

Value co-creation as a source of innovation and knowledge to enhance brand competitiveness through long-term customer relations

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Abstract

Consumers can play a key role in value co-creation processes when strong consumer-brand bonds are developed. Through interaction, collaboration and shared experiences, consumers can reinforce affective and emotional bonds with a brand, strengthen long-term relationships with the company and thus help improve its profitability. Nowadays, emotions and positive affect are the focus of attention of the co-creation literature, emphasizing that if consumers experience brand love, they are more willing to engage in co-creative behaviors and joint actions with the company. To analyze the impact of brand love on both online and offline value co-creation, data from 311 Land Rover vehicle owners and members of the brand's community was gathered. The empirical testing of the hypotheses was carried out using partial least squares equation modelling (PLS-SEM). The results confirmed that the consumers feel love for both the brand and the community of brand users, which, in turn, positively influences value co-creation. More specifically, consumers become co-creators of value for a beloved brand when they engage in conversations on behalf of the brand through evangelism, defense, promotion, openness, as well as through their online actions including the posting of comments and photos, as well as the liking and sharing of brand posts, among others.

Keywords: *brand love, brand community love, value co-creation, brand communities*

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1 INTRODUCTION

Nowadays we are witnessing a significant transformation in the way companies innovate and create value in the marketplace. Think about a group of brand enthusiasts working alongside designers to develop the product of their dreams; this would represent the essence of the co-creation concept, as participants collectively create, exchange and enhance brand value (Corsaro & Murtarelli, 2024). The collaborative approach is becoming crucial, since the productive sector faces the challenge of seeking competitive advantages that go beyond functional innovation in products, processes and methods derived exclusively from the business vision. There is a need, therefore, to involve consumers in the development of innovation strategies. Under this approach, companies implement innovations that respond to highly competitive environments, based on an understanding of consumer wants, needs and preferences (Rese et al., 2015; Sánchez-Franco & Aramendia-Muneta, 2023).

Involving consumers in the creation of new products and brands has attracted significant research interest since studies confirm the positive impact of customer co-creation on innovation and organizational performance (Leung et al., 2020). From the consumer's perspective, co-creation contributes to improving perceived brand value, satisfaction, and

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commitment (Danaher et al., 2023; Katsifaraki & Theodosiou, 2024; Sánchez-Franco & Aramendia-Muneta, 2023). Accordingly, fostering value co-creation leads to enhanced competitive advantages and sustainable business operations in the long term (Chang-Hua, 2023). In the automotive industry, the current literature examines the role of customer co-creation behavior in the business decision-making process. For example, Sachdeva et al. (2023) investigated how the relationship between customer interaction with the company and online content creation affects customer loyalty. Other studies have looked into the moderating effect of fair price on the co-creation-satisfaction relationship (Opata et al., 2020), the impact of customer participation in the collaborative innovation process in the BMW and Volkswagen co-creation labs (Dewalska-Opitek, 2020) and customer participation in the development of new customized products (Rema & Srivastav, 2024), among others.

Co-creation is understood as a joint innovation of distinctive value and/or experiences, through the participation of customers and other stakeholders (Foroudi et al., 2019). This innovation strategy is based on the active role of both the supplier and the customer, since in value co-creation, joint collaborative activities take place through direct and indirect interactions between customers and companies (Ahn et al., 2020; Kovanovienė et al., 2021). Furthermore, the interactions that arise through online social networks and brand communities promote constant learning, as members collaboratively conceive and disseminate information (Kaufmann et al., 2016; Kusuma et al., 2024). Thus, online media has emerged as a driver of the transformation of the consumer's role from a passive receiver of information to an active co-creator of value and meaning and even a co-creator of offers (Dressler & Paunovic, 2021).

There are various communication channels which allow consumers to post their consumption experiences and openly expose their values and feelings about a product, a brand or a company (Bigné et al., 2019; Parrott et al., 2015). For example, online brand communities, live interactions and social networks are channels that facilitate social contact with companies and other stakeholders (Ananda et al., 2016; Wang & Wang, 2023). In this way, these communication platforms enable interaction and collaboration among participants and facilitate the value co-creation process (Pelletier et al., 2020).

In this research we argue that co-creation is a social act of collaborative and voluntary meaning-making by the consumer (Kaufmann et al., 2016), which involves various behaviors such as: evangelism, defense, positive word-of-mouth (WOM), and openness to the brand (Frempong et al., 2020; Yi & Gong, 2013). Evangelism implies supporting the brand through purchase and spreading positive referral communication, as well as convincing others about their preferred brand by disparaging competing brands (Panda et al., 2020). Through both proactive and reactive brand defense, consumers protect the interests of a brand by supporting it, preserving its good name and good intentions (Harrigan et al., 2021; Wilk et al., 2020). Positive brand WOM can be defined as the degree to which consumers are willing to spend time and effort on recommending the brand to others (Coelho et al., 2019; Merrilees et al., 2021), including providing information even if other buyers have not requested it (Wilk et al., 2018). Openness refers to consumers' willingness to give information freely and openly to the organization (i.e., feedback) (Melancon et al., 2011) such as compliments, complaints, ideas or suggested changes (Robinson & Celuch, 2016; Sigurdsson et al., 2021).

The review of the existing literature reveals that co-creation does not depend only on the collected information, but also on the existence of affective and emotional ties, which contribute

to the formation of attitudes towards brands and their communities (Kusuma et al., 2024). Thus, if consumers have positive feelings about a brand, such as love, they are more willing to engage in co-creation behaviors, either through direct consumer-brand interactions or through a brand community (Acikgoz & Tasci, 2022; Kaufmann et al., 2016; Kolomiiets et al., 2018). Despite scholars' interest in delving deeper into this topic, most studies have failed to include the link between brand love and value co-creation in the operationalization of the latter (Gilal et al., 2020; Kennedy & Guzmán, 2020). This affective and emotional consumer-brand bond can be extended to other contexts, such as online brand communities, which is referred to as brand community love (Ahuvia et al., 2022). Drawing on the brand community love concept, we answer the call for research of Gilal et al. (2020) and Kennedy and Guzman (2020) by specifically investigating how affective bonding at the community level drives value co-creation behaviors. Moreover, from a managerial point of view, we address the recommendation of Sachdeva et al. (2023) to examine customer cocreation in brand communities, considering this behavior as a strategic advantage in the automotive industry.

The aim of this research therefore is to analyze the love that a consumer feels for a brand and for the brand's online community, together with its impact on a wide range of co-creation behaviors derived from that affective and emotional consumer-brand link. Hence, the following research questions are formulated:

RQ1. How does consumer's love for a brand and its online community influence value co-creation behaviors?

RQ2. How does the mutual exchange of ideas, information and emotions facilitate value co-creation and consumer-brand interactions?

In this regard, this study makes several contributions. First, and given the gap in the existing literature, brand community love is posited as a key study variable. Second, various dimensions of relational value are identified to improve the understanding of value co-creation in offline and online environments. Third, the effects of consumer's love toward a brand and its online brand community on the value co-creation processes are empirically assessed.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

2.1 Brand love and value co-creation

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the academic literature has made significant progress in analyzing the connections between consumer feelings and consumer behavior. Research has emphasized the concept of love, establishing that this feeling can arise when a consumer manifests that their loved object is a possession, thus including brands (Ahuvia, 2022; Aro et al., 2018; Palusuk et al., 2019; Song & Kim, 2022). Roy et al. (2013) defines brand love as an emotional and passionate feeling that can lead to brand commitment and loyalty, which, in turn, makes it a key driver of customer retention. According to Langner et al. (2016) the main characteristics of brand love include affection intensity, long-term relationship and fear of separation.

Accordingly, brand love plays a strategic role in developing long-term sustainable relationships between brands and consumers (Ahuvia et al., 2022; Hegner et al., 2017; Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014; Vernuccio et al., 2015). The literature shows that only an emotion such as love can create new ways of developing a customer-brand bond. Under this perspective, it can be

argued that the strategic objective of a brand is to forge affective, strong and meaningful bonds with consumers (Aro et al., 2018). Consumers nowadays not only want to be in love with the brands they choose to bring into their lives, but they want to establish a holistic multifaceted relationship with them. This, in turn, implies that consumers expect brands to play a positive and proactive role in their lives (Ahuvia, 2022; Ahuvia et al., 2022).

