


Article

Exploring Consumer Behavior and Brand Management in the Automotive Sector: Insights from a Digital and Territorial Perspective

Diana Rodrigues ¹, Bruno Sousa ^{1,2,*} , Sofia Gomes ^{3,*} , José Oliveira ^{3,*}  and Eunice Lopes ^{2,4} ¹ Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave (IPCA), Campus IPCA, 4750-810 Barcelos, Portugal² CiTUR Centre for Tourism Research, Development and Innovation, Polytechnic of Leiria, 2411-901 Leiria, Portugal³ REMIT—Research on Economics, Management and Information Technologies, University Portucalense, 4200-072 Porto, Portugal⁴ TECHN&ART, Polytechnic Institute of Tomar (IPT), Estrada da Serra, 2300-313 Tomar, Portugal

* Correspondence: bsousa@ipca.pt (B.S.); sofiag@upt.pt (S.G.); jcastroliveira@ispgaya.pt (J.O.)

Abstract: Human beings are strongly influenced by their emotions; so, it is believed that building a close relationship between consumers and brands is a key factor for success. In this way, car brands are no exception, and despite facing numerous challenges associated with the energy transition, they have to reinvent themselves, retaining a focus on offering a unique and personalized experience for the consumer without forgetting the factors that influence the decision-making process. Therefore, current research aims to understand the relationship between brand love and other behavioral constructs, including brand attachment, brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, and positive word of mouth, as well as its influence on consumer behavior in the Portuguese automotive market, more specifically regarding the brands Audi, BMW, and Mercedes-Benz. Based on the literature review, a questionnaire survey was conducted on a group of 324 respondents. From this sample, it was possible to develop a conceptual model and formulate six research hypotheses. The results reveal that brand attachment and satisfaction have a positive influence on brand love, which has a positive influence on brand loyalty and positive word of mouth. In addition, brand attachment is positively related to brand loyalty, which has a positive impact on loyalty. Therefore, this article presents some insights from the perspective of digital marketing (i.e., e-WOM and social networks) and territory management (i.e., notoriety and positioning of territories). In the end, the limitations of the study will be presented, and guidelines for future research will be outlined.

Keywords: automotive; consumer behavior; brand love; digital trends; territorial management



Citation: Rodrigues, Diana, Bruno Sousa, Sofia Gomes, José Oliveira, and Eunice Lopes. 2023. Exploring Consumer Behavior and Brand Management in the Automotive Sector: Insights from a Digital and Territorial Perspective. *Administrative Sciences* 13: 36. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci13020036>

Received: 15 January 2023

Revised: 20 January 2023

Accepted: 24 January 2023

Published: 28 January 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Currently, the automotive industry plays an important role in the world economy. However, the sector faces several challenges motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., rising inflation rates and energy transition) that make consumers analyze in detail when they intend to change their car (Wen et al. 2021). Consequently, as in many other sectors, the automotive sector is currently facing some adversities that can be transformed into opportunities for brands to stand out from the competition. Brands can show their true personality in order to attract new customers and, above all, to strengthen ties with consumers who are already aligned with the brand, in order to become their first option. This is because “consumers do not choose brands, they choose lifestyles” (Fournier 1998, p. 367). For some consumers, the automobile is seen only as a means of transportation. However, for many, cars represent much more than “simple goods that consumers use to move from one point to another, cars can create emotions and bonds in the consumer’s mind” (Loureiro et al. 2017a, p. 2).

For some drivers, a car is considered a status symbol in the case of luxury or premium segment cars. These can show the status that the owners have or that they want other people to think they have. On the other hand, the car can be associated with the pleasure that driving it offers and can be considered a way for the consumer to escape from daily stress. For other consumers, their cars can be considered as a kind of memory “machine”, for example, in the case of their first car. For some people, it is difficult to let go of their first car, as it reminds them of the experiences they have had, the happy moments, and the various stages they have moved through with it, thus causing a certain nostalgia.

This passion and taste that owners show for their cars can also be seen through the countless groups that are formed on social networks; these can be official, that is, recognized by the brands or created by individuals. These groups are important for brands, as they are proof of the pride and passion felt by consumers in the car they own. In this way, the commitment by brands to this type of club is a very important way to show their interest in maintaining a close relationship with their consumers (Raji et al. 2019). This proximity between the brand and customers is an ongoing process. Passion leads customers to be more open to a stronger relationship, which leads to greater trust in the brand (Loureiro et al. 2017a). Identification with the brand, along with good experiences and the work it conducts, ultimately results in a brand that attracts, falls in love with, and retains its customers (Japutra et al. 2014; Loureiro et al. 2012; Pires et al. 2022). Therefore, it can be concluded that the value of a brand can be measured through its ability to create a more personal and emotional connection with its customers (Bıçakcıoğlu and İpek 2018; Hupp et al. 2018). Therefore, if brand managers want to form deeper bonds with their customers, they must adopt a strategy where the focus is the customer. This strategy begins with the creation of the brand personality, which must be defined considering the target audience (Albert et al. 2013; Alvarez and Fournier 2016; Bıçakcıoğlu and İpek 2018).

According to Saritas and Penez (2017), there are some factors that affect consumers and determine (automotive) consumer behaviors in an effective marketing system to satisfy consumer needs. These factors can be divided into two groups. The first group is marketing factors that are related to product, price, place, and promotion. These factors can be controlled in general. The second group consists of economic, psychological, sociocultural, situational, and demographic factors.

