

## **"Online Touchpoints Matter!" - An Empirical Analysis of Consumer-Brand Relationships in Retail Settings**

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### **Abstract**

Brand touchpoints represent any communicative touchpoints between consumers and brands along the customer journey and are thus essential for the success of retail brands (Ieva & Ziliani, 2018). However, the current pandemic crisis is characterized by some severe restrictions on brick-and-mortar retail. It can be assumed that this has led to a shortage of in-store brand touchpoints and consequently to a weakening of the consumer-brand relationship which needs to be compensated (Baxendale et al., 2015). In the sense of omnichannel retailing, combining offline and online touchpoints is being advocated - even before and independently of Covid 19 - to strengthen the brand relationship of customers (von Briel, 2018; Verhoef et al., 2015). It remains unclear to what extent this integrated use of online and offline touchpoints can help to compensate for corona-related limitations by strengthening the consumer-brand relationship. This study investigates the impact of corona-related scarcity of in-store brand touchpoints on four different dimensions of consumer-brand relationship (trust, satisfaction, attachment, loyalty). On the example of a shopping mall, we tested consumer responses to two different customer journeys (solely in-store vs. in-store & online), which represented higher or weaker perceived strength of brand touchpoints. Findings of a PLS-SEM study (n=281) indicate that consumers' perceived strength of brand touchpoints has an overall positive effect on the single dimensions of consumer-brand relationships. It became evident that the joint use of online and offline touchpoints has a stronger effect on attachment than focusing exclusively on analog touchpoints. In our discussion, we highlight the importance of retail brands' capability to build up both, online and offline touchpoints to maintain and secure relationships with customers in times of crisis. The study contributes to a better understanding of brand-consumer relationships and the importance of a mix of offline and online brand touchpoints in the retail sector.

**Keywords:** Touchpoints, Omnichannel Retailing, Consumer-Brand Relationships, Customer Journey, Brand Experience.

**JEL classification:** M3, M31, M37.

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, a paradigm shift affects consumers and companies likewise. An integrated omnichannel model has replaced the isolated view of different interaction and communication channels. A seamless brand experience is supposed to be enabled, allowing the consumer to interact with the brand whenever desired (von Briel, 2018). This requires brands to be both active and responsive at touchpoints. However, with the myriad of channels and touchpoints, it is a significant challenge for brand managers to identify the most influential touchpoints that contribute to the brand's success. However, this no longer involves purely transaction-based economic goals, but in particular interaction behavior along the entire purchasing decision process (Grönroos, 2010). Brands can create specific impressions for the consumer at any touchpoint along the customer journey (Baxendale et al., 2015), affecting not only the brand experience but also consumer-brand relationships (Xie et al., 2017).

However, due to the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, several brick-and-mortar retailers are temporarily closed, limiting in-store touchpoints. As a result, the retail brand cannot interact with consumers at the point of sale as intended. To date, there has been no clear comparison of in-store only or the joint use of in-store and online touchpoints (e.g., Giraldi et al., 2016), nor have shopping malls been significantly considered as retail brands in this research area (Merrilees et al., 2016). Therefore, this study examines whether the joint use of online and in-store touchpoints will impact the consumer-brand relationship more positively compared to exclusively in-store touchpoints. The goal is to investigate whether this joint deployment of touchpoints can partially compensate for constrained in-store touchpoints. A shopping mall serves as the object of study, connecting both research fields of shopping malls and branding.

## **2. Literature Review and Development of the Conceptual Framework**

### **2.1 Branding and Shopping Malls**

Shopping malls are a retail agglomeration format allowing consumers to make tie-in purchases reducing the cost of shopping and comparative purchases reducing the cost of obtaining information (Mulligan et al., 2012). Furthermore, mall visits result in multiple needs being met simultaneously: On the one hand, conventional supplies can be purchased; on the other hand, consumers can socialize and spend their free time (Das & Varshneya, 2017). Resulting urbanization and localization economies may lead consumers to prefer shopping malls over retail stores, although they are more distant (Teller & Elms, 2010). Despite these benefits, little research has addressed branding in the context of shopping malls (Merrilees et al., 2016). Although the literature on corporate branding has multiplied (Miller et al., 2014) and some of the literature on malls has dealt with loyalty (Chebat et al., 2009), an intersection of these two areas is almost lacking. Therefore, following Myers et al. (2008), who highlighted the importance of differentiating shopping places by creating shopping place branding, this study analyzes shopping malls as retail brands in the following.

One of the essential factors in consumers' purchase, involvement, and motivation is individual experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). These experiences can be evoked by any point of contact at which the customer interacts with the retail brand. Therefore, by managing brand experiences effectively, retail brands could achieve a competitive advantage, enhance customer loyalty and strengthen consumer-brand relationships (Grewal et al., 2009).