Consumers manifest their brand love when interacting with the brand both physically and virtually (Joshi & Garg, 2021). Hence, participation in brand communities leads to the development of positive emotional connections between consumers and brands, having a positive effect on their brand decisions and stimulating brand love (Coelho et al., 2019; Gaber et al., 2021). Moreover, social experiences with other community members boost the affective consumer-brand relationship, thus strengthening brand love (Coelho et al., 2019). Brand communities thus become places where participants can release and celebrate their love and obsession for brands, and where brand advocates gather, chat and share thoughts, feelings, opinions and passions for a brand (Coelho et al., 2019; Parrott et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019). An individual who belongs to a brand community and feels affection for its members is supposed to love it even more (Burnasheva et al., 2019). Consumers are even likely to develop an emotional attachment (love) to the members of the brand community and not only to the brand itself (Ahuvia et al., 2022).

The literature documents that beloved brands can contribute to value co-creation processes (Kaufmann et al., 2016; Mingione et al., 2020). In the online context, the study of Quach and Thaichon (2017) evidenced that social media platforms are a means for customers to share their emotions and feelings (such as love), thus enhancing the positive affect surrounding a brand, and their own subjective well-being, which altogether channel into co-creating value. According to Kaufmann et al. (2016), emotions and affection are the focal point of the co-creation literature, positing that when consumers experience brand love, their willingness to engage in co-creation behavior increases. As a consumer becomes an active member of the brand community, he or she starts to develop strong feelings, reflected in an emotional obligation towards the community and consequently, participating in the creation of the brand through joint actions, in order to achieve common community goals. Emotional obligation is manifested when consumers become missionaries or brand ambassadors, attracting and captivating new brand devotees (Kaufmann et al., 2012).

Kolomiiets et al. (2018) maintain that consumers experiencing brand love facilitate co-creation engagement and increase the willingness to contribute to the welfare of the brand. Some of these contributions are related to the process of social discourse making, in which stakeholders participate in brand creation and development, meeting on purpose or by chance on physical and/or virtual platforms, to share their experiences, disseminate their brand knowledge or express their beliefs, evaluations, expectations and convictions about the brand. For example, Mingione et al. (2020) deepened in the understanding of the co-creation process based on exchanged emotional value (including brand love) through a netnographic methodological approach consisting of sentiment analysis of various brands' Twitter accounts. The study established the key role of emotional value in consumer-brand interactions, given their relational and experiential nature, which explains why consumers do not have monetary payoff motivations when participating in brand co-creation activities but rather seek enjoyable social encounters. Kennedy and Guzman (2020) explored co-creation and brand love as outcome variables in the context of brand transgressions. Gilal et al. (2020) focused on brand reactivation

resulting from consumer campaigns or organized movements which aim to bring to life beloved brands. In the context of environmental branding, Wu and Chen (2019) argued that brand co-creation leads to experiential satisfaction, which then grows into brand love. Hence, co-creation is an indirect determinant of brand love.

Most studies on brand love focus on its antecedents and outcomes (Velmurugan & Thalhath, 2021). There are many factors that directly or indirectly lead to brand love, such as social self or brand image (Unal & Aydın, 2013), self-congruence or brand experience (Bıçakcıoğlu et al., 2016), social identity or sense of community, (Burnasheva et al., 2019), or hedonic product and self-expressive brands (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). There are other factors that result from brand love, including positive WOM and brand loyalty (Burnasheva et al., 2019), variety seeking (Unal & Aydın, 2013), willingness to pay more (Kang, 2018), intention to repurchase (Han et al., 2019), resistance to negative information (Gumparthi & Patra, 2020) and brand advocacy (Burnasheva et al., 2019), among others.

Most research on the determinants and outcomes of brand love has centered on fashion brands (Velmurugan & Thalhath, 2021), including clothing, footwear and cosmetics. The sheer choice of these product categories in the marketplace makes branding essential to maintain customers. Brand love has also been frequently examined in the tourism context: for example, the hotel industry has received significant research attention, due to the intense competition among hotel chains (Sarkar et al., 2018). Other industries/products that have also received a lot of interest from brand love researchers have been smart phones (major players in the consumer market), the food industry, sports (sports equipment) and the automotive industries. Brand love towards computer-related goods and services, fast-moving consumer goods and music equipment, among others, have also been investigated (Velmurugan & Thalhath, 2021).

It should be noted that the understanding of the consequences of brand love is still limited (Velmurugan & Thalhath, 2021), with most research focusing on behavioral loyalty as an outcome variable (Song et al., 2019). More research on the concept of extended loyalty is needed such as studying brand evangelism and advocacy, promotion, openness/feedback to the brand, or resistance to negative brand information, thus turning consumers into active co-creators of brand value and meaning (Dressler & Paunovic, 2021). The existing body of research can be extended by exploring new behavioral responses such as interest in the brand's well-being, brand longing and memories (Aro et al., 2018); consumer forgiveness or attitude towards brand extensions (Garg et al., 2015; Han et al., 2019); anticipated separation distress (Albert, 2014); declaration of love or willingness to invest in brand's shares (Aro et al., 2018).

The review of the literature reveals that most studies on brand love have been carried out in developed countries than in developing ones. Although quantitative evidence should be further gathered, there is a lack of qualitative research to complement the data collected through surveys. Besides, empirical research across diverse cultural contexts is also scant (Kaufmann et al., 2016; Mingione et al., 2020).

As for value co-creation, the existing studies have been conducted mainly in the retail, tourism and e-commerce sectors (Carvalho & Alves, 2023; Kang, 2014; Xiao et al., 2024), in which co-creation is viewed as a process to improve customer involvement and engagement with the brand. Companies operating in social media platforms, e-services and/or telecommunications are also developing co-creation strategies, aiming to provide favorable experiences to their

customers by involving them in their operations (Agrawal & Rahman, 2017; Kao et al., 2016; Rosenthal & Brito, 2017). The importance of value co-creation (Jain et al., 2024; Lumivalo et al., 2024; Mujahid et al., 2023; Saha et al., 2022) and brand love (Velmurugan & Thalath, 2021; Vivek & Sabyasachi, 2020) has been emphasized by many bibliometric studies. Nevertheless, there is hardly any published work on the relationship between the two variables (Kaufmann et al., 2016; Malik et al., 2023).

2.2 Brand love and online brand community love

Beloved brands are those that manage to create genuine affective ties with the consumer communities and social media channels in which they operate (Roberts, 2005). These brands are symbolic objects capable of attracting individuals who gather in a virtual community, driven primarily by their shared passion for the brand (Yi-Hsin & Sejung, 2011). In this case, the passion is not only on an individual, but also on a collective level, implying that the love felt extends further than the brand itself to include the virtual community (Ahuvia et al., 2022).

Consumers initially love a brand because they identify with it, then they become part of a community centered around the brand, where they share the same values and ideas with other consumers, which fosters an emotional connection and affective commitment to the group (Kaufmann et al., 2016). Thus, the online brand community is formed by a group of consumers united by a common passion, the love for that brand (Banerjee & Banerjee, 2015; Wang et al., 2019). In this way a special bond is established among community members which is associated with certain benefits such as: mutual support (McAlexander et al., 2002), social identity (Vernuccio et al., 2015), and a sense of belonging to the community (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). As a result, consumers are willing to visit the online brand community more frequently, thus becoming more interdependent on it, both cognitively and emotionally (Wang et al., 2019). In a nutshell, consumers perceive online brand communities as places to celebrate their brand love and share their feelings and passion for a brand (Coelho et al., 2019; Parrott et al., 2015).