The creation of emotional ties with customers, namely brand love, is a matter of extreme importance, as the creation of this type of tie can result in a long-lasting and sustainable (Wiedmann et al. 2011) form of customer retention. According to recent studies, it is five times cheaper to retain an old customer than to “acquire” a new one (Kotler et al. 2020). Thus, considering some of the benefits that the creation of an emotional connection entails for consumers and for companies, this study evaluates the influence of brand attachment and satisfaction with brand love and behavioral intentions. To this end, three car brands in the premium segment (Audi, BMW, and Mercedes-Benz) were selected and a questionnaire was applied to consumers of these brands. The results of this study demonstrate that brand attachment and satisfaction with the car brands Audi, BMW, and Mercedes-Benz can positively influence brand love. In turn, brand love contributes positively to brand loyalty and positive word of mouth. Furthermore, brand loyalty may also be an antecedent of positive word of mouth. Therefore, this article presents some insights from the perspective of digital marketing (i.e., e-WOM and social networks) and territory management (i.e., notoriety and positioning of territories).

The results seem to suggest two very significant implications. On the one hand, the strong relationship between brand love and behavioral intentions suggests a greater predisposition for consumers to promote e-WOM and, consequently, more interaction on social networks and online sharing by consumers (e.g., social networks, videos, and viral testimonials). On the other hand, in the case of three brands from the same territory (i.e., Germany), there seems to be a greater tendency to associate brands and behavioral intentions with the notoriety of the territory and the identity of the place (i.e., associating the

territory with the image of reliability, rigor, safety, and quality). In the end, the limitations of the study will be presented and guidelines for future research will be outlined.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Brand Attachment and Brand Love

According to [Cardoso and Sousa \(2020\)](#), the brand has an identifying function, since it allows one to differentiate the products and/or services existing in the market, through a name, term, sign symbol, or a combination of all these elements. The identity of the brand can be adapted according to the needs and desires of its target audience, to foster recognition and create an emotional link with it. This cognitive and affective bond is called attachment theory, and it is defined by the attachment between an individual and a brand, in such a way that, when the connection is strong, the individual will see it as an extension of oneself, being part of the individual's characterization. According to [Madadi et al. \(2021\)](#), previous studies have concluded that brand love can be a consequence of ethnic advertising; moreover, when anticipating the effects on WOM communications, brand love has a greater direct impact than mere brand attachment and attitude toward the brand.

Brand attachment is a feeling that consumers have toward a brand or product; these feelings can become stronger, resulting in true love for the brand ([Batra et al. 2012](#); [Loureiro et al. 2012](#)). For [Loureiro et al. \(2012\)](#), brand attachment is positively related to brand love, and this reinforces trust and interest in continuing a relationship with the brand in the future. Several researchers have concluded that brand love is positively influenced by brand attachment ([Hadi and Ahmed 2018](#); [Ghorbanzadeh and Rahehagh 2020](#); [Gumparthy and Patr 2020](#); [Japutra et al. 2018](#); [Vieira and Sousa 2020](#)). This is due to the fact that brand attachment is seen by many authors as an antecedent of brand love ([Gumparthy and Patr 2020](#); [Japutra et al. 2018](#); [Roy et al. 2016](#); [Cardoso and Sousa 2020](#); [Reis et al. 2023](#)). The relationship of attachment and love for the brand can be compared to an interpersonal relationship. Individuals strongly attached to a person are more likely to fall in love with that person and to commit, invest, and make sacrifices for that person. The same can happen with a brand, that is, more intense feelings of connection are associated with stronger feelings of connection, affection, love, and passion ([Thomson et al. 2005](#)). In a particularly affective context, the term 'brand attachment' is difficult to confine to just one definition, since there have been several presented by different authors; however, in general, it is possible to say that the term suggests the development of a "love" between the consumer and the brand ([Alves et al. 2022](#)). Brand love is a concept that defines the degree of emotional connection that satisfied consumers establish with brands, resulting in positive and lasting relationships ([Carroll and Ahuvia 2006](#)). Although the emotional attachment is a strong relationship, brand love is considered to be an even deeper feeling, so attachment can be designated as an antecedent of brand love, influencing it in a positive way.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Brand attachment positively influences car brand love.*

2.2. Behavioral Intentions and Brand Love

Brand attachment triggers intentions to perform behaviors using consumer resources, namely, time, money, and reputation ([Alves et al. 2022](#)). Brands perform numerous functions for consumers, which result in benefits for the strengthening of the brand–consumer relationship ([Santos et al. 2021](#)). Several researchers have considered that consumer satisfaction with the brand is a prerequisite for brand love to be developed ([Drennan et al. 2015](#); [Hsu and Chen 2018](#); [Palusuk et al. 2019](#); [Torres et al. 2022](#)). Although the existence of satisfaction is essential for the creation of a close and long-term relationship with a brand, as is the case with brand love, this is not enough to justify such a deep feeling, since consumers can be satisfied with several brands simultaneously without a deeper connection with the brands ([Aro et al. 2018](#)). In this way, satisfaction can be considered as a first step for there to be a relationship of love between the consumer and the brand.

Ghorbanzadeh and Rahehagh (2021) are also advocates of this relationship, proposing that when the consumer feels satisfied with consuming a brand more than once, this experience will most likely result in the creation of a love relationship with the brand in question. In this way, satisfaction plays a decisive role in the formation of this special and deep bond between a consumer and a brand (Hsu and Chen 2018). Among the possible forms of contact with the brand (direct or indirect), the consumption experience is the most relevant and important for brand satisfaction (Drennan et al. 2015). Through experiences, consumers make mental associations, which reinforce the brand's positioning (Loureiro and Kaufmann 2012). The emotional connection between wine tourists, regions, and producers visited is established not only through wine as a core product but also through the set of hedonic attributes that make up the trip, which includes tangible and intangible components that determine the holistic experience (Santos et al. 2020).

