

The Impact of Brand Love on Constructive and Defensive e-WOM Intentions of Consumers: The Moderating Role of e-WOM Valence

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Abstract

In today's digital era, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) is an important communication tool positively or negatively affecting consumer behavior; however, it also poses challenges to firms since they cannot control its creation and dissemination. Brand love, the focus of brand management research in the past years, is known to create consumer loyalty and positive WOM. Therefore, this study aims to understand whether brand love can be a solution to preserve brands from negative e-WOM or augment its reputation with the spread of positive e-WOM. A multi-group experimental design was developed to test the hypotheses on Twitter users. Results show that in the case of positive tweets, the effect of brand love on producing constructive viral reactions is positive. In the case of negative tweets, the effect of brand love on producing defensive viral reactions is not significant. The results also confirm that the components of interpersonal love are valid for the brand love concept, with passion being the strongest.

Keywords: Brand Love, e-WOM, e-WOM Valence, Viral Behavior, Social Media, Twitter.

JEL Classification: M310

Elektronik Ağızdan Ağıza İletişimin Valansı, Marka Aşkının Müşterilerin Ağızdan Ağıza İletişim Niyetleri Üzerindeki Etkisine Nasıl Aracılık Eder?

Özet

İçinde bulunduğumuz postmodern dijital çağda, elektronik ağızdan ağıza iletişim, tüketici davranışlarını olumlu ya da olumsuz yönde etkileyebilen önemli bir iletişim aracı olmakla birlikte, ortaya çıkışı ve yayılışını kontrol edemedikleri için şirketler için zorluk çıkarmaktadır. Marka yönetimi araştırmalarının son yıllardaki odağı olan marka aşkının, sadakat ve olumlu ağızdan ağıza iletişime yol açtığı bilinmektedir. Bu çalışma ile, markaları olumsuz ağızdan ağıza iletişimden korumada ya da olumlu ağızdan ağıza iletişimle markaların şöhretini perçinlemede marka aşkının bir çözüm olup olmayacağını anlaşılması amaçlanmaktadır. Hipotezleri Twitter kullanıcıları üzerinde test etmek üzere çoklu grup deneyinden faydalanılmıştır. Sonuçlar olumlu tweete maruz kalındığında, marka aşkının yapıcı viral tepki verilmesine etkisinin olumlu olduğunu; olumsuz tweete maruz kalındığında ise, marka aşkının yıkıcı viral tepki verilmesi üzerinde bir etkisi olmadığını göstermektedir. Sonuçlar ayrıca kişiler arası aşkın bileşenlerinin marka aşkı için de geçerli olduğunu doğrulamış ve en güçlü bileşenin tutku olduğunu göstermiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Marka Aşkını, Elektronik Ağızdan Ağıza İletişim, Elektronik Ağızdan Ağıza İletişim Valansı, Viral Davranış, Sosyal Medya, Twitter.

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The Internet and social media channels provide consumers with rich and accessible platforms for interacting with each other through sending and receiving reviews and comments about their experiences, changing the form of traditional word-of-mouth into an electronic form, called e-WOM (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004; Sun et al, 2006). Owing to anonymity and exemption from facing social consequences, people can share their own experiences and trust each other's information easily and confidently on the Internet and social media channels. Thus, brand-related messages are uncontrollably diffused online, reaching both acquaintances and strangers who may or may not look for them (Sun et al., 2006; Chaiwongkachon, 2008). Given that e-WOM proves to be more powerful than advertising (Chen et al, 2016), it can positively or negatively affect the awareness, attitude, and purchase behavior of individuals who are exposed to it (Park and Lee, 2009; Liu, 2006; Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Kim et al, 2016). Thus, it has become an important topic of interest in the academic literature, and more research is called for to understand and control its nature in order to help marketing practices (Verhagen et al, 2013).

e-WOM can pose challenges to firms since they cannot control their creation and dissemination. They might, however, find a way to control its antecedents (ie., personal reputation, self-enhancement, sense of belonging, doing public good, problem-solving, the joy of helping others) to create positive e-WOM rather than a negative one (Cheung and Lee, 2012; Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004; Presi et al., 2014; Chu and Kim, 2011). As such, brand love, "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006, p.81), might be a useful tool to manipulate e-WOM potential, to spread the good word or maybe block bad ones. Existing studies support the idea that brand love has an impact on positive e-WOM production (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Albert et al, 2009; Wallace et al., 2014), and a defensive reaction to negative information about loved brands (Wilson et al, 2017; Cheng et al., 2012). Accordingly, this paper focuses on the power of brand love and analyzes its impact on consumers' reactions (constructive or defensive) when they are faced with positive or negative e-WOM about brands. The valence of e-WOM is assumed to play a moderating role in the relationship between brand love and consumers' constructive or defensive e-WOM intentions.