### **2.2. Consumer-brand Relationship Dimensions**

One of the first works manifesting consumer-brand relationships (CBR) was Fournier's (1998), identifying 15 types of CBR and developing the "brand relationship quality" (BRQ) as an indicator of the strength, consisting of six dimensions: love/passion and self-connection (affective), intimacy, and partner quality (cognitive) as well as interdependence and commitment (behavioral). As one of the most comprehensive analyses of CBR, her work serves as a model for further studies (e. g. Fernandes & Moreira, 2019). In terms of affective relationship dimensions, Park et al. (2010) extended self-connection to attachment by brand prominence. Attachment positively effects commitment (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014) or loyalty (Khamitov et al., 2019), respectively. According to Thibaut & Kelley's (1959) interdependence theory and Rusbult's (1980) investment model, satisfaction is central to relationships. Further, a positive influence of satisfaction on loyalty (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019) and consumer behavior in the context of shopping malls (Chebat et al., 2014), has been found. Even though Fournier (1998) equates satisfaction with partner quality, while Huber et al. (2010) incorporate partner quality as an antecedent, this study focuses on relationship satisfaction, including brand satisfaction and partner quality, as a cognitive relationship dimension. Within the behavioral dimensions, Fournier's (1998) study exclusively considers attitudinal, not actual behavioral

aspects. Alternatively, some studies on CBR examine brand loyalty as a behavioral dimension (e. g. Khamitov et al., 2019) or focus exclusively on purchase intention (Huber et al., 2010) and WOM (Hudson et al., 2015). This study adopts loyalty consisting of purchase intention and WOM, being characterized cognitively and conatively (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003).

The BRQ does not capture relevant aspects for consumer-brand relationships from a social psychological perspective. As per Homans' (1961) and Blau's (1964) social exchange theory and Altman & Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory, trust is central among other relationship facets. Recent studies have proven a positive influence of trust on loyalty (Khamitov et al., 2019; Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). Therefore, in the following, trust is considered as an additional relationship dimension of equal importance.

**H1:** The CBR dimensions trust (a), satisfaction (b), and attachment (c) have a positive effect on loyalty.

### 2.3. Brand Touchpoints in Retail Settings

Brand touchpoints comprise any direct or indirect contact with the brand (Baxendale et al., 2015). As brand-related stimuli, they evoke a specific brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009), impacting the quality of consumer-brand relationships (Xie et al., 2017). The proliferation of channels has led to an increasingly complex purchase decision process, as consumers have more options to get in touch with a brand (Wind & Hays, 2016). As a result, managing the customer journey and developing a consistent brand experience across all touchpoints becomes more challenging (Homburg et al., 2017). To cope with this variety, touchpoint classifications have been developed (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This study applies a division into in-store and online touchpoints to analyze the combined use concerning omnichannel retailing. In-store brand touchpoints have been found to lead to a more positive change in brand consideration than other brand touchpoints (Baxendale et al., 2015). In terms of loyalty, both in-store and online touchpoints seem crucial (Ieva & Ziliani, 2018b). This demonstrates the central role of retail stores, despite the growing omnichannel transformation. However, this transformation reinforces the importance of providing a holistic brand experience that not only relates to the physical store but unites all channels (von Briel, 2018). As a result, we assume combining in-store and online touchpoints will not only influence the loyalty but also other CBR dimensions more effectively than solely online touchpoints.

**H2:** The perceived strength of touchpoints (brand experience) has a positive impact on the CBR dimensions trust (a), satisfaction (b), attachment (c), and loyalty (d).

**H3:** The joint use of in-store and online brand touchpoints leads to a stronger positive impact of brand experience on the CBR dimensions trust (a), satisfaction (b), attachment (c), and loyalty (d) than exclusively online touchpoints.

### 2.4. Stimulus-Organism-Response Paradigm

Consumer research is characterized by the SOR paradigm, originated by Mehrabian & Russell (1974) and modified by Jacoby (2002). It assumes that responses arise as external stimuli lead to unobservable psychological processes. These processes are intervening variables used as mediators in research (Zhao et al., 2010). In this study, brand touchpoints constitute the stimuli that are (un-)consciously processed in the course of a brand experience (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014), resulting in loyalty as a response. According to Jacoby (2002), attachment, satisfaction, and trust represent emotional and cognitive sectors of the organism and thus function as mediators. These relationships form the research model of this study and as illustrated in Figure 1.

**H4:** The effect of brand experience on loyalty is mediated by the CBR dimensions trust (a), satisfaction (b), and attachment (c).