Previous research reveals that the consumer-brand emotional connection extends to the brand community (Ahuvia et al., 2022; Matute et al., 2019). For example, Matute et al. (2019) reported that the greater the affective engagement of the customer with a photographic products' brand, the greater the intention to engage with its online community. Similarly, existing studies demonstrated that as consumers develop social relationships with other consumers, they are likely to develop an emotional attachment not only to the brand but also to its users' community (Ahuvia et al., 2022). Based on the above, online brand community love is defined as the emotional connection that binds consumers to a brand in the virtual realm. This love is manifested when consumers, attracted by a brand, join an online community whose members share a common passion, values and ideas, thus establishing a strong emotional bond with the brand and the community. Therefore, while brand love refers to the personal relationship with a brand, online brand community love describes the connection with other brand enthusiasts in a virtual environment (Ahuvia et al., 2022). In view of the above, we argue that brand love will transfer to the online community of the beloved brand, which suggests the following hypothesis:

H1. Brand love positively influences online brand community love

2.3 Brand love consequences: offline value co-creation behaviors

Brand evangelism is a voluntary action resulting from a strong emotional bond between a consumer and a brand, which makes consumers take the initiative to tell others how much they admire that brand so as to lure them into adopting it (Panda et al., 2020). Brand evangelism is conceptualized as spreading favorable comments accompanied by great efforts to convince other consumers to engage with the preferred brand. In this way, consumers become promoters of the brand, highlighting their favorite brand attributes and “the wonders of the brand” (Matzler et al., 2007). Therefore, brand evangelism goes beyond WOM+ as a means of informal communication, since consumers not only speak well of the brand, but also try to persuade and entice others to consume and interact with it.

Accordingly, brand evangelism can be defined as a type of informal communication aimed at promoting preferred brands, by encouraging brand adoption (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013; Panda et al., 2020). It is an endorsement that involves actions favoring the brand, such as brand purchase, spreading positive brand references and convincing others to buy the brand (Marticotte et al., 2016; Panda et al., 2020). In the process of opinion exchange, brand evangelism can be considered an aggressive persuasion mechanism, focused on the search for new brand followers (Panda et al., 2020).

Those evangelistic behaviors are more pronounced when there is an emotional bonding with the brand (Panda et al., 2020). Accordingly, when there is a strong affective consumer-brand relationship, it is not unusual for consumers to want to speak well of the brand (and thus to recommend it to potential buyers (Ismail & Spinelli, 2012)), as well as to have a greater willingness to forgive its mishaps (Hegner et al., 2017).

Brand evangelism can also be understood as a form of affective engagement accompanied by proactive pro-brand behaviors (Pimentel & Reynolds, 2004; Scarpi, 2010). There is empirical evidence of affective engagement eliciting more intense and even aggressive actions that go beyond positive WOM, such as scolding another consumer if he or she condemns the beloved brand (Matzler et al., 2007). Thus, a brand evangelist may engage in one or more of the following behaviors: extolling the brand, convincing others to purchase it, protecting it from any undesirable actions/events, and engaging in negative WOM against the competing brands (Kang et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the essence of brand evangelism is to preach the most beloved aspects of the brand and to convince others about its “wonders” (Matzler et al., 2007). Accordingly, consumers feel the need to share their emotions with others, persuading them to actively engage with their beloved brand (Matzler et al., 2007; Pimentel & Reynolds, 2004).

The relationship between brand love and brand evangelism has been studied in various sectors and industries, such as telecommunications, tourism and education. For example, Kemp et al. (2012) extended the brand love concept to a city, maintaining that when residents develop an emotional connection with a city brand, they become brand evangelists by promoting the destination to others and thus encouraging brand adoption. In a study of the telecom market, Junaid et al. (2020) also concluded that mobile brand passion leads to both online and offline evangelistic behaviors. Another example of brand evangelism has been found in the education sector: a student can feel love for a university brand if it offers quality services, as found by Amani (2023).

In view of the above, and considering that the emotional attachment to a brand lead to brand evangelism (Al-Nawas et al., 2021; Matzler et al., 2007; Nyadzayo et al., 2020; Scarpi, 2010), we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. Brand love positively influences brand evangelism

Among the actions that trigger the "good word" about the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006) is brand defense, understood as an extremely strong WOM resulting from brand love, which can counteract the effects of negative WOM about the beloved brand (Javed et al. 2015; Wang et al., 2019). This means that, if consumers feel brand love, they will defend it against any criticism (Faizan et al., 2021). Brand defense can be described as a type of brand-supportive behavior, where consumers demonstrate proactive and reactive brand advocacy, defending the interests of a brand, supporting it, protecting its good name and goodwill (Wilk et al., 2020).

Brand defense involves a close relationship in which consumers make proactive and reactive comments aimed at supporting the brand by preserving its good name, praising its good deeds (Wilk et al., 2020), even if there is negative advertising or unfavorable evaluations about it (Folse et al., 2013). It is informal communication in which consumers protect their beloved brand during interactions with other consumers (Dalman et al., 2019).

The literature has examined the relationship between defense and love, concluding that the former is a consequence of brand love (Coelho et al., 2019). The brand love-brand advocacy interaction has been established in the tourism and telecommunications sectors. In a tourism setting, Harrigan et al. (2021) argue that beloved brands are owned by the consumer, and therefore as 'owners', they are willing to co-create value and advocate for it. For example, in a study conducted during the covid19 pandemic, Faizan et al. (2021) observed the following: as some hospitality establishments changed their logos to support social distancing, criticism arose. Then, the defense of the beloved brand by its fans emerged as a result of the strong emotional commitment and the powerful bond between the consumer and the brand. Haq et al. (2024) also revealed that the love felt for a destination brand is positively correlated with its defense, promotion and resistance to negative information about it. In telecommunications sector, Dalman et al. (2019) looked at how mobile brands' love affected brand support in extremely unethical (negative) situations. The analysis of the Apple brand revealed that consumers who had a love-like relationship with the brand proactively protected it from others, using brand advocacy as a brand-supportive behavior.

Alongside the aforementioned studies, the literature supports the argument that brand defense involves interpersonal communication that stems from positive emotions (Sierra & Taute, 2019), including brand love (Dalman et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019). Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

H3. Brand love positively influences brand defense

WOM encompasses various informal, interpersonal and voluntary brand-related communications, including activities like consuming, commenting on, posting and forwarding information (Pasternak et al., 2017; Štefko et al., 2023). Wallace et al. (2012) maintain that positive WOM is a way of promoting brands which reflects the "inner" self and the "social" self of the consumer and that is why consumers make great efforts to protect the brand (Cristela et al., 2018). Consumer actions include offline and online statements supporting the brand that

reflect specific and deep knowledge about it (Wilk et al., 2020). Other actions are advising and helping others to directly access the services offered by the brand (Merrilees et al., 2021), as well as providing information to other consumers who have not requested guidance about the brand (Wilk et al., 2018). The latter are recommendations made by highly involved or connected to the brand consumers, who talk about their positive experiences (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013; Ryu & Park, 2020; Štefko et al., 2023).

While brand promotion through positive WOM is generally considered an indicator of consumer loyalty (Yi & Gong, 2013), the emotional component of the positive brand communication is also present (Coelho et al., 2019). For example, users use expressions such as "I love" and "I adore this brand" in brand promotion activities (Wilk et al., 2018). This is a predictable behavior for those who deeply love a brand, because as Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) documented, brand love only includes positive feelings towards the brand.

Current literature supports the positive relationship between brand love and WOM behaviors. Coelho et al. (2019) argue that positive brand WOM is the result of an intense and cemented consumer-brand relationship, which has high levels of trust and affection. Harrigan et al. (2021) concluded that brand love leads to positive brand referral and advocacy, after analyzing consumers' tourism brand experiences. In an airline setting, Boubker and Naoui (2022) also found that passengers who loved the airline brand (Royal Air Maroc), generated more positive WOM and were more likely to be loyal customers. The role of brand love has also been evidenced in the context of retail brands: Rodrigues and Brandão (2021) confirmed that the love felt for a brand such as IKEA mediated the relationship between brand experience and positive WOM. These findings add to the existing body of research evidence indicating that brand love inspires consumers to perform selfless acts such as spreading positive comments about the brand (Albert, 2014; Batra et al., 2012; Ismail & Spinelli, 2012; Štefko et al., 2023). The above leads us to formulating the following hypothesis:

H4. Brand love positively influences positive brand WOM

In addition to the previously discussed forms of value co-creation, which are based on consumer-to-consumer interactions, there is also brand openness, which is characterized by an exclusive interaction between the consumer and the brand. It is defined as voluntary communication in which consumers provide information to enhance the brand, suggest changes, praise it, but also complain if it does not fulfill its promise of value (Melancon et al., 2011; Robinson & Celuch, 2016). The purpose of these consumer actions is to foster the growth and success of the brand (Kovanovienė et al., 2021; Sigurdsson et al., 2021).