The significance of this study is two-fold. First, even though there is considerable research on the impact of e-WOM on receivers in terms of attitude, purchase intention, etc. (Park and Lee, 2009; Liu, 2006; Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Kim, et al., 2016), this research diverts from them and adds to the extant literature by focusing on receivers' engagement in further e-WOM (constructive or defensive) when faced with e-WOM from somebody else, and the role of brand love in this process. Second, it contributes to the current literature by evaluating the applicability of brand love on consumers' engagement in e-WOM on social media platforms. Building a loving relationship to ensure the sustainable loyalty of consumers is deemed to be crucial in the contemporary marketing world (Bagozzi et al., 2017; Kaufmann et al., 2016). Measuring the potential influence of so-called loving relationships with brands on consumer behavior in social media is timely and necessary given the increasing power of both concepts in the current marketing context. Hence, an academic analysis in this field can be particularly fruitful in terms of addressing different perspectives and providing insight.

Research on Brand Love

Studies on consumer behavior have expanded over the past few years from focusing on merely rational consumer choices and classical decision-making processes to targeting states such as irrational buying, and especially sensory, emotional, and playful consumer responses (Roy et al., 2013). As the most emotionally intense relationship between a consumer and a brand, "brand love constitutes the main objective of brand management (Hegner et al., 2017, p. 26)".

The conceptualization of brand love was primarily founded on Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love. One of the earliest studies regarding brand love can be traced back to Shimp and Madden's (1988) study on consumer-object relations. Adapting Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love, they defined consumer-object love by drawing analogies between interpersonal love and love for consumption objects. Sternberg (1986) states that love is an outcome of three psychological processes, namely, emotion, motivation, cognition. Each process corresponds to a component: intimacy (closeness, bondedness, warmth, mutual understanding, support); passion (romance, physical consummation, attractiveness); and decision/commitment (short and long-term intention to love and maintain love) respectively (Sternberg, 1986; Sternberg and Grajek, 1984; Diessner et al., 2004). The Triangular Theory of Love rules that love can be explained with these three components. A combination of these components or absence of them leads to various types of relationships, such as liking when there is only intimacy, or succumbed desire when passion and decision are present (Sternberg, 1986; Shimp and Madden, 1988).

Relying on interpersonal love theories to explain brand love has been a source of disagreement in the brand management literature (Carroll et al., 2006; Batra et al., 2012; Langner et al., 2015). One of the main resources of this disagreement is the presumption stating that relationships occur between two active and reciprocating partners. Brands are non-living beings, thus, they cannot be reciprocating partners in relationships. Therefore, this raises the question of whether brand love can be explained via interpersonal love theories or not (Whang et al., 2004). Huber *et al.* (2015) also argue that brand love should not be studied based on interpersonal love as its characteristics are not completely analogous to the feelings experienced while liking or loving a person. They underline that interpersonal love is a consequence of bidirectional interaction, while brand love is unidirectional. Likewise, Langner *et al.* (2015) claim that the emotional nature of interpersonal love and brand love is significantly different. Interpersonal love is complemented by stronger emotions compared to brand love and brand love is more similar to interpersonal liking (Langner et al., 2015) While a consumer-brand relationship is often affected by rational advantages, interpersonal love is mostly altruistic. Both Langner *et al.* (2015) and Huber *et al.* (2015) show in their studies that love in brand relations is driven by rational aspects.