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Brand satisfaction positively influences car brand love.*

Word of mouth is a tool that consumers consider credible, as it is usually carried out by people who have no commercial interest in the transaction. Therefore, often, before buying a product they have never had contact with, people search online forums and talk to people they consider closest to them in order to receive feedback. In a way, word of mouth works as a consumer defense mechanism, which helps to protect oneself from brands or products that do not add any value. Therefore, positive word of mouth is more likely to occur when a customer feels satisfied but, above all, when the consumer has a special connection with the brand, as words can positively influence the behavior of a future consumer. Consumers who are emotionally attached to a brand in a long-term relationship and have a passionate desire to continue using and interacting with the brand will be more proactive in defending it and recommending it to others (Loureiro et al. 2017a; Roy et al. 2016). Positive word of mouth involves reporting pleasant experiences, making recommendations to other consumers, and even showing off products and brands. Thus, several authors have concluded that brand love positively influences post-purchase parameters such as positive word of mouth (Bıçakcıoğlu and İpek 2018; Loureiro et al. 2017a; Malhotra 2022; Roy et al. 2016).

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Brand love positively influences positive word of mouth about the car brand.*

Brand love is considered one of the most important antecedents of brand loyalty (Ghorbanzadeh and Rahehagh 2021). When a consumer falls in love with a brand, the consumer develops a very strong emotional relationship, both in rational and emotional terms (Holmes et al. 2020). This relationship creates intense emotional responses in relation to the brand, as it works as a kind of guarantee that the consumer will buy it again in order to experience all the positive emotions that are aroused by the acquisition of a product or service of a certain brand, remaining loyal (Ghorbanzadeh and Rahehagh 2021). In this way, the feeling of love for the brand constitutes a strong barrier for competing brands, as noted by Pawle and Cooper (2006), "loyalty cannot be bought for money, but it can be for love" (p. 39). Considering that consumers who have a feeling of love towards the brand are the most loyal and the most committed advocates of a brand (Roy et al. 2016), then brand love is considered an antecedent of brand loyalty (Albert and Merunka 2013; Bairrada et al. 2018; Ghorbanzadeh and Rahehagh 2020; Holmes et al. 2020; Hsu and Chen 2018; Khamitov et al. 2019; Malhotra 2022; Torres et al. 2022). Consequently, brand love has a positive impact on brand loyalty behaviors.

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Car brand love positively influences brand loyalty.*

A consumer's loyalty toward a brand is a feeling of extreme importance, as it demonstrates the consumer's willingness to establish a long-term relationship with the brand. Therefore, as a result of this loyalty, the consumer will defend the brand through positive

references to other people and resistance to negative information about the brand in question (Dick and Basu 1994). Loyal customers tend to make positive recommendations about the brand to others and defend the company against negative opinions or rumors, thus representing a hard and stable core of consumers, which can represent a very important support for companies in a crisis situation. For Zhang and Liu (2017), brand loyalty can have the following positive consequences: greater tolerance for price changes; a greater likelihood of repurchasing the product; being the consumer's first choice; and spreading positive word of mouth, by encouraging colleagues, friends, and family to purchase a particular product or service. Several studies show that loyal customers tend to make positive recommendations to others, i.e., that brand loyalty positively influences positive word of mouth (Bıçakcıoğlu and İpek 2018; Zhang and Liu 2017).

Hypothesis 5 (H5). *Brand loyalty positively influences positive word of mouth regarding the car brand.*

Considering the hypotheses formulated, the research model shown in Figure 1 was built.

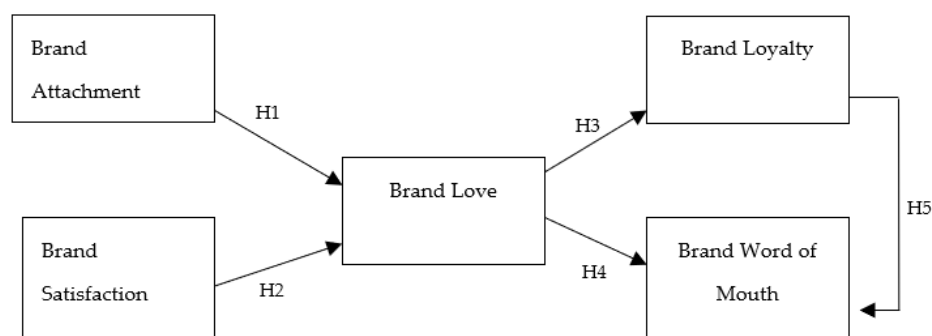


Figure 1. Research model.

3. Methodology

Considering the purpose of the study and the formulated research model, a quantitative approach was chosen based on the collection of surveys by questionnaire. An investigation that follows a quantitative approach is one that generates numerical or statistical results that can be measured or counted (Corbin and Strauss 2015). A questionnaire survey can be used in large-scale studies, as it allows the investigation of a significant number of individuals facing a given social phenomenon, and it offers the possibility of quantifying the data obtained and making inferences and generalizations (Alves et al. 2021). In addition, it allows the researcher to identify certain hypotheses and analyze the relationships between the variables involved in the study through their statistical treatment (Santos and Henriques 2021).

3.1. Sample

The questionnaire was made available online between 1 March and 5 April 2022 and resulted in 324 valid responses collected. The questionnaire was disseminated through social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, as well as through personal contact with individuals who owned cars of the brands under study. Thus, it is a non-probabilistic convenience sample. The questionnaire was anonymous, participation was voluntary, and the participants were informed about the purpose of the study. In order to validate the questionnaire, six pretests were carried out. The pretests aimed to see if all the questions were well structured, if they were understood by the participants, and the length of the completion time. The questionnaire consisted of six groups of questions: (i) brand attachment, consisting of three questions adapted from the study by Loureiro et al. (2012) and Carroll and Ahuvia (2006); (ii) satisfaction with the brand, consisting of five questions

adapted from Brakus et al. (2009) and Oliver (1980); (iii) brand love, with four questions adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006); (iv) brand loyalty, with five questions adapted from Fetscherin (2014) and Quester and Lin Lim (2003); (v) positive word of mouth, with four questions adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006); and (vi) the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants. The questions in groups (i) to (v) were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 “Strongly Agree”.