Brand openness is regarded as a citizenship behavior (Rubio et al., 2020; Yi & Gong, 2013), in which consumers provide feedback to the organization/brand (Groth, 2005), in order to favor and improve it in the long term (Vega et al., 2013). From the company's point of view, the brand openness concept focuses on the brand, its promise to consumers and the feedback based on brand perceptions (Bhandari et al., 2021). As a result of this feedback, brands and consumers interact with each other to share knowledge, ideas and possible solutions (Shamim et al., 2017).

As mentioned previously, consumers and brands are regarded as relational partners, therefore it is not enough for consumers to feel brand love, but they demand a more impactful relationship and expect the brand to play a positive and proactive role in their lives (Gobe, 2002).

Accordingly, brand openness strengthens and maintains the relationship between the consumer and the brand.

Yi and Gong (2013) suggested that one of the building blocks of value co-creation is citizenship behavior, which, in turn, involves feedback, among other elements. Gumparthy and Patra (2020) argue that citizenship behavior is a conative outcome of brand love. Hence, consumers in love with a brand seek more frequent brand interactions and invest resources (Batra et al., 2012), such as money, time and energy (Aro et al., 2018) to provide information that benefits the brand (Lee et al., 2018). Similarly, companies that own beloved brands seek ways to get closer to consumers, since maintaining their brand love requires not only permanent contact with customers but also collaborating with them and involving them in all brand processes (Roberts, 2005). An example of the brand love-openness relationship can be found in the study by Garg et al. (2015), which demonstrated the existence of customers' willingness to offer advice to the beloved brand in order to help it recognize its weaknesses, so that they can be overcome in the future. Choi et al. (2016) discussed the idea of physical value co-creation encounters, where customers communicate and interact cognitively and emotionally with the beloved brand to learn, advise and share information about it. In line with the above arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5. Brand love positively influences brand openness

To sum up, brand evangelism, brand defense, positive brand WOM and brand openness are key to value co-creation. These behaviors reinforce brand value, thus benefiting both the company and its fans. Evangelism enhances brand visibility and reputation, the defense increases trust and loyalty, the positive word of mouth attracts new customers and validates the brand, while openness improves customer relationships, fostering collaboration and engagement with the brand.

2.4 Brand/brand community love consequences: online value co-creation behaviors

Nowadays social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube, among others, are an optimal tool for developing customer relationships. One way to achieve this is through brand posts (i.e., photos, videos, messages, information, contests and other materials) published on the various online channels, where consumers can either "like" the post or comment on it (Han et al., 2019). For some consumers, these posts on social media posts are the ideal place to connect with brands and thus develop engagement with their beloved brands (Kusumasondjaja, 2018).

The content which is created and disseminated through social media is an act of consumer co-creation, however this outcome can be further enhanced if feelings and emotions such as love are evoked in these channels (Straker & Wrigley, 2016). Manaman et al. (2016) assert that it is feasible to know the general consumer feelings by looking at the emotions expressed in their online posts. Wallace et al. (2014) and Kudeshia et al. (2016) explained that when consumers give "likes" on Facebook, their action is positively associated with brand love. Vernuccio et al. (2015) attributed great significance to clicking on the heart-shaped icon on the online social networks, as it represents a complete picture of the positive emotional relationships between a consumer and a brand. Another way for consumers to exhibit true brand love is to upload images about a memorable brand experience on social networks (Üçok et al., 2016). Consequently, there is consensus that the intense emotional ties to a brand, such as love, trigger

interactions in the online community environment such as, for example, posting reviews and positive comments, as well as liking brands' posts or sharing them, among others (Correia et al., 2017; Machado et al., 2019; Vernuccio et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the online community can be regarded as a relevant instrument for brand value co-creation (Elia et al., 2020; Healy & McDonagh, 2013; Skålén et al., 2015). Value co-creation in a community environment happens through interaction, collaboration and sharing of experiences, in which consumers feel that the brand belongs to them, rather than to the company (Cova & Pace, 2006). Sharing meaningful consumer experiences strengthens interpersonal bonds and enhances mutual appreciation for the product and brand (McAlexander et al., 2002). Moreover, belonging to an online brand community engenders positive feelings (McAlexander et al., 2002) and strong emotional bonds, including love, which enhance the participation, involvement and commitment of the community members, thus co-creating value (Kaufmann et al., 2016). Therefore, if consumers develop strong emotional bonds with an online brand community, they are more likely to participate in various value co-creation activities.

Nowadays, online value co-creation extends to virtually all sectors and industries. Pourazad et al. (2020) demonstrated the significant effect of brand passion on brand advocacy. More specifically, the study showed that as members of a sportswear brand online community shared information and generated creative content, they felt the need to act on behalf of the brand by advocating its brand value. Another piece of research on sport stars and teams revealed that respondents were very likely to spread favorable information about the Liverpool brand, including praising it and talking optimistically about it (Wong & Hung, 2023). In addition, respondents were willing to defend the Liverpool brand when others criticized or spoke ill of it. They also shared brand information, discussed its upcoming events and engaged in interactions with the brand. A general analysis of brand community followers on social media demonstrated that brand love fostered positive word-of-mouth (Paruthi et al., 2023). A study in the e-commerce retail sector also found that the e-Word of mouth, emitted by Shopee users in Indonesia, was directly influenced by brand love (Harisandi et al., 2024). This evidence shows that when consumers love and admire certain brands, they connect emotionally and feel a passionate desire to continue interacting, advocating for them and generating positive reviews about them (Islam et al., 2021). In view of the above arguments, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H6. Brand love positively influences online value co-creation

H7. Online brand community love positively influences online value co-creation

Figure 1 displays the generated hypotheses.

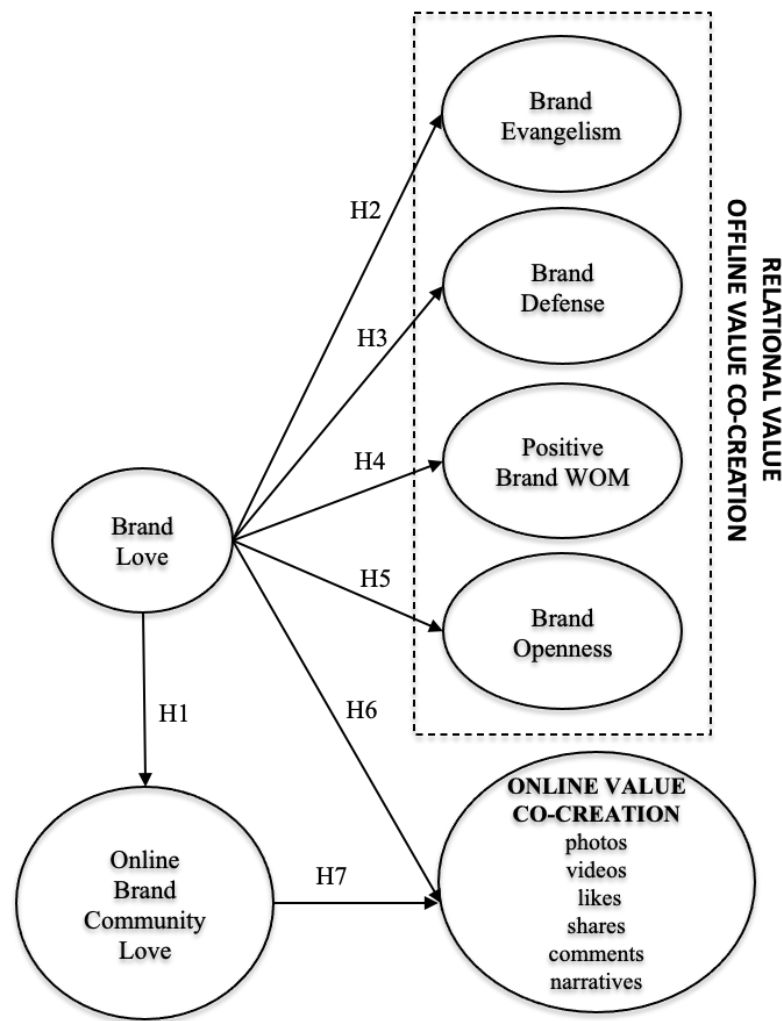


Fig. 1 –

theoretical model. Source: own research

Proposed

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data collection, measurement instrument and sample characteristics