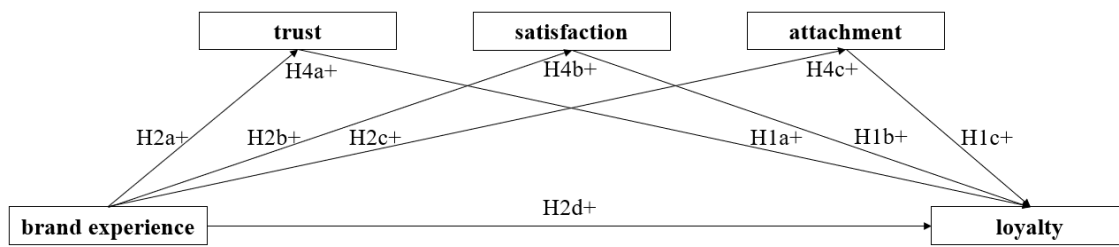


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design and Sample Characteristics

Conducting an online survey in October 2020, this study used a quantitative explorative design leading to a total sample size of 281 participants. Customers of a German shopping mall who had visited the mall at least once filled in the questionnaire. Respondents were directed to SoSci-Survey through a link shared on the shopping mall's Instagram account, where a brief overview of the survey was presented. According to a two-dimensional brand touchpoint division, the website, the Facebook account, the Instagram account, and the newsletter of the mall represented their online touchpoints. In contrast, personal communication, activities/events, services, appearance as well as the diversity of shops represented their in-store touchpoints. After checking the respondents' perceptions of the strength of those brand touchpoints, they were led to measurement scales to determine their shopping mall relationship. Participants were asked to provide sociodemographic information at the end of the survey.

Two-thirds of the sample is female, and one-third is male. The average age is 30, with the largest age groups being under 25 (36%) and 25-34 (44%). Those aged 35-44 (10%) and 45-54 (6%) are much less common, with participants over 55 (4%) making up the smallest age group. Almost half of all participants are students (47%), a good third are employees (36%), and the remaining 17% are distributed among the other six groups, with officials standing out with 6%. Most participants visit the center several times a year (32%) or once (22%) or several times a month (21%). For conducting a multigroup analysis (MGA), the sample was divided into two groups based on the perceived brand touchpoints presented in the survey. The presumed visit to the shopping mall results in the respondents not having had contact exclusively online. Therefore, the sample is divided into group 1, which has predominantly perceived the five aforementioned in-store touchpoints (n=141), and group 2, which additionally perceived at least one of the four online presented touchpoints (n=140).

#### 3.2. Measures and Data Analysis

For measuring the constructs, we used scales that have been proven in research, translated them into German and slightly modified them for this study. The scale for brand experience (BE) was measured based on Brakus et al. (2009) and extended by a relational dimension following Nysveen et al. (2013). To adapt the scale to a shopping mall context, it was adjusted according to Ong et al. (2018). Trust (TR) was measured using the scale of Koschate-Fischer & Gärtner (2015). The satisfaction (SA) scale is based on the scale of Yoon & Uysal (2005). For attachment (AT), the scale of Park et al. (2010) was adopted. WOM and revisit intention in the context of loyalty were measured following Ong et al. (2018).

The partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) allows the use of both reflective and formative latent variables (Rigdon et al., 2017). The constructs BE, SA, AT, and LO were specified as formative-reflective higher-order constructs (HOC). We used an embedded two-stage approach for specifying these two-dimensional HOC (Sarstedt et al., 2019). Trust was the only reflectively measured construct. SmartPLS 3.3.2 was used to conduct

the analyses of the measurement model and structural model (Ringle et al., 2015) applying a bootstrap re-sampling procedure with 5000 subsamples (Hair et al., 2019). The sociodemographics of the sample were analyzed descriptively. To examine the heterogeneity of the two groups, the Mann-Whitney-U test is applied to the ranks of the data to identify statistically significant differences using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Evaluation of the Measurement Models

The measurement models for the formative constructs of BE, SA, AT, and LO were evaluated as shown in Table 1. The variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below 5, ruling out problematic multicollinearity. Further, according to loading-values above 0.5 and p-values below 0.05, all indicators' weights (except cognitive BE) were statistically significant. Despite the lack of significance, cognitive BE is kept as an indicator since the loading is sufficiently large and its relevance for measuring BE is indicated by theory (Hair et al., 2019).

