Brand experience and brand attachment as drivers of WOM in hospitality

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
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-óido, 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 del 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-óido. 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-óido.

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-óido, Hotel

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-Cantallops 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-Cantallops 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 Martin, 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 (Başakçıoğlu 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-Cantallops 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, Bıçakçıoğlu 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; Bıçakçıoğlu 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):

\[
\frac{\text{Value} - 1}{\text{Number of response categories} - 1} \times 100
\]

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,
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.

Table 2.
PCA of brand experience

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

Note: ***Significant at 1 per cent
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>$Li$</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$1 - R^2$</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
<th>Composite reliability</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UBI1_1 LOCATION</td>
<td>0.734</td>
<td>0.539</td>
<td>0.461</td>
<td>0.637</td>
<td>0.828</td>
<td>0.852</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UBI2_1 LOCATION</td>
<td>0.873</td>
<td>0.762</td>
<td>0.238</td>
<td>15.747 ***</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>UBI3_1 LOCATION</td>
<td>0.782</td>
<td>0.612</td>
<td>0.388</td>
<td>15.014 ***</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEB1_1 WEB</td>
<td>0.782</td>
<td>0.612</td>
<td>0.388</td>
<td>0.655</td>
<td>0.850</td>
<td>0.855</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEB2_1 WEB</td>
<td>0.852</td>
<td>0.726</td>
<td>0.274</td>
<td>16.564 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>WEB3_1 WEB</td>
<td>0.792</td>
<td>0.627</td>
<td>0.373</td>
<td>16.031 ***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>AMB1_1 AMBIENCE</td>
<td>0.688</td>
<td>0.473</td>
<td>0.527</td>
<td>0.561</td>
<td>0.778</td>
<td>0.895</td>
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<tr>
<td>AMB2_1 AMBIENCE</td>
<td>0.760</td>
<td>0.578</td>
<td>0.422</td>
<td>13.267 ***</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMB3_1 AMBIENCE</td>
<td>0.795</td>
<td>0.632</td>
<td>0.368</td>
<td>13.589 ***</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAFF1_1 STAFF</td>
<td>0.812</td>
<td>0.659</td>
<td>0.341</td>
<td>0.731</td>
<td>0.843</td>
<td>0.868</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAFF3_1 STAFF</td>
<td>0.853</td>
<td>0.728</td>
<td>0.272</td>
<td>19.908 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAFF4_1 STAFF</td>
<td>0.898</td>
<td>0.806</td>
<td>0.194</td>
<td>20.837 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Ambience</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Web</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>0.637</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambience</td>
<td>0.402</td>
<td>0.561</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.199</td>
<td>0.456</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web</td>
<td>0.087</td>
<td>0.199</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

**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.
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-Cantallops 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; Reihan, 2019), or that affection

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

**Notes:** χ²/g.l. = 2.625; GFI = 0.902; CFI = 0.942; TLI = 0.930; RMSA = 0.065; ***significant at 1%

**Source:** Own elaboration
toward brands or tourist destinations increases WOM recommendations (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Bıçakçıoğlu 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 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.

References
Dawes, J. (2018), “Do data characteristics change according to the number of scale points used? An experiment using 5-Point, 7-Point and 10-Point scales”, International Journal of Market Research, Vol. 50 No. 1, pp. 61-104.


Moussa, S. (2015), “I may be a twin but I’m one of a kind: are brand attachment and brand love different names for the same construct?”, Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 69-85.


Further reading


### Appendix

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

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

Source: Own elaboration

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