The research data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to Land Rover vehicle owners, members of both the offline and online brand's communities. Initially 319 respondents were interviewed, but the final sample consisted of 311, since some of the questionnaires were incomplete or incorrectly filled in. A non-probabilistic quota sampling stratifying participants by gender and age was used based on the Carwow barometer (2023), which clearly indicated a predominance of male consumers over 45 years old in the purchase of vehicles. In the present study, 97% of the respondents were men aged between 35 and 54 years old (79,1%). In terms of education, most respondents had a university degree (73%). More than half of the respondents were employed (54.7%), with 40.8% being self-employed. The income of the majority of respondents was higher or much higher than the average (64.6%).

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The fieldwork was carried out by a market research company in the last quarter of 2023, using two data collection approaches: (1) an online survey administered through a consumer panel and (2) face-to-face surveys carried out by professional interviewers at the brand's dealership stores. The questionnaire contained three sections: (i) emotional perceptions including questions on brand love and brand community love; (ii) relational values, which integrated the assessment of offline and online value co-creation; and (iii) the socio-demographic data of the respondents.

The choice of a car brand as a study object was due to the fact that it is a possession whose purchase is influenced by both instrumentalist and symbolic-affective factors (Liao et al., 2017). The Land Rover brand was chosen for the purposes of this study since not only functional but also emotional attributes influence the consumer decision to purchase that brand (Narteh et al., 2012).

All constructs were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale, with endpoints labelled as “totally disagree” and “totally agree”, using measures which were previously validated by the literature. Brand love and brand community love were measured with 8 items each, following Carroll and Ahuvia (2006). As for the offline value co-creation constructs, brand evangelism was assessed through the Matzler et al. (2007) scale; brand defense was measured using the scale developed by Dalman et al. (2019); for the measurement of positive brand WOM items from the scales of Kim et al. (2001), Yi and Gong (2013) and Shimul et al. (2019) were adapted; brand openness/feedback was measured using the scale of Melancon et al. (2011). Finally, online value co-creation was evaluated through the scales of Turri et al. (2013) and Sanz-Blas et al. (2019). The measurement instrument can be found in Appendix 1.

3.2 Data analysis

The relationships proposed in the theoretical model were tested by Partial Least Squares (PLS) equation modelling using the Smart-PLS 4.0.9.6 software. PLS-SEM is a rigorous and robust structural equation modeling technique, which focuses on maximizing the variance of the dependent variables explained by the independent variables. It is based on the premise that each construct (i.e., theoretical concept) is represented by its indicators and the relationships between constructs are established taking into account prior knowledge (theory) of the phenomenon under analysis (Loehlin, 1998).

PLS-SEM is commonly used for the assessment not only of the measurement model but also the structural model with its hypotheses, since it is suitable for both predictive and exploratory studies (Hung, 2014). In the business practice, this methodology allows the assessment of complex models with many constructs and interrelationships, besides working well with relatively small samples (Ringle et al., 2014). In addition, PLS-SEM allows making less strict assumptions about the data distribution, thus making it possible to work with nominal, ordinal and interval data (Hair et al., 2019).

The PLS-SEM model of the present research is composed of two parts: a measurement and a structural model. The measurement model represents the relationships between the constructs and their corresponding items, and the structural model describes the relationships between the latent variables (i.e., constructs). First, the psychometric properties of the measurement model were analyzed, evaluating its convergent validity, internal consistency and discriminant validity. Next, the structural model was assessed through the standardized β coefficients and

their significance level (t-values), estimating, additionally, the predictive power and relevance of the model (R2 and Q2 respectively).

4 RESULTS

4.1 Measurement instrument

Convergent validity was established by verifying that (i) the absolute standardized loadings of the indicators were equal to or greater than 0.70 (Chin, 1998; Hair et al., 2011), (ii) their t-values were above 1.96 ($p < 0.05$) (Hair et al., 2011) and (iii) the average variance extracted (AVE) values surpassed the 0.50 threshold (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Internal consistency was assessed through Cronbach's alpha and the composite reliability index (CR), and the obtained values were above 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978; Nunnally & Bernstein 1994). Hence, it can be confirmed that the measurement model is reliable and has convergent validity (see Table 1).

Tab. 1 – Measurement instrument: convergent validity and internal consistency.
Source: own research

| | Mean | Standard deviation | Skewness | Loading | t-value | AVE | CR | Cronbach's Alpha |
|------------------------------------|------|--------------------|----------|---------|---------|-------|-------|------------------|
| Brand Love | | | | | | | | |
| BL 1 | 5.95 | 1.234 | -0.898 | 0.883 | 72.406 | 0.680 | 0.937 | 0.932 |
| BL 2 | 6.23 | 0.948 | -1.335 | 0.885 | 59.787 | | | |
| BL 3 | 5.86 | 1.127 | -0.947 | 0.828 | 29.932 | | | |
| BL 4 | 6.33 | 0.993 | -1.720 | 0.825 | 28.405 | | | |
| BL 5 | 6.05 | 1.435 | -1.945 | 0.729 | 25.855 | | | |
| BL 6 | 6.11 | 0.924 | -1.193 | 0.802 | 19.998 | | | |
| BL 7 | 5.50 | 1.357 | -0.448 | 0.873 | 76.748 | | | |
| BL 8 | 5.93 | 1.107 | -0.817 | 0.757 | 18.269 | | | |
| Online Brand Community Love | | | | | | | | |
| OBCL1 | 5.85 | 1.138 | -0.987 | 0.852 | 36.995 | 0.790 | 0.965 | 0.962 |
| OBCL 2 | 5.63 | 1.137 | -0.939 | 0.937 | 76.429 | | | |
| OBCL 3 | 5.33 | 1.238 | -0.434 | 0.865 | 38.794 | | | |
| OBCL 4 | 5.62 | 1.174 | -0.832 | 0.918 | 68.470 | | | |
| OBCL 5 | 5.41 | 1.254 | -0.627 | 0.921 | 71.583 | | | |
| OBCL 6 | 5.57 | 1.204 | -0.752 | 0.906 | 59.183 | | | |
| OBCL 7 | 5.05 | 1.365 | -0.357 | 0.851 | 40.554 | | | |
| OBCL 8 | 5.37 | 1.213 | -0.591 | 0.854 | 39.018 | | | |
| Brand Evangelism | | | | | | | | |
| BEva1 | 5.50 | 1.260 | -0.890 | 0.800 | 24.398 | 0.616 | 0.850 | 0.837 |
| BEva2 | 5.71 | 1.208 | -0.760 | 0.876 | 43.972 | | | |
| BEva3 | 5.97 | 1.041 | -1.338 | 0.870 | 32.634 | | | |
| BEva4 | 6.08 | 1.096 | -1.082 | 0.766 | 17.118 | | | |
| BEva5 | 5.32 | 1.673 | -0.920 | 0.572 | 13.131 | | | |
| Brand Defense | | | | | | | | |
| BDef1 | 6.16 | 0.997 | -1.013 | 0.962 | 126.604 | 0.905 | 0.952 | 0.947 |
| BDef2 | 6.08 | 1.029 | -0.964 | 0.965 | 160.384 | | | |
| BDef3 | 6.00 | 1.324 | -1.177 | 0.926 | 81.332 | | | |
| Positive Brand WOM | | | | | | | | |
| PBWOM1 | 6.03 | 1.190 | -1.273 | 0.942 | 107.131 | 0.810 | 0.946 | 0.940 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|------|-------|--------|-------|---------|-------|-------|-------|
| PBWOM 2 | 6.36 | 1.013 | -2.119 | 0.787 | 18.448 | | | |
| PBWOM 3 | 6.16 | 1.106 | -1.387 | 0.924 | 67.297 | | | |
| PBWOM 4 | 6.06 | 1.171 | -1.386 | 0.956 | 145.972 | | | |
| PBWOM 5 | 5.80 | 1.443 | -1.618 | 0.881 | 55.560 | | | |
| Brand Openness | | | | | | | | |
| BOp1 | 6.31 | 0.997 | -1.662 | 0.876 | 30.944 | 0.787 | 0.882 | 0.865 |
| BOp2 | 6.27 | 0.996 | -1.789 | 0.877 | 27.020 | | | |
| BOp3 | 6.33 | 0.986 | -1.686 | 0.908 | 63.681 | | | |
| Online Value Co-Creation | | | | | | | | |
| CoCrea1 | 5.62 | 1.235 | -0.766 | 1.000 | - | 1.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 |