Yet, other studies show that interpersonal love and brand love resemble each other. The transfer of interpersonal love theories to the field of marketing continued after Shimp and Madden's (1988) attempt. Fournier (1998) was the first researcher to conduct a study on consumer-brand relationships. Accordingly, similar to interpersonal relationships, Fournier (1998) believed that consumers can even establish emotional relations with certain consumption objects such as brands and identified a total of six relationships: love and passion, self-connection, commitment, interdependence, intimacy, and brand partner quality. She defined brand love as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (1998, p. 363). Whang *et al.* (2004) adopted Lee's (1977) colors of love theory and concluded that "bikers' love toward their motorcycles resembles an interpersonal love that is passionate, possessive and selfless in nature" (p. 320). Criticizing the fact that most of the brand love literature is based on interpersonal love theories, Albert *et al.* (2009) carried out exploratory studies and developed their brand love scale, saying that brand love is a multidimensional concept which covers two macro components, "affection" and "passion". One of the findings of their study, however, was that brand love is highly similar to interpersonal love (Albert et al., 2009). Albert and Valette-Florence (2010), later on, adopted scales from various interpersonal love theories to form their two-dimensional brand love measure. In line with these scholars, this study adopts interpersonal love theories to explain brand love, as brands are perceived as reciprocating partners since all marketing actions -

execution of marketing plans and tactics- regarding a brand are interpreted as reciprocal behaviors of that brand towards its users (Shimp and Madden, 1988; Fournier, 1998). Even though brands are non-living beings, the collection of perceptions formed by customers via marketers' actions personalizes them and makes them a relationship partner who can start, sustain and destroy their relationships with customers (Fournier, 1998).

The love relationship between consumers and brands has been proven to exist in online contexts as well. Wallace *et al.*'s work (2014) is noteworthy in this respect. Their study concluded that there is a positive relationship between self-expressive brands that are "liked" or "engaged with" on Facebook and brand love. Furthermore, brand love is found to mediate the relationship between brands and WOM. Vernuccio *et al.* (2015) searched for antecedents of brand love in online communities and found that social-interactive engagement influences social identity directly and brand love indirectly through the full mediating effect of social identity in online environments. In a study conducted by Chen *et al.* (2014), it was found that brand love influences the perception of a brand's Facebook page's ease of use. According to Hudson *et al.*'s study (2015), engagement with brands on social media increases the love for brands. One of the findings of the study carried out by Karjaluoto *et al.* (2016) is that brand love has a positive effect on e-WOM and this relation is stronger when a consumer has more experience with the brand. Wallace *et al.*, (2017), working on brand-self congruence, found that higher self-brand congruence with a "liked" brand on Facebook predicts brand love and e-WOM. Loureiro *et al.*, (2017) found that brand love mediates the relationship between online consumer-brand engagement and positive e-WOM, and that brand love has a stronger influence on e-WOM than satisfaction.

e-WOM on Social Media Networks

Social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram provide platforms for individuals to connect, create, and share online content (Boyd and Ellison 2008). They create non-geographically bound brand communities, which can be described as "a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, p.412). Consumers exchange opinions among themselves about brands or products, engaging in a form of WOM communication on social media platforms that are known as e-WOM. (Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013). Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004) defined e-WOM as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (p. 39). e-WOM can be driven by consumers' motivations to give a company "something in return" for a positive experience, as well as to maintain and support the continued success of the company (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). The reverse is also possible. e-WOM on social media platforms is slightly different from traditional WOM (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). First, e-WOM on social media networks do not occur only among real-life acquaintances but also with strangers (Sun *et al.*, 2006; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). Thus, people feel less pressured, and express their thoughts more comfortably (Phelps *et al.*, 2004; Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). As e-WOM messages are produced in written format (also as image, video, and audio formats), they are also more persistent and can be easily retrieved by consumers anytime they need them (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Finally, similar to traditional WOM, the brand-related messages on e-WOM can be positive, negative, or a mixture of both, which is called WOM valence. Negative WOM is known to be more informative for consumers and more powerful compared to positive WOM (Arndt, 1967; Herr *et al.*, 1991; Hauser *et al.*, 1993).

e-WOM has received mounting attention as a powerful source of information and marketing communication tool; its consequences and antecedents have attracted the attention of researchers so far. Prior empirical research has examined the impact of e-WOM on product

sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006), consumers' decision-making processes (De Bruyn and Lilien 2008), attitudes towards the brand and the website (Park and Lee, 2009), and purchase intentions (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Park and Lee, 2009). Other studies have also sought to understand which social factors make consumers engage in e-WOM behavior (Dellarocas, 2003; Brown et al., 2007; Steffes and Burgee, 2009; Chu and Kim, 2011).