3.2. Method

This study used a quantitative approach. First, a statistical analysis of the variables was performed and then the Partial Least Square (PLS) method was applied in Smart PLS to test the relationships established in the research model. The PLS method is a statistical technique used to test and estimate causal relationships that applies a combination of statistical data and qualitative causal assumptions. One of the reasons for choosing this method was the fact that the variables under analysis did not have a normal distribution. In addition, the PLS allows the representation of constructs, which are measured by one or several indicators (manifest variables); this can estimate very complex models with many latent and manifest variables (Hair et al. 2019).

The application of the PLS method resulted in the model shown in Figure 2.

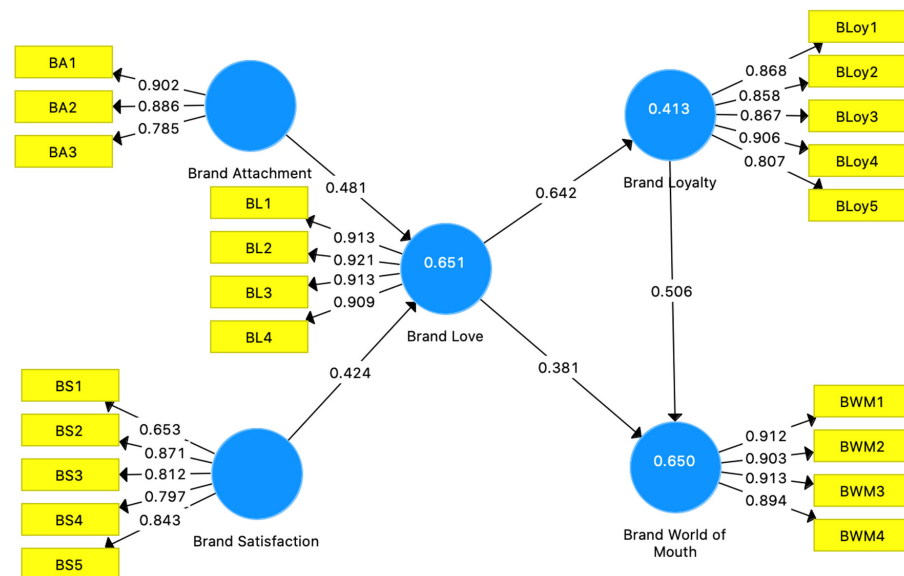


Figure 2. Model resulting from the application of the PLS method to the research model.

3.3. Evaluation of Reflective Model

The model obtained after applying the PLS algorithm required validation in terms of consistency, feasibility, and reliability (Table 1). For this purpose, Cronbach’s alpha coefficient (CRα), the composite reliability (CR), and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were used. The obtained model presented consistency and reliability, since the CRα and CR were superior to the reference value (0.70), as well as the AVE (0.50), according to the criteria of Hair et al. (2019). The discriminant validity was also verified, using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (in Table 1 diagonally).

Table 1. The evaluation of the model obtained after applying the PLS method to the research model.

	CRα	CR	AVE	BL	BA	BLoy	BWM	BS
Brand Love (BL)	0.934	0.953	0.836	0.914				
Brand Attachment (BA)	0.824	0.894	0.739	0.729	0.859			
Brand Loyalty (BLoy)	0.913	0.935	0.743	0.64	0.785	0.862		
Brand Word of Mouth (BWM)	0.927	0.948	0.82	0.706	0.721	0.751	0.905	
Brand Satisfaction (BS)	0.86	0.897	0.638	0.707	0.587	0.599	0.647	0.799

4. Results

4.1. Statistical Analysis of the Sample

The central objective of this article was to understand and analyze how brand love was related to brand attachment, brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, and positive word of mouth and what its influence was on consumer behavior, regarding the Portuguese car market, more specifically in relation to three selected brands. In addition to the general objective presented above, specific objectives were also defined for this research, such as: (1) to understand whether consumers feel emotionally connected to the brand of car they currently own; (2) to analyze consumer behavior with regard to brand loyalty, brand attachment, brand love, satisfaction, and positive word of mouth; and (3) to analyze the consumer profile and behavior in specific marketing contexts, such as the Portuguese car market, and more specifically in relation to the car brands Audi, BMW, and Mercedes-Benz.

The sample was composed of 324 participants. Table 2 contains the statistical analysis of the sociodemographic variables. Men represented almost 80% of the total respondents. In terms of age, 57.4% of participants were over 34 years old, and in terms of residence, 46.6% lived in the northern region of Portugal and 36.1% lived in the central region. In total, 59.2% of the participants were married or in a de facto relationship, and 57.7% had at most, in terms of schooling, completed secondary education. Further, 71% of participants worked for others.

Table 2. Statistical analysis of the sociodemographic variables.

Sociodemographic Variable	Categories	Percentage
Sex	Male	79.6%
	Female	20.4%
Age	18–25	17.6%
	26–33	25%
	34–41	23.2%
	42–49	19.4%
	More than 50	14.8%
Residence Zone	North	46.6%
	Center	36.1%
	South	13%
	Other	4.3%
Education	Secondary education at most	57.7%
	Graduate	28.4%
	Master's/PhD	7.7%
	Postgraduate studies	6.2%
Marital status	Married or cohabiting	59.2%
	Single	35.5%
	Divorced	4.3%
	Other	0.9%
Professional situation	Worker for others	71%
	Self-employed	17%
	Student worker	3.4%
	Student	4%
	Retired	3.1%
	Unemployed	1.5%

4.2. Statistical Analysis of Constructs

Regarding the constructs considered in the research model (Table 3), brand love generated the highest agreement on average ($M = 4.30$), followed by positive word of mouth ($M = 3.94$). The construct that generated the least agreement was satisfaction with the brand ($M = 2.83$), mainly because the participants did not feel good about the decision to purchase that brand and were not satisfied with the car brand they chose.

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of constructs.