Tab. 2 – Measurement instrument: discriminant validity. Source: own research

| Construct | BL | OBCL | BEva | BDef | PBWOM | BOp | CoCrea |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| BL | 0.824 | 0.512 | 0.783 | 0.815 | 0.843 | 0.722 | 0.245 |
| OBCL | 0.485 | 0.889 | 0.458 | 0.414 | 0.413 | 0.387 | 0.654 |
| BEva | 0.757 | 0.410 | 0.785 | 0.737 | 0.786 | 0.825 | 0.438 |
| BDef | 0.783 | 0.391 | 0.662 | 0.951 | 0.778 | 0.748 | 0.117 |
| PBWOM | 0.801 | 0.388 | 0.747 | 0.902 | 0.900 | 0.812 | 0.195 |
| BOp | 0.662 | 0.360 | 0.712 | 0.695 | 0.740 | 0.887 | 0.429 |
| CoCrea | 0.216 | 0.653 | 0.378 | 0.117 | 0.183 | 0.385 | 1.000 |

Note: values in bold along the diagonal are the squared roots of AVE; Fornell-Larcker criterion values (below the diagonal); HTMT values (above the diagonal).

4.2 Structural model

Once the quality of the measurement instrument was evaluated, the proposed structural model was assessed through the standardized path coefficients (β) and their significance obtained through a bootstrap test with 5000 subsamples. The values of the variance explained by the model (R^2) and the predictive relevance test (Q^2) (Hair et al., 2011) were also assessed. Table 3 and Figure 2 display the results of the evaluation of the proposed model.

Tab. 3 – Results of the structural model. Source: own research

| | Relationship | β | t | R^2 | Q^2 | |
|----|--|---------|--------|-------|-------|----------|
| H1 | Brand love \rightarrow Online brand community love | 0.485** | 6.425 | | | Accepted |
| H2 | Brand love \rightarrow Brand evangelism | 0.757** | 20.409 | | | Accepted |
| H3 | Brand love \rightarrow Brand defense | 0.783** | 30.141 | | | Accepted |
| H4 | Brand love \rightarrow Positive brand WOM | 0.801** | 26.704 | | | Accepted |
| H5 | Brand love \rightarrow Brand openness | 0.662** | 12.719 | | | Accepted |

| | | | | | | |
|----|---|---------|--------|-------|-------|----------|
| H6 | Brand love → Online value co-creation | 0.232* | 2.418 | | | Accepted |
| H7 | Brand community love → Online value co-creation | 0.717** | 15.322 | | | Accepted |
| | Online brand community love | | | 0.438 | 0.435 | |
| | Brand evangelism | | | 0.236 | 0.223 | |
| | Brand defense | | | 0.574 | 0.574 | |
| | Positive brand WOM | | | 0.613 | 0.613 | |
| | Brand openness | | | 0.642 | 0.640 | |
| | Online value co-creation | | | 0.438 | 0.434 | |

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

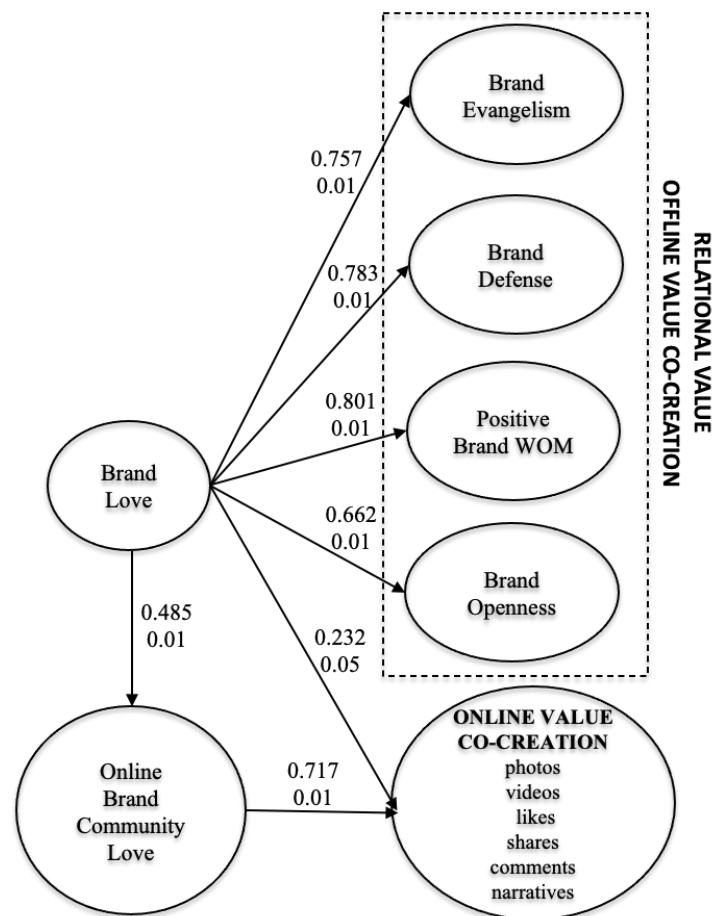


Fig. 2 – Results of the structural model. Source: own research

We can conclude that the consumer-brand relationship is connected to the consumer-online brand community bond based on affective ties. The results reveal that brand love directly and positively impacts online brand community love, thus confirming the first hypothesis ($\beta = 0.485$; $p < 0.01$). Accordingly, as consumers develop affection for a brand, they become more engaged with it and praise its online community higher, feeling love for it. This positive association between the two variables implies that love is a feeling applicable to various contexts, so it

would be expected that, in turn, the love felt for the brand community would also strengthen brand love.

The love that a consumer feels for a brand can also trigger brand evangelism ($\beta = 0.757$; $p < 0.01$). Land Rover fans become evangelists by persuading others of the brand's virtues, thus demonstrating fervent emotional engagement. In relation to brand defense ($\beta = 0.783$; $p < 0.01$), Land Rover followers show a remarkable commitment to verbally protecting and promoting the brand in their interactions with others. Regarding positive WOM actions ($\beta = 0.801$; $p < 0.01$), Land Rover fans show their love and support by recommending the brand, investing time and resources in its promotion and participating in brand events. As for brand openness ($\beta = 0.662$; $p < 0.01$), Land Rover users interact with the company to contribute to the brand's growth and success, through compliments, complaints and suggestions. The above results confirm hypotheses H2, H3, H4 and H5, and demonstrate that love is a key variable for offline value co-creation. Its positive influence on value co-creation extends to the online context ($\beta = 0.232$; $p < 0.05$), which supports hypothesis H6. In a brand community context, members who declare loving the online community are largely in favor of co-creating value online (through participation, comments, photos, videos and likes, among others) ($\beta = 0.717$; $p < 0.01$), thus accepting H7.

The data in Table 3 indicates that the explained variance (R^2) of the dependent variables exceeds the recommended minimum of 10% (Falk & Miller, 1992). The predictive relevance of the model, measured through Q^2 , was also confirmed, since it presents a value greater than zero in all the cases (Chin, 1998).