In terms of brand love, many studies show that brand love has a positive influence on e-WOM (Wallace et al., 2014; Vernuccio et al., 2015; Karjaluo et al., 2016). If consumers feel loving relationships with brands, they are likely to recommend these brands to their friends and acquaintances. They are more proactive to post positive comments, advocate, and recommend it to others (Loureiro et al., 2017). The literature suggests that strong brand relationships such as brand love create a link between the brand and the person's self-concept; where the brand symbolically represents whom consumers believe they are or want to be (Escalas, 2004; Fournier, 1998; Cheng et al, 2012). This loving relationship then turns consumers into brand advocates, based on what Fournier (1998) calls feelings of love encouraging a biased positive perception of the brand. People spread good words about loved brands to enhance their self-concept and image. Social media make this process easier since, as Kozinets *et al.* (2010) emphasized, social media already transformed e-WOM into a way of expressing oneself and influencing others. Exploring the relation among brand engagement, "liking" on Facebook, brand love and WOM, Wallace *et al.* (2014) identified an indirect relationship between brand love and e-WOM intention, concluding that there is a positive relationship between the self-expressive nature of brands "liked" and brand love, and that consumers who engage with inner self-expressive brands are more likely to offer e-WOM for that brand. A study focusing on brand-consumer relationships conducted by Kim *et al.*, (2014) showed that brand followers who have a strong relationship with brands tend to retweet brand tweets to others. Thus

H₁: When a positive tweet about the brand is received, brand love has a positive effect on constructive e-WOM intention.

The same reasoning seems to hold for acting defensively towards negative e-WOM about loved brands. Fournier (1998) discussed in her seminal work that brand advocacy resulting from brand love can also lead to accepting wrongdoing of the brand or having biased attributions of blame. Batra *et al.* (2012) also talked about consumers' resistance to negative information as a result of their love for the brand. Cheng *et al.* (2012) discussed the idea that this is so because consumer-brand relationships are subject to self-related motivations and mechanisms (e.g., maintenance of positive self-view). Their findings showed consumers who treat the brand as self, defend the brand in failure situations, just as they would defend themselves if they failed. This is because they feel a threat to their self-concept when the brand fails and defend it to maintain a positive view of themselves. Self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) is used to explain how consumers form a bond between themselves and the loved brands that are threatened with negative information. Similar to Cheng *et al.* (2012), Wilson *et al.* (2017) also confirmed that having a close personal connection to brands leads consumers to process negative e-WOM messages defensively. According to his work, a counterintuitive favorable effect results from the self-brand connection. When a self-brand connection is formed, negative information regarding the brand is seen as a threat to the self, and a psychological defense mechanism is formed where consumers fight against the threatening information (Sherman and Cohen, 2006). Thus **H₂:** When a negative tweet about the brand is received, brand love has a positive effect on defensive e-WOM intention.

Methodology

Design and Sample of the Study

An online survey method was used for data collection. For this study, Twitter was chosen as the social media platform because of its informal and spontaneous nature that encourages users to connect to and interact with large communities (Sousa et al., 2010). These characteristics make Twitter an ideal platform for e-WOM communication (Jansen et al., 2009). Moreover, it is one of the most popular social networking and micro-blogging sites and has more than 313 million monthly active users (<https://about.twitter.com/company>). The questionnaire started by asking the subjects if they used Twitter to eliminate those who did not use Twitter. Then, they were asked questions measuring the components of brand love based on Shimp and Madden's brand love model to understand their relationship with the fashion brand they followed on Twitter and recently purchased from. The fashion category was chosen as consumers can have love relationships with brands they use to construct their identities, exerting high levels of self-brand connection (Batra et al., 2012; Ahuvia, 2005; Wilson et al., 2017).

A scenario-based experimental design was employed to understand the impact of a negative versus a positive tweet on the brand love-e-WOM intention. Two tweets were prepared, one with a positive and the other one with a negative tweet on consumers' loved brands. Respondents were told that the tweets were about the brands they had completed the brand love questionnaire for. The positive tweet read "the only brand, not a single item from it upsets me... As if it read my mind...it can be the only explanation why I find what I dream for in its stores"; and the negative tweet read "who buys from? Everything upsets me. Nothing is catchy or interesting. I can find nothing I dream of in its stores", respectively. Each group was then asked to answer questions related to how they would react to these tweets, constructive and defensive e-WOM. Respondents were presented both of these tweets and read the hypothetical positive/ negative tweet and were asked to express how they would react to these tweets (constructively or defensively).