Constructs and Items	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation
Brand Attachment	3.41	1.208
I am very attached to this brand.	3.85	1.094
This brand is irreplaceable.	3.16	1.292
I miss this brand of car.	3.22	1.237
Brand Satisfaction	2.83	0.855
I am satisfied with the brand and its performance.	4.27	0.794
If I were to buy a vehicle, I would buy a different brand.	2.37	1.013
I made a good choice by choosing this brand of car.	4.27	0.785
I feel bad about my decision to buy a car from this brand.	1.62	0.822
I am satisfied with the car brand I have chosen.	1.62	0.863
Brand Love	4.30	0.838
This is a spectacular brand.	4.37	0.802
This brand makes me feel good.	4.36	0.807
This brand makes me very happy.	4.22	0.851
I love this brand!	4.24	0.892
Brand Loyalty	3.50	1.209
I am committed to this automotive brand.	3.31	1.253
I pay more attention to this car brand than others.	3.72	1.205
I have a greater interest in this particular car brand than others.	3.87	1.096
It is very important for me to buy this brand of car over another.	3.45	1.188
I always buy the same brand of car because I like it.	3.17	1.304
Brand Word of Mouth	3.94	0.983
I recommend this brand to many people.	4.03	0.921
I talk about this brand to my friends.	4.13	0.862
I try to spread the quality of this brand through word of mouth.	3.91	1.037
I give a lot of positive publicity through word of mouth.	3.7	1.113

4.3. Regression Analysis

The second step of the PLS method consisted of a bootstrap analysis. This analysis consisted of a non-parametric technique that allowed analyzing the accuracy of the estimates of the PLS parameters and was applied to test the hypotheses formulated in the research model. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Direct effects between constructs.

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	p-Values
H1: Brand Attachment → Brand Love	0.479	0.473	0.041	0.000 *
H2: Brand Satisfaction → Brand Love	0.425	0.432	0.037	0.000 *
H3: Brand Love → Brand Word of Mouth	0.382	0.388	0.056	0.000 *
H4: Brand Love → Brand Loyalty	0.415	0.140	0.054	0.008 *
H5: Brand Loyalty → Brand Word of Mouth	0.507	0.504	0.052	0.000 *

Note: * $p < 0.05$.

All the relationships established between the constructs were significant and positively related. Thus, the results revealed that brand attachment and brand satisfaction positively influenced brand love ($\beta = 0.479$ and $\beta = 0.425$, respectively), confirming hypotheses 1 and 2. Brand love positively influenced brand loyalty and positive word of mouth ($\beta = 0.415$ and $\beta = 0.382$, respectively) confirming hypotheses 3 and 4. Finally, brand loyalty positively influenced positive word of mouth about the brand ($\beta = 0.507$), confirming hypothesis 5.

5. Discussion and Insights for Digital and Territorial Management

It has been proven that brand attachment plays a crucial role in the performance of the affectivity created by the consumer in relation to specific car products and services. The automotive industry, as a highly technological industry, is one of the main drivers in

the development of the world economy (Verevka et al. 2019). This has to adapt, adopting measures that help in the energy and technological transition without neglecting the desires and needs of consumers. Although brands can theoretically succeed without establishing an emotional connection with their customers, success and competitive advantage can be reinforced with the creation of this type of connection (Park et al. 2006). The understanding of this emotional connection between consumers and brands allows marketing professionals to create conditions for the promotion of stronger relationships with consumers (Hung and Lu 2018).

The results demonstrated that attachment to the car brand positively influenced the brand love, as found in the studies by Ghorbanzadeh and Rahehagh (2020), Gumparthi and Patr (2020), and Japutra et al. (2018). In this way, consumers' feelings of strong attachment to a brand may generate a deeper feeling of love for the brand, according to Roy et al. (2016). In addition, the results demonstrated that brand satisfaction can also be an antecedent that positively influences brand love, corroborating the findings of Hsu and Chen (2018), Palusuk et al. (2019), and Torres et al. (2022). Satisfaction with a brand is essential for creating a long-term emotional connection with it, becoming as intense as brand love (Aro et al. 2018). Thus, it may be the first stage of a phase of falling in love with the brand and consumer loyalty to the brand (Ghorbanzadeh and Rahehagh 2021). In this way, both brand attachment and brand satisfaction can contribute positively to brand love, as its drivers.

In addition, the results revealed that brand love positively influenced brand loyalty and positive word of mouth. In the case of brand loyalty, Ghorbanzadeh and Rahehagh (2021) considered that loyalty was the most important determinant of brand love. This happens because brand love creates very intense emotional bonds (Holmes et al. 2020), generating positive emotions that lead the consumer to want to repeat the acquisition of a product or service of a certain brand (Ghorbanzadeh and Rahehagh 2021). Additionally, positive word of mouth can be a consequence of brand love. When there are strong feelings for a brand, in addition to consumers wanting to repeat the shopping experience, they will disclose their satisfaction to others and defend and recommend it to others (Loureiro et al. 2017b). Furthermore, the results revealed that brand loyalty positively influenced positive word of mouth. This happens because a brand-loyal customer has brand love and will issue positive references to others about it (Bıçakcıoğlu and İpek 2018; Zhang and Liu 2017).

The results seemed to suggest two very significant implications. On the one hand, the strong relationship between brand love and behavioral intentions suggested a greater predisposition for consumers to promote e-WOM and, consequently, more interaction on social networks and online sharing by consumers (e.g., social networks, videos, and viral testimonials). On the other hand, in the case of the three brands from the same territory (i.e., Germany), there seemed to be a greater tendency to associate brands and behavioral intentions with the notoriety of the territory and the identity of the place (i.e., associating the territory with the image of reliability, rigor, safety, and quality). Consequently, this may boost the growth of local tourism markets (Patuelli et al. 2013). According to Doolittle (2004), the image of the territory can contribute to the identity of the place associated with natural and cultural components, making the image of the territory more attractive and enhancing the experience (Connell 2004).

