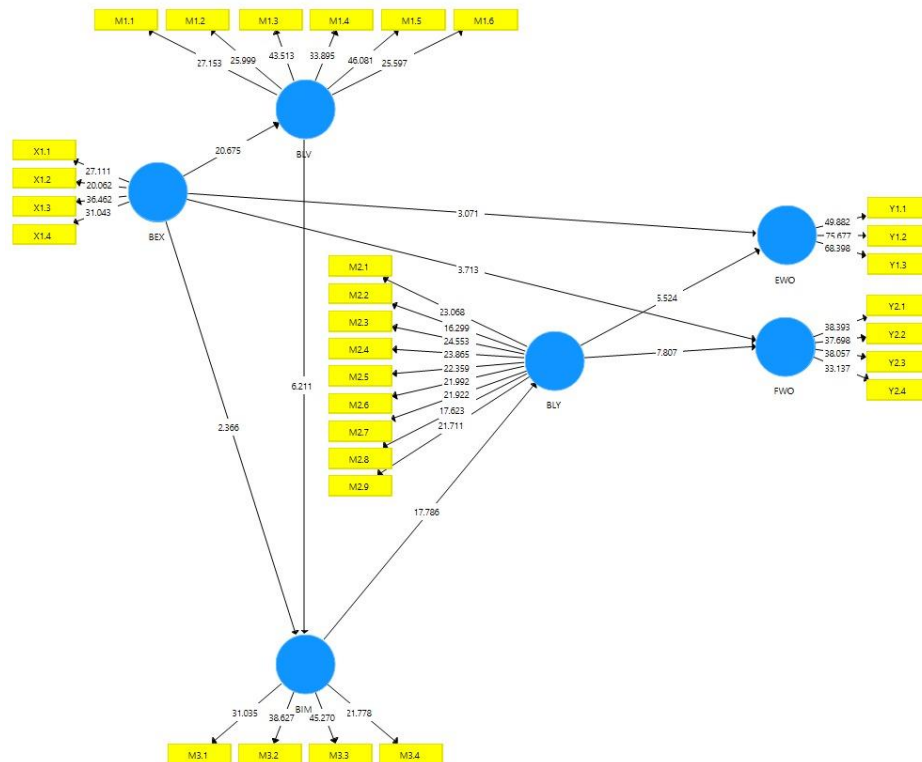
Figure 2. Path Significance

Figure 2 displays the importance of the path. T-statistics are represented by the numbers between the lines. All links are significant. Holding together, marketers should place a strong emphasis on customer experience management. In order to make a positive first impression on the customer, the initial contact is crucial. Consumers can, however, perceive a brand's quality through repeated evidence of interactions. Again, it is proposed that consumer-friendly behaviors may not appear right away (Geva & Goldman, 1990).

To wrap it together, business organizations may choose to rely on evaluating the marketing programs, more especially their promotional activities, since this work emphasizes the benefits of positive WOM on some significant consumers' attitudes about product brands. Organizations should rely on cross-functional responsibilities rather than the marketing department to increase positive perceptions. This initiative can also receive assistance from other departments. For instance, operations and R&D units may narrow the gap between current quality and desired level. The HR department should reconsider the role that human resources play in raising quality standards generally. In order to reserve ideal financial assistance relevant to the activities, the financial department must also be connected to the marketing department.

CONCLUSION

The study delivers several empirical facts. Specifically, the brand experience can account for e-WOM and f-WOM. Moreover, brand love, brand image, and brand loyalty can play roles as mediators among the variables. The study may offer additional knowledge of the relationships among these brands and WOM to be used as a database along with the related works of literature. From these, marketers may receive an important understanding regarding how to encourage more positive WOM. To implement the initiative successfully, the marketing department must coordinate with all other departments in the company.

LIMITATION

This study reveals several limitations. First, this study involved the consumers of just one brand. This may result in less generalizability of the results. Future studies may employ various brand users. Second, the proposed model in terms of the variable sequence is quite new. However, the data for analysis were taken from a cross-sectional method. Therefore, the logical flow of the variables might be less justified. Future study may be conducted to confirm the flow by carrying out a further study with qualitative data (i.e., through a depth interview).

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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