Respondents were chosen using a convenience sampling method. A total of 210 participants completed questionnaires. The participants were mostly single and female (82.86%, 71.90% respectively), aged between 21-30 (74.29%), and university students or graduates (56.67%). Twitter activities and Twitter usage frequencies of the participants were measured. According to the results, participants were mostly engaged in reading tweets and retweeting (92.38% and 63.81% respectively). Finally, almost half of them used Twitter at least a few times a day (49.52%).

Measures

Brand love was measured by adapting the items developed by Sternberg (1986) to measure interpersonal love. A forward and backward translation methodology by two volunteer native interpreters was applied to ensure semantic and conceptual equivalence between the source language (English) and the questionnaire language (Turkish), and to minimize problems that can be created by lack of normative equivalence (Brancato et al., 2006). The authors, on the other, listed the possible constructive and defensive reactions within the possibilities of Twitter and incorporated them as items into the questionnaire to measure e-WOM intention (constructive and defensive). Each of these constructs was measured by a 5-point Likert scale, "1" being "strongly disagree" and "5" being "strongly agree". The items and variables can be found in Table 1.

Findings

Before hypotheses testing, reliability and construct validity scores were examined to ensure the appropriateness of the research instrument. According to the results, all constructs are considered valid and reliable. The factor loadings belonging to the items are above 0.50 and they range between 0.572 and 1.037, and t-values are significant as well. Composite Reliability Coefficients is higher than 0.70 and it ranges from 0.811 to 0.956. Hence, it shows all of the scales are reliable. All AVE scores are above 0.50 which ranges between 0.594 and 0.880 (Table 1).

Table 1 Reliability Coefficients for Constructs

Construct and Indicators	Factor Loading	t-value	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
First-order					
Constructive Viral Intention			0.86	0.811	0.594
I would share this tweet in my other social networks	0.833				
I would retweet this tweet with a supportive comment	0.620	8.929			
Defensive Viral Intention			0.86	0.870	0.694
I would write opposing comments for this tweet	0.940	11.160			
I would retweet this tweet with an opposing comment	0.867	10.921			
Second-order					
Brand Love			0.874	0.956	0.880
Commitment	0.863				
I can't imagine ending my relationship with this brand	0.779				
I couldn't let anything get in the way of my commitment to this brand	0.601	7.782			
I have confidence in the stability of my relationship with this brand	0.572	7.423			
Intimacy	0.906				
I have a relationship of mutual understanding with this brand	0.741				
I experience great happiness with this brand	0.626	9.592			
I value this brand greatly in my life	0.801	10.266			
Passion	1.037				
I find this brand very attractive physically	0.690				
I cannot imagine life without this brand	0.687	8.869			

Note: All loadings are significant at level $p < 0.001$ with a 2,000 sample bootstrapping procedure.

According to the results of discriminant validity assessment, all variables reflect distinct concepts. The square root of AVE is higher than correlations with others. For example, brand love's square root of AVE (0.938) is higher than the correlation coefficients of all other variables (Table 2). The result of the second-order factor analysis confirms that three dimensions, namely intimacy, passion, and commitment explain the brand love concept, passion scoring the highest.

Table 2 Correlations of Latent Variables

	CeWOMI	BRAND_LOVE	DeWOMI
CeWOMI	0,770		
BRAND_LOVE	0,302	0,938	
DeWOMI	0,641	0,062	0,833

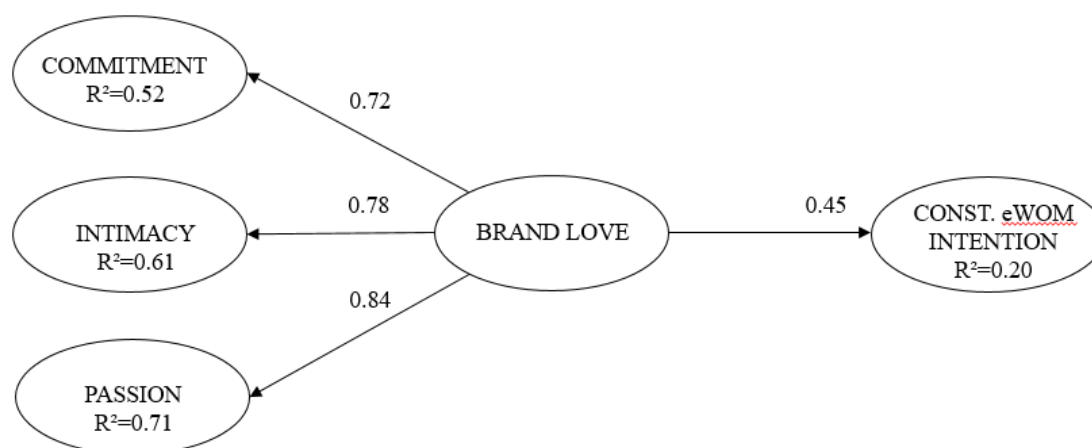
Diagonal cells are the square root of AVE.