The results still seemed to suggest that the strong (emotional) relationship that consumers establish with brands (cars) could have strong implications in the domains of recommendation/repurchase and, consequently, e-WOM with family, friends, and colleagues (i.e., through channels and through online testimonials). On the other hand, there was also an association between brands and territories. That is, the connection that consumers will be able to develop with brands (cars) from a given country or territory, should stimulate associations (positive or negative) that consumers have in that territory or place (e.g., a territory that presents quality brands and differentiating security).

The association between brands and territories can be understood as a diversification of simplified visions of places and identities, providing consumers with more complex ways of interpreting the character and cultural identity of the territory, allowing for a

more multifaceted and profound experience (Cohen-Hattab and Kerber 2004). Therefore, and according to Oliveira et al. (2021), manufacturers increasingly seek new value in services and integrated solutions from their traditional business models based on product sales. To secure the benefits from services, manufacturing companies find themselves in a challenging capability, innovation (Gomes et al. 2022), digital, and organizational transformation. This perception, therefore, reveals the attachment and loyalty to the brand, playing a crucial role in empowering the affectivity created by the consumer in relation to specific products and services of the car and the very insights for territorial management that they may trigger.

6. Conclusions

The present study aimed to evaluate the contributions of brand attachment and brand satisfaction as antecedents of brand love. The results revealed that the antecedents of brand love, brand attachment and brand satisfaction positively influenced brand love. In turn, brand love positively influenced brand loyalty and positive brand word of mouth.

This study had some limitations. Namely, it was a study focused on the automotive sector and focused on three brands (German brands in the automotive sector) in the automotive sector. In addition, the sample was almost 80% male consumers, which also represented a limitation in this study, which should be more balanced in future studies. Other variables could have been considered as determinants and consequences of brand love, as this paper focused only on the variables considered in the research model.

This article presents interdisciplinary insights. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, it is a theoretical and practical contribution to the management of territories (even indirectly) due to the association with the (territorial) brand and the positioning of the countries. At the same time, the manuscript presents theoretical and practical contributions in a digital aspect, namely in online behavioral intentions (e.g., recommendation, electronic word of mouth, digital influencers, and consumer testimonials on social networks). Finally, the manuscript presents a practical contribution to the automotive sector, as a support tool for “players” who work directly in the automotive sector and seek competitive advantage and differentiation through marketing and strategy (e.g., brand management).

For future research, it is suggested to enrich this study with more participants and other important variables. Furthermore, it is suggested that this questionnaire be applied to different car segments (diesel/gasoline, electric, and hybrid) in order to assess whether consumer behavior differs between these segments. It would also be interesting to apply this questionnaire to more participants from different generations in order to assess consumer behavior between generations (X, Y, and Z). A qualitative methodology with open-ended questions could support the results of future research. However, one of the main contributions of the present study focuses on the relationship that previous studies have suggested in that the relationship between brand love and behavioral intentions may impact (positively or negatively) the terms of digital communication and territorial management. Many tourist destinations can benefit from the knowledge that consumers have in relation to brands (cars) in each country or territory. For this reason, everything that exposes one’s identity to challenge or learning can be considered creative and positive for the territory. The analysis of the three brands in the automotive sector mentioned had, as a common element, the fact that they were brands from the same territory (i.e., Germany). However, this may be a limitation of the research, considering that the profile of consumers and consumption habits may be different among consumers of the three brands mentioned. Future studies should make it possible to deepen this type of statistical analysis in the domains of consumer behavior and profile in the automotive sector. On the other hand, the online questionnaire also did not allow the generalization of the results obtained (in the sample size). Future studies should make it possible to complete the results obtained through content analysis (e.g., interviews and/or focus groups with consumers of the aforementioned brands).

On the other hand, it will also be relevant to understand the relationship established between brand love, behavioral intentions, and subsequent implication in the tourism sector (i.e., image and positioning of tourist territories). This (complementary) logic will allow, in future studies, a better understanding of the studied phenomenon and the development of new insights for digital marketing and territory management.