5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The present research has delved deeper into the interactions between consumer feelings and behavior, documenting that consumers develop strong affective and emotional bonds with beloved brands, which, in turn, plays a key role in value co-creation processes. More specifically, consumers who feel brand love are more willing to engage in co-creation behaviors and joint actions with the company, thus fostering its competitive advantage and ensuring its long-term sustainability.

Therefore, the research has evidenced that value co-creation does not depend solely and exclusively on information obtained from clients, but also on the affective and emotional bonds that consumers develop with brands, as they contribute to the formation of favorable attitudes towards, which altogether corroborates the findings of Kusuma et al. (2024).

The present research has also demonstrated that consumer's brand love extends to the brand's user community, which is in line with previous studies establishing that both affective commitment and emotional attachment are transferred to the online brand community (Ahuvia et al., 2022; Matute et al., 2019). Accordingly, both brand love and brand community love are key connectors between the emotional and relational consumer values.

With the above in mind, we have advanced the understanding of brand love in new study contexts, thus bridging the gap in the literature by operationalizing brand community love as a key study variable. Additionally, we have empirically assessed how both brand love and brand community love influence value co-creation with the brand.

These results advance the understanding of the brand love concept in new, unexplored contexts, thus filling the existing gap in the literature through conceptualizing brand community love as a key variable. In addition, we have empirically assessed the impact of both brand love and brand community love on value co-creation.

Moreover, the results revealed that brand love can trigger brand evangelism, brand defense, positive brand WOM and brand openness/feedback, thus confirming the key role of love in the offline value co-creation process. Its positive influence on value co-creation is also evident in the online setting. Thus, consumers become co-creators of value for the beloved brand when engaging in conversations on its behalf, both face-to-face and virtually, posting comments, narratives, photos, videos and likes to Land Rover's online brand communities, as well as through evangelism, defense, positive WOM, openness/feedback to the brand. In this way, consumers become active value and meaning co-creators for the company (Dressler & Paunovic, 2021). Consumers' positive statements indicated brand support (Wilk et al., 2020) and contributed to communicating the benefits offered by the brand to other customers (Merrilees et al., 2021). Consistent with previous research, the study highlighted consumers' power to create content that influenced the perceptions about the beloved brand positively (Joshi & Garg, 2021; Singh & Trinchetta, 2020), which helped to strengthen the long-term relationship with the company and improved its profitability (Pranay, 2021).

More specifically, the strongest effect was observed in the relationship between brand love and positive WOM. The results of the study indicated that the "Landrovers" communicated their brand perceptions and experiences through both online and offline channels. This consumer group demonstrated their brand love by dedicating time, resources and efforts to promote and recommend the brand to families, friends and other community members. For example, by attending brand's social events, consumers may become Land Rover promoters and enthusiasts. These actions demonstrate brand support (Wilk et al., 2020) and help convince other customers about the benefits of the brand (Merrilees et al., 2021). In line with previous studies, our findings revealed a positive association between brand love and positive WOM (Albert, 2014; Batra et al., 2012; Burnasheva et al., 2019; Coelho et al., 2019; Wallace et al., 2014), thus confirming the idea that in the car industry brand love fosters positive brand referral (Hashem et al., 2024).

The brand love-defense relationship constitutes the second most important contribution to the value co-creation process. Consistent with previous research, brand defense aims to diminish the effects of negative WOM (Javed et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019). It is the consumer's protective response against all kinds of criticism toward the beloved brand. Our study revealed that Land Rover users' informal communications in both offline and online social settings not only protect and defend the brand in a conversation or interaction with other members but also encourage people to trust it. It is thus confirmed, as observed in earlier studies, that brand defense is a consequence of consumers' love towards it (Dalman et al., 2019; Faizan et al., 2021; Muhammad et al., 2024). Hence, in line with Muhammad et al. (2024), it is concluded that a strong consumer-brand emotional connection leads to a proactive engagement that protects the brand's reputation.

The brand love-evangelism relationship is another way of demonstrating the strength of the relational bond between a consumer and a brand. Our findings matched those obtained by Harrigan et al. (2021) who suggested brand love as a trigger of brand-related evangelism behaviors. Thus, the "landrovers" showed their brand support by talking about the qualities of

the brand and trying to convince others to engage with it. The findings confirmed that shared values and social identity among members of Land Rover brand communities were key drivers of brand evangelism in an online context, which corroborated the results of Hsu (2019). It can therefore be concluded that brand community members are evangelists, connoisseurs and devotees, who extolled the beloved brand and informed others about its marvels on top of sharing their brand passion and emotions with other consumers. In this regard, the findings supported the results obtained by Chiengkul and Junla (2023) in the sense that brand love influences consumers' willingness to become brand ambassadors aiming to convince others to become Land Rover users.

The brand love-brand openness relationship was also confirmed in this research. This type of value co-creation behavior, focused on direct feedback between a consumer and a brand, drives users to voluntarily give ideas and recommendations to improve the brand's products, either offline (e.g., through suggestion boxes) or online (e.g., social networks, webpages, forums). These results supported previous research documenting that users generate content to suggest changes, improvements, solutions, and to share knowledge and ideas with the brand, in order to contribute to its growth and success (Ananda et al., 2016; Melancon et al., 2011; Robinson & Celuch, 2016; Shamim et al., 2017). Moreover, in accord with previous studies (Aro et al., 2018; Garg et al., 2015), our research confirmed that consumers' willingness to offer suggestions to a brand increased even more when the brand is a beloved one, since in this way the brand can benefit and improve in the future. Besides, it was corroborated that the interaction and dialogue generated as a result of customers' feedback are manifestations of their positive affective responses such as love towards their brand (Yang & Mundel, 2022).

Brand community love also has a role in co-creating value online, as through participating in online communities dedicated to a beloved brand, consumers can share values and ideas with other people and express their feelings, which altogether fosters an emotional connection and affective commitment to the group and the brand. In this regard, the present research answered the research call by Kaufmann et al. (2016) to empirically validate the process of value co-creation, based on brand love and loving feelings towards the community. Our findings confirmed that consumers participate in the co-creation of value for the Land Rover brand whenever they can by posting comments or "liking" their posts, uploading photos and/or videos, among others. These results reflect those of previous research, which also found that when there are intense emotional bonds with a brand, such as love, interactions in the online community are more likely to emerge such as commenting on brand's posts or sharing them, among others (Correia et al., 2017; Machado et al., 2019; Vernuccio et al., 2015).

6 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have a number of practical implications for the Land Rover brand, off-road vehicle sellers, as well as for the managers and administrators of car brand communities. First, our research suggested that marketing strategies should be focused on the promotion of consumers' self-concept. Thus, in its communication campaigns, Land Rover should emphasize the brand's ability to convey strength, greatness and power to the consumer in order to enhance the affective relationship with the brand.

Second, a key priority for brands should be to foster and encourage interactions among the members of their communities since, as established by the literature review, they are necessary to maintain and strengthen the affective and emotional relationship with the brand. Therefore,

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Land Rover's marketing managers, or the administrators of its online brand community, should organize events such as parties, meetings, tours, exhibitions, workshops, experiences, circuits, among others to integrate the brand's users. These social gatherings should foster rapprochement, learning and reciprocity among all community members. In the online setting, they should also ensure a direct communication channel to connect with users, who can advise and propose changes to improve the brand, and, in turn, Land Rover could consider these suggestions by implementing innovative processes that lead to mutual benefit. For instance, YouTube is one of the online communication platforms that encourages brand-consumer interactivity. While it is true that Land Rover has its own account in this social media network, it lacks interactivity, being used merely as an exhibit of the brand's products, which complements other means of communication. The YouTube accounts can stimulate direct user participation by using real-time broadcasts, for example, which can be an ideal place for Land Rovers to ask questions or talk about their experiences with the brands' products and services. The success of this kind of online events lies in the immediacy and effectiveness of the company's or its sales representatives' response. Interaction helps to strengthen interpersonal relationships, which undoubtedly improves the emotional connection with the brand. Interactivity, on the other hand, fosters the bond, identification with and commitment to the community, which, in turn promotes the development of positive emotions, such as brand community love. Thus, creating and maintaining optimal communication channels with the consumers are strategies that Land Rover can leverage, since the innovation resulting from the interactions can help to solve various operational problems, as well as contribute to the development of new products and adjustments in the company's business model (Qinqin et al., 2023).