Ce-WOMI: Constructive e-WOM Intention; DeWI: Defensive e-WOM Intention

The model for constructive e-WOM intention showed good fit where χ^2 : 41.398df: 24, p : .015 CFI: .983 TLI: .968 RMSEA: .042 PCLOSE: .720, which indicate the model fit the data well. The structural model was evaluated using standardized path coefficients, their significance level (t-statistic), and R^2 estimates. The R^2 of constructive e-WOM intention is

0.20, which is greater than the recommended value of 0.10 (Falk and Miller, 1992). For positive tweet exposed respondents, the effect of brand love on producing constructive e-WOM reactions in the face of the positive tweet is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.45$, $t = 3.964$, $p < 0.001$), which shows that H1 is supported (Figure 1). The model for defensive e-WOM intention also shows good fit where $\chi^2: 36,114$ $df: 24$, $p: .054$ CFI: .990 TLI: .981 RMSEA: .035 PCLOSE: .860, which indicated the model fit the data well. The structural models were evaluated using standardized path coefficients, their significance level (t-statistic), and R^2 estimates. According to the results, H2 is not supported: The R^2 of defensive e-WOM intention in the face of negative tweet is 0.01, which is inadequate for the recommended value of 0.10 (Falk and Miller, 1992). For negative tweet exposed respondents, the effect of brand love on defensive e-WOM reactions is insignificant ($\beta = 0.09$, $t = 0.702$, $p < 0.001$).

Figure 1 Effect of Brand Love on Constructive e-WOM Intention in the face of Positive Tweet.



Discussion and Conclusion

The present research examined the impact of brand love on consumers' constructive e-WOM reactions and consumers' defensive e-WOM reactions when they receive a positive versus negative e-WOM. Previous literature already confirmed that brand love has a positive effect on positive e-WOM of consumers (Wallace et al., 2014; Vernuccio et al., 2015; Karjaluoto et al., 2016). This study extended the previous studies by adding e-WOM valence as a moderator on this proven relationship and, in this way, explore the possibilities of defensive e-WOM intentions to add to the literature. The results showed that consumers' reactions to e-WOM messages vary based on the valence of the e-WOM received. When participants were exposed to a positive tweet about their beloved brand, brand love led to constructive e-WOM intentions. In other words, consumers said that they would further spread the good word not only on Twitter but also on other social networks, and write extra positive comments. When consumers were faced with a negative tweet about their loved brand, on the other hand, it was expected that they would react defensively and protect the brand as they would defend themselves, similar to the results of the study by Wilson *et al.* (2017) and Cheng *et al.* (2012). However, the results proved that was not so. Brand love did not lead to defensive e-WOM intention when participants witness a negative tweet about their brands. Consumers by no means were prone to act to defend their brand. This result contradicted the results in the extant literature (Wilson et al., 2017; Cheng et al., 2012) and needs to be explored through further research.

The finding that defensive action is not taken against a negative tweet about a loved brand is surprising. First of all, clothing is an identity relevant category, which may create stronger bonding or self-identification between the consumer and the loved brand and can lead consumers to engage in counterintuitive and defensive responses (Wilson et al., 2017). There may be some reasons why it did not so. The medium in the study, Twitter may be one of these reasons. When looking into the reasons why people use Twitter, the literature shows that people use Twitter for mostly “peaceful” reasons like keeping in touch with acquaintances, raising visibility for interesting things, gathering information, seeking opinion (Java et al., 2007; Zhao and Rosson, 2009; Naaman et al., 2010). Thus, this fact may lend support to the findings of research about the spreading of positive tweets and not engaging in “defensive” actions as a result of this dominant peaceful atmosphere. Writing a negative tweet raises interest in others, and consumers may become involved with tweeting traffic that would not be pleasant. Another reason for not taking action against negative tweets might be that retweeting the negative tweet even with a negative comment will ensure visibility for the brand-related negative comment, which will lead to the unintentional spread of it. Therefore, consumers may choose to leave the negative tweet as it is in order not to further spread it. Nevertheless, the findings of this research need further enhancement.