Author Contributions: Methodology, D.R. and S.G.; Software, D.R. and S.G.; Formal analysis, D.R. and B.S.; Research, D.R., S.G. and B.S.; Data curation, S.G.; Writing—original draft, D.R.; Writing—review and editing, B.S., J.O. and E.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, since written informed consent was obtained for the in-depth interviews before each session. In the survey, a link to the online survey platform was sent by social media and partners' social media, and at no time was contact established between researchers and participants. Moreover, the interview script and the personal questionnaire did not include any information on the participants' histories. As such, all data accessible to the researchers were stripped of respondents' names, addresses, or birth dates and could not be linked back to them.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Albert, Noel, and Dwight Merunka. 2013. The role of brand love in consumer-brand relationships. *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 30: 258–66. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Albert, Noel, Dwight Merunka, and Pierre Valette-Florence. 2013. Brand passion: Antecedents and consequences. *Journal of Business Research* 66: 904–9. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Alvarez, Claudio, and Susan Fournier. 2016. Consumers' relationships with brands. *Current Opinion in Psychology* 10: 129–35. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Alves, Aline, Ana Nascimento, Andrea Ulh a, Bruna Batista, Cleidson Venturine, Domingas Rodrigues, Elisabete Moreira, and Francisco Silva. 2021. T cnicas de Recolha de Dados em Investiga o: Inquirir por question rio e/ou inquirir por entrevista. In *Reflex es em Torno de Metodologias de Investiga o: Recolha de Dados*. Aveiro: Universidade de Aveiro, vol. 2.
- Alves, Helena, Bruno Sousa, Aida Carvalho, Vasco Santos,  lvvaro Dias, and Marco Valeri. 2022. Encouraging brand attachment on consumer behaviour: Pet-friendly tourism segment. *Journal of Tourism, Heritage & Services Marketing* 8: 16–24.
- Aro, Kaisa, Kati Suomi, and Salla Saraniemi. 2018. Antecedents and consequences of destination brand love—A case study from Finnish Lapland. *Tourism Management* 67: 71–81. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Bairrada, Cristela Maia, Arnaldo Coelho, and Viktoriya Lizanets. 2018. The impact of brand personality on consumer behavior: The role of brand love. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* 23: 30–47. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Batra, Rajeev, Aaron Ahuvia, and Richard P. Bagozzi. 2012. Brand love. *Journal of Marketing* 76: 1–16. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Bıçakcıođlu, Nilay, and Ilayda İpek. 2018. Antecedents and outcomes of brand love: The mediating role of brand loyalty. *Journal of Marketing Communications* 24: 863–77. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Brakus, J. Jo sko, Bernd H. Schmitt, and Lia Zarantonello. 2009. Brand Experience: What Is It? How Is It Measured? Does It Affect Loyalty? *Journal of Marketing* 73: 52–68. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Cardoso, Ana, and Bruno Sousa. 2020. The theory of attachment in contexts of public and social marketing: Study of the program "Portugal Sou Eu". In *CSR and Sustainability in the Public Sector*. Singapore: Springer, pp. 95–110.
- Carroll, Barbara A., and Aaron C. Ahuvia. 2006. Some antecedents and outcomes of brand love. *Market Lett* 17: 79–89. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Cohen-Hattab, Kobi, and Jenny Kerber. 2004. Literature, cultural identity and the limits of authenticity: A composite approach. *International Journal of Tourism Research* 6: 57–73. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Connell, Joanne. 2004. The purest of human pleasures: The characteristics and motivations of garden visitors in Great Britain. *Tourism Management* 25: 229–47. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Corbin, J., and A. Strauss. 2015. Basics of Qualitative Research. *Sage Publications*, 65–86. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Dick, Alan S., and Kunal Basu. 1994. Customer loyalty: Toward an integrated conceptual framework. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 22: 99–113. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Doolittle, William. 2004. Gardens are us, we are nature: Transcending antiquity and modernity. *The Geographical Review* 94: 391–404. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Drennan, Judy, Constanza Bianchi, Silvia Cacho-Elizondo, Sandra Loureiro, Nathalie Guibert, and William Proud. 2015. Examining the role of wine brand love on brand loyalty: A multi-country comparison. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 49: 47–55. [CrossRef]
- Fetscherin, Marc. 2014. What type of relationship do we have with loved brands? *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 31: 430–40. [CrossRef]
- Fournier, Susan. 1998. Consumers and their brands: Developing relationship theory in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research* 24: 343–73. [CrossRef]
- Ghorbanzadeh, Davood, and Atena Rahehagh. 2020. The role of emotional structures in the relationship between satisfaction and brand loyalty. *Cogent Psychology* 7: 1782098. [CrossRef]
- Ghorbanzadeh, Davood, and Atena Rahehagh. 2021. Emotional brand attachment and brand love: The emotional bridges in the process of transition from satisfaction to loyalty. *Rajagiri Management Journal* 15: 16–38. [CrossRef]
- Gomes, Sofia, João Lopes, Luís Ferreira, and José Oliveira. 2022. Science and technology parks: Opening the pandora's box of regional development. *Journal of the Knowledge Economy*, 1–24. [CrossRef]
- Gumparthi, Vivek Pani, and Sabyasachi Patr. 2020. The Phenomenon of Brand Love: A Systematic Literature Review. *Journal of Relationship Marketing* 19: 93–132. [CrossRef]
- Hadi, Noor Ul, and Shahjehan Ahmed. 2018. Role of employer branding dimensions on employee retention: Evidence from educational sector. *Administrative Sciences* 8: 44. [CrossRef]
- Hair, Joseph, J. J. Risher, M. Sarstedt, and C. M. Ringle. 2019. When to use and how to report the results of PLS-SEM. *European Business Review* 31: 2–24. [CrossRef]
- Holmes, Gary R., Charles E. Pettijohn, and Subhro Mitra. 2020. Dealer loyalty and brand loyalty: United or divided? *Journal of Marketing Channels* 26: 263–75. [CrossRef]
- Hsu, Chia-Lin, and Mu-Chen Chen. 2018. How gamification marketing activities motivate desirable consumer behaviors: Focusing on the role of brand love. *Computers in Human Behavior* 88: 121–33. [CrossRef]
- Hung, Hsiu-Yu, and Hao-Te Lu. 2018. The rosy side and the blue side of emotional brand attachment. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 17: 302–12. [CrossRef]
- Hupp, Oliver, David Robbins, and Susan Fournier. 2018. At-Risk Brand Relationships and Threats to the Bottom Line. *GfK-Marketing Intelligence Review* 10: 59–63. [CrossRef]
- Japutra, Arnold, Yuksel Ekinci, and Lyndon Simkin. 2014. Exploring brand attachment, its determinants and outcomes. *Journal of Strategic Marketing* 22: 616–30. [CrossRef]
- Japutra, Arnold, Yuksel Ekinci, and Lyndon Simkin. 2018. Tie the knot: Building stronger consumers' attachment toward a brand. *Journal of Strategic Marketing* 26: 223–40. [CrossRef]
- Khamitov, Mansur, Xin Wang, and Matthew Thomson. 2019. How well do consumer-brand relationships drive customer brand loyalty? Generalizations from a meta-analysis of brand relationship elasticities. *Journal of Consumer Research* 46: 435–59. [CrossRef]
- Kotler, Philip, Gary Armstrong, Lloyd Harris, and Hongwei He. 2020. Principles of Marketing: Eighth European Edition. Pearson Education Ltd. Available online: www.pearson.com/uk (accessed on 12 June 2022).
- Loureiro, Sandra Maria Correia, and Hans Ruediger Kaufmann. 2012. Explaining love of wine brands. *Journal of Promotion Management* 18: 329–43. [CrossRef]
- Loureiro, Sandra Maria Correia, Eduardo Moraes Sarmento, and Goulwen Le Bellego. 2017a. The effect of corporate brand reputation on brand attachment and brand loyalty: Automobile sector. *Cogent Business & Management* 4: 1360031. [CrossRef]
- Loureiro, Sandra Maria Correia, Kaufmann Hans Ruediger, and Vrontis Demetris. 2012. Brand emotional connection and loyalty. *Journal of Brand Management* 20: 13–27. [CrossRef]
- Loureiro, Sandra Maria Correia, Tatjana Gorgus, and Hans Ruediger Kaufmann. 2017b. Antecedents and outcomes of online brand engagement: The role of brand love on enhancing electronic-word-of-mouth. *Online Information Review* 41: 985–1005. [CrossRef]
- Madadi, Rozbeh, Ivonne M. Torres, Reza Fazli-Salehi, and Miguel Ángel Zúñiga. 2021. The effects of advertising ethnic cues on brand love, brand attachment and attitude toward the brand. *Spanish Journal of Marketing-ESIC* 25: 333–54. [CrossRef]
- Malhotra, Suzanee. 2022. Impact of Country of Origin on Brand Love: An Empirical Study of Select Denim Jeans Brands. *International Journal of Business and Society* 23: 820–33. [CrossRef]
- Oliver, Richard. 1980. A Cognitive Model of the Antecedents and Consequences of Satisfaction Decisions. *Journal of Marketing Research* 17: 460–69. [CrossRef]
- Oliveira, José, António Azevedo, João Ferreira, Sofia Gomes, and João Lopes. 2021. An insight on B2B firms in the age of digitalization and paperless processes. *Sustainability* 13: 11565. [CrossRef]
- Palusuk, Narissara, Bernadett Koles, and Rajibul Hasan. 2019. 'All you need is brand love': A critical review and comprehensive conceptual framework for brand love. *Journal of Marketing Management* 35: 97–129. [CrossRef]
- Park, C. Whan, Deborah J. MacInnis, and Joseph Priester. 2006. Brand attachment: Constructs, consequences, and causes. *Foundations and Trends in Marketing* 1: 191–230. [CrossRef]
- Patuelli, Roberto, Maurizio Mussoni, and Guido Candela. 2013. The effects of World Heritage Sites on domestic tourism: A spatial interaction model for Italy. *Journal of Geographical Systems* 15: 369–402. [CrossRef]
- Pawle, John, and Peter Cooper. 2006. Measuring emotion—Lovemarks, the future beyond brands. *Journal of Advertising Research* 46: 38–48. [CrossRef]