Furthermore, in order to establish and improve the connection with the audience, the brand should generate emotional messages, as it has been proven that consumers are more encouraged to act by posts featuring emotional and social appeals (Yu, 2014). In addition, consumers use social networks to share content online, and its transmission influences the purchase of products, especially, when there is a positive emotion in the message (Fu et al., 2017). Brand's interaction with the community members is a great opportunity to get to know consumers' desires and preferences, as well as to identify the causes of their discontent and complaints in a short period of time (Sigurdsson et al., 2021). Considering the above, brands can highlight the emotional values of their products and services to increase the chances of being chosen by consumers.

In addition, brand community managers should keep in mind that users join these groups because they want to meet people who share their interests (in this case love for the Land Rover brand). In this regard, the administrators can use various resources that help bind the community members together, such as entertainment. For example, gamification can be used as a strategy that encourages consumer interaction and participation. Playfulness fosters interpersonal relationships and could eventually improve engagement with the brand. Hence, having fun should always be part of the brand experience.

Lastly, it should be noted that this research is framed by relational values and consumers' post-purchase behavioral responses. Although Land Rover users may feel love for the brand and its community, some of them are more rational than others. This rationality can have a strong impact on consumers' actions and judgments regarding the brand and the manufacturing company. Land Rover users often associate Great Britain with prestige, style, and engineering

superiority, but due to the change of the company's ownership, they might develop negative brand attitudes related to the existing stereotypes about the new Indian owners (Johansson et al., 2018). In response, Land Rover managers must foster positive brand associations, emphasizing that the brand stands for prestigious, avant-garde, adventurous, and empowered people. It should be highlighted that Land Rover is the most well-known off-road vehicle brand in the world, used by highly respected opinion leaders, such as the British royalty. Communication actions promoting the key brand's attributes such as the materials used, the design and the product innovations should also be a priority to keep current customers loyal to the brand. In this regard, the brand evangelists and promoters participating in the online brand communities can be invited to promote the brand. For example, these followers can be allowed to make videos or take pictures of themselves using the newest Land Rover products, highlighting the brand's best features, and then link this content to the brand's official communication channels. In this way, other consumers are also encouraged to remain loyal to the beloved brand.

7 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH LINES

This research is not without limitations which are discussed below. First, the study focused on Land Rover owners, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other brands or industries. Future research could replicate the study with a more diverse sample to enhance the external validity of the findings. Second, due to the chosen type of product and brand (i.e., Land Rover SUVs), the sample was dominated by male consumers (97%), which may introduce a statistical bias. In this regard, future studies might explore the purchasing process of another car brand whose clientele is more heterogeneous in terms of customers' gender. Moreover, it should be noted that the study relied on self-reported measures of brand love and co-creation behaviors, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research could use objective measures of co-creation behaviors, such as social media analytics, to triangulate the findings.

A natural progression of this work is to examine the direct and indirect antecedents that influence brand love and brand community love. As for the direct antecedents, future studies can delve deeper into, for example, brand attachment or brand attitudes, as well as establish the role of personality traits on the manifestation of brand love. Regarding the indirect antecedents, there are perceptions that influence the development of affective bonds and are based on the brand communication messages. Therefore, further studies could include variables such as brand reputation or experience in the formulation of new behavioral models.

The research findings have established that brand love extends to the brand community, but it would also be interesting to assess whether the love felt for a brand community can enhance brand love with the same intensity. In other words, further research is needed to determine whether the affective and emotional relationships that individuals develop with members of the brand community can strengthen their love for the brand.

The study did not examine the possible moderating effects of other variables on the relationship between brand love and co-creation behaviors (evangelism, advocacy, positive WOM and brand openness). These moderating variables could be related to the product, the company or the consumer him/herself. In relation to the product, it would be worthwhile to analyze how certain product attributes (e.g., safety, reliability, exclusivity) affect the intensity of the brand love-co-creation relationships (Junaid et al., 2020; Kaufmann et al., 2016). From the company's

point of view, the degree to which it is committed to its clientele should also be considered, as this could affect brand evangelism, advocacy, positive WOM and brand openness behaviors (Harrigan et al., 2020; Junaid et al., 2020). Additionally, the individual's personality traits and previous experience with the brand could also moderate the relationship between brand love and co-creation of online and offline value (Junaid et al., 2020). The literature has also suggested some possible mediators of the relationships posited in the model such as brand trust and satisfaction (Kaufmann et al., 2016).

Following the recommendation of previous studies (Sajtos et al., 2021), the intensity of the relationships analyzed in this research should be examined across various cultural contexts, as consumer behavior in relation to products/brands differs depending on the cultural values of the country of origin.

Land Rover is a high-cost, long-lasting vehicle, so from the consumer's perspective, it is not a car which is to be shortly replaced. This circumstance opens four possible research lines: (1) to replicate the current research in other luxury brands; (2) to apply the research model to more affordable car brands; (3) to conduct the study using non-durable products as a research context; (4) to analyze other durable categories of products and compare the results with the present findings.

Another research stream, which is increasingly getting attention in the literature, is the dark side of the customer-brand relationship. Accordingly, further research could explore the process that leads from brand love to brand hate or focus on examining specific negative aspects of the consumer-brand relationship, such as brand betrayal or jealousy.

The affective consumer-brand bond can be strengthened if the company incorporates emotional appeals in its communication strategies. In this regard, a better understanding of the emotional features of a company's communication actions and its effect on brand/brand community love needs to be developed. Therefore, future studies could examine the brand's posts in its online social networks, to find out what type of communication style (emotional versus rational-promotional) triggers community members' participation more effectively. Lastly, focusing on value co-creation processes, it might be interesting to examine the impact that value co-creation can have on brand performance and its financial results.

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Appendix 1. Measurement instrument

| Construct | Measurement items |
|--|---|
| Brand Love Carroll & Ahuvia (2006) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Land Rover is an amazing brand 2. Land Rover makes me feel good 3. Land Rover is an awesome brand 4. I have positive feelings about Land Rover 5. Land Rover makes me feel happy 6. I love Land Rover 7. I am delighted about the Land Rover brand 8. I have a passion for Land Rover |
| Online Brand Community Love Carroll & Ahuvia (2006) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Land Rover Brand communities are enriching for me 2. The Land Rover Brand communities make me feel good 3. The Land Rover Brand communities are incredible 4. I have positive feelings about the Land Rover communities 5. The Land Rover Brand communities make me feel happy 6. I love the Land Rover Brand communities 7. I am delighted about the Land Rover brand communities 8. I have a passion for the Land Rover Brand communities |
| Brand Evangelism Matzler et al. (2007) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I could serve as a perfect Land Rover salesperson 2. I could make my friends converts to Land Rover 3. I could convince others about the qualities of Land Rover 4. I would tell anyone that Land Rover is the best car brand in the world 5. If someone tries to defame Land Rover, I will reprimand them for sure |
| Brand Defense Dalman et al. (2019) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I would stand up for Land Rover in a conversation 2. I would protect Land Rover in a conversation 3. I would encourage anyone to trust Land Rover |
| Positive Brand WOM Kim et al. (2001); Yi & Gong (2013); Shimul & Phau (2019) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I would recommend Land Rover to others 2. I would say positive things about my experience with Land Rover to others 3. I would say positive things about the Land Rover Brand 4. I would suggest others to buy Land Rover 5. I would encourage my friends and relatives to buy Land Rover |
| Brand Openness Melancon et al. (2011) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I would feel comfortable telling Land Rover that they need to improve something if needed |

| | |
|---|---|
| | <p>2. I will suggest changes to Land Rover if I encounter a problem with the product/service</p> <p>3. I am willing to provide information to help Land Rover improve</p> |
| <p>Online Value Co-creation Turri et al. (2013); Sanz-Blas et al. (2019)</p> | <p>1. Whenever I can, I like/post/share brand-related comments, photos and videos in the Land Rover Brand community</p> |

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