Apart from the discussion above, this study can also be approached from its contributions to Shimp and Madden’s brand love model adapted from Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love (Sternberg, 1986) in a social media context. The results confirmed that brand love has three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Among all of them, the passion component scored the highest, suggesting that it is the strongest component of brand love. The result is noteworthy: the intimacy vertex is more related to reciprocity; while the passion vertex is less so. It might be interpreted that reciprocity is not a priority for consumers; what they look for in a brand can be interpreted as an irresistible attraction. Moreover, the case of commitment vertex scoring less than passion, however slightly, might offer a hint that consumers don't look for commitment in their relationships with loved brands as strongly as marketers think, at least not more than passion. This might further lend credence to the idea that it is possible to love a brand even though one doesn't purchase that particular brand (maybe due to lack of means).

Overall, this study supports Shimp and Madden’s brand love model in understanding consumer behavior in online contexts. Contrary to the general understanding that consumers spread negative WOM more than positive WOM, this study found that if consumers love the brand, they are likely to spread positive e-WOM on social media platforms (Twitter in this case). On the other hand, even if the consumers love the brand, they remain indifferent when faced with negative e-WOM, neither acting defensively such as blocking it, nor spreading it further at least on the Twitter platform. The study provides evidence in favor of creating marketing strategies to build a strong emotional connection, love, and passionate relationship between the consumers and brands in the digital, social media age. More studies can be constructed to understand this relationship in different social media contexts, different types of products and differing levels of brand love manipulated.

Managerial Implications

In today's world, the Internet constitutes non-negligible importance in people's lives. They consult it for various reasons not the least of which is spending some leisure time, passing time, exploring, looking for information and socializing. Thanks to social media, they are no longer a mere "audience" but have become the "co-creators" of content in the virtual world. They upload videos to Youtube, open blogs to write about their summer vacations, share the photo of a riot they come across on Instagram or an article on their Facebook accounts. There is a

continuous and endless conversation with no or limited control among ordinary people on these social media platforms. To the fear of marketers mostly, they also share their brand-related experiences on the Internet, magnifying the effect of traditional word of mouth conversations, which are deemed more credible than advertising. A buzz started by an upset and angry customer has the power to crush a brand in the eyes of other customers. This study provides important insights for firms that operate or do marketing activities in social media. The findings imply that brand love facilitates the spread of the good word about the brand, yet, consumers remain indifferent when they are exposed to negative brand-related online messages on Twitter even though it's about their beloved brands. Thus, firms can save money by lowering their investment in fighting against negative e-WOM or preventing the exposure of negative e-WOM to consumers, at least on Twitter, since the negative word does not spread as quickly as it spreads offline (Richins, 1987) on this medium. On the other hand, marketers need to look for ways to build love relationships between their brands and target customers to ensure positive online conversations spreading on Twitter. The analysis shows that customers tend to love brands that say something about who they are and communicate this message to other members of the community. This finding implies that marketers need to meticulously analyze their target segments to understand who they are and what they want to say about themselves to the rest of the world. As the literature shows that congruence between inner-self and brand is more likely to lead to brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), marketers need to understand the longings and passions of their customers and find a way of addressing them in their communications.

Further Research Implications

First of all, this study is restricted to fashion brands, so it can be repeated in other categories to understand if hypotheses hold in those contexts as well. Second, the convenience sampling methodology may limit the generalizability of the findings. Thus, probability sampling methods may be employed in further research. To sophisticate the research, other studies may measure the self-brand connection of the consumers and understand their level of involvement within the category to provide better insight into why people do not defend their loved brands on Twitter. Another important point is that this study restricted itself to Twitter as a social media platform. The study can be applied to other social media channels to see if there are any variations in viral intentions based on the platform used. Finally, the source of the tweet may make a difference in the responses of the receivers. For example, Laczniak *et al.*, (2001) found in their study that individuals attribute word of mouth negativity to the communicators, so that brand evaluations can be protected from negativity. Therefore, several different types of sources for tweets can be taken into account in terms of how they affect consumer responses in further studies.

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