- Pires, Paulo, José Duarte Santos, Pedro Quelhas Brito, and David Nunes Marques. 2022. Connecting Digital Channels to Consumers' Purchase Decision-Making Process in Online Stores. *Sustainability* 14: 14392. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Quester, Pascale, and Ai Lin Lim. 2003. Product involvement/brand loyalty: Is there a link? *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 12: 22–38. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Raji, Ridwan Adetunji, Sabrina Mohd Rashid, and Sobhi Mohd Ishak. 2019. Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) and the role of social media communications: Qualitative findings from the Malaysian automotive industry. *Journal of Marketing Communications* 25: 511–34. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Reis, Raissa, André Catarino, Bruno Sousa, Alexandra Malheiro, and Vasco Santos. 2023. Brand Attachment and Agile Marketing: Responses to the (Post-) Pandemic Context in the Sports Fashion Context. In *Promoting Organizational Performance Through 5G and Agile Marketing*. Hershey: IGI Global, pp. 42–54.
- Roy, Pinaki, Kapil Khandeparkar, and Manoj Motiani. 2016. A lovable personality: The effect of brand personality on brand love. *Journal of Brand Management* 23: 97–113. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Santos, J. R., and S. Henriques. 2021. *Inquérito por Questionário: Contributos de Conceção e Utilização em Contextos Educativos*. Lisboa: Universidade Aberta.
- Santos, Vasco, Paulo Ramos, Bruno Sousa, Nuno Almeida, and Marco Valeri. 2021. Factors influencing touristic consumer behavior. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 35: 409–29. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Santos, Vasco, Paulo Ramos, Nuno Almeida, João Marôco, and Santos-Pavón. 2020. Wine tourist profiling in the Porto wine cellars: Segmentation based on wine product involvement. *Anatolia* 31: 577–90. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Saritas, Ahmet, and Selin Penez. 2017. Factors of Purchasing Decision and Measuring Brand Loyalty: An Empirical Study of Automotive Sector. *Journal of Marketing & Management* 8: 1–10.
- Thomson, Matthew, Deborah J. MacInnis, and C. Whan Park. 2005. The ties that bind: Measuring the strength of customer's attachment to brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 15: 77–91. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Torres, Pedro, Mário Augusto, and Cristiana Neves. 2022. Value dimensions of gamification and their influence on brand loyalty and word-of-mouth: Relationships and combinations with satisfaction and brand love. *Psychology & Marketing* 39: 59–75.
- Verevka, Tatiana V., Svetlana S. Gutman, and Alexey Shmatko. 2019. Prospects for Innovative Development of World Automotive Market in Digital Economy. Paper presented at the SPBPU IDE'19: 2019 International SPBPU Scientific Conference on Innovations in Digital Economy, Saint-Petersburg, Russia, October 24–25.
- Vieira, Carla, and Bruno Sousa. 2020. The brand attachment and consumer behavior in sports marketing contexts: The case of football fans in Portugal. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing* 20: 29–46. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Wen, W., S. Yang, P. Zhou, and S. Z. Gao. 2021. Impacts of COVID-19 on the electric vehicle industry: Evidence from China. *Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews* 144: 111024. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Wiedmann, Klaus-Peter, Nadine Hennigs, Lars Pankalla, Martin Kassubek, and Barbara Seegebarth. 2011. Adoption barriers and resistance to sustainable solutions in the automotive sector. *Journal of Business Research* 64: 1201–6. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Zhang, Yueli, and Feng Liu. 2017. The Formation of Brand Loyalty: A Partial Dual-Factor Explanation. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing* 29: 239–49. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.