*Table 1. Operationalization of the formative constructs*

HOC	Item	LOC	VIF	Weight	Loading
BE	1. The mall appeals to my senses in a positive way, 2. I like the appearance of the mall	Sensory	1.693	0.362**	0.710
	3. The mall arouses positive feelings and emotions, 4. The contact to the mall improves my mood	Affective	2.369	0.292**	0.839
	5. The mall awakens my curiosity and imagination, 6. The mall's performance evokes positive thoughts	Cognitive	2.192	0.105	0.787
	7. The mall inspires me about activities, 8. The mall represents my lifestyle	Behavioral	1.725	0.182**	0.697
	9. Other mall customers have similar interests, 10. Using the mall strengthens my relationships	Relational	1.455	0.336**	0.759
SA	1. I am absolutely satisfied with the mall, 2. The mall exceeded my expectations.	Satisfaction with brand	1.831	0.374**	0.852
	3. Visiting the mall is worth my time and effort, 4. Compared to others, this mall is the better choice.	Partner Quality	1.831	0.709**	0.961
AT	1. The mall is like a part of me and who I am, 2. I feel emotionally bonded to the mall	Self-connection	1.940	0.572**	0.930
	3. Thoughts and feelings towards the mall come to mind automatic, 4. Thoughts and feelings towards the mall come naturally and instantly	Brand prominence	1.940	0.513**	0.912
LO	1. The next time I'm looking for a place to shop with friends or family, I would visit this mall, 2. I intend to continue to use this mall, 3. If this mall is unavailable, I will wait until it is open	Revisit intention	1.77	0.526**	0.904
	4. If the mall were mentioned in a conversation, I would recommend it, 5. If anyone commented negatively on the mall, I would defend it	WOM	1.77	0.571**	0.919

Note: \*\* represents significance at the 5% level.

As shown in Table 2, the reflective construct trust met the criteria for internal consistency, with composite reliability (CR) values exceeding 0.70. With loadings above 0.708 and average variance extracted (AVE) values above 0.5, convergent validity also was held. The items TR1 and TR4 are not excluded as their indicator reliability (IR) does not drop below the 0.4 thresholds ( $IR_{TR1}=0,46$ ;  $IR_{TR4}=0,41$ ) (Hair et al., 2019). The Fornell-Larcker criteria support discriminant validity, since the square root of the AVE (0.748) is higher than the correlations with other latent variables (BE: 0.602; SA: 0.619; AT: 0.436; LO: 0.628).

**Table 2. Internal consistency validity and convergent validity of the reflective construct**

Construct	Item	Loading	IR	AVE	CR
TR	1. I am confident in the mall's ability to perform well.	0.676	0.457	0.56	0.863
	2. I trust the mall.	0.805	0.648		
	3. I rely on the mall.	0.811	0.657		
	4. The mall's staff would help me with a problem.	0.641	0.411		
	5. I expect the mall to deliver on its promise	0.790	0.624		

#### 4.2. Evaluation of the Structural Model

The Mann-Whitney-U-test reveals significant differences between group 1 and group 2 in terms of age (AG), professional status (PS), and frequency of mall visits (FV) ( $p < 0.05$ ). Even though the effect sizes indicate weak differences ( $r_{AG} = -0.15$ ,  $r_{PS} = -0.14$ ,  $r_{FV} = -0.28$ ) (Dinneen & Blakesley, 1973), they are being eliminated by incorporating these constructs into the research model as control variables.

VIF values below 5 rule out problematic multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2019). Using 5.000 bootstrap re-samples, the path coefficients' statistical significance could be determined as shown in Table 3. TR, SA, and AT have statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) positive effects on LO ( $\beta_{TR-LO} = 0.164$ ,  $\beta_{SA-LO} = 0.360$ ,  $\beta_{AT-LO} = 0.194$ ), confirming H1a-c. Moreover, BE has a statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) positive effect on the intervening CBR dimensions ( $\beta_{BE-TR} = 0.588$ ,  $\beta_{BE-SA} = 0.640$ ,  $\beta_{BE-AT} = 0.458$ ), indicating that H2a-c is accepted. H2d is verified by the direct effect of BE on LO, which is positive and statistically significant ( $\beta_{BE-LO} = 0.188$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Moreover, the indirect effects of BE on LO are positive and statistically significant ( $\beta_{BE-TR-LO} = 0.096$ ,  $\beta_{BE-SA-LO} = 0.231$ ,  $\beta_{BE-AT-LO} = 0.094$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), implying partial complementary mediation (total effect:  $\beta_{BE-LO} = 0.609$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), so H4a-c is only partially supported (Zhao et al., 2010). In terms of the control variables, it was revealed that AG has a statistically significant positive effect on AT and LO ( $\beta_{AG-AT} = 0.101$ ,  $\beta_{AG-LO} = 0.073$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), PS has a statistically significant positive effect on AT ( $\beta_{PS-AT} = 0.083$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), and FV has a statistically significant negative effect on AT, LO, and SA ( $\beta_{FV-AT} = -0.204$ ,  $\beta_{FV-LO} = -0.157$ ;  $\beta_{FV-SA} = -0.117$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), other relations are not statistically significant.

We conducted a multigroup analysis to support the hypothesis both in-store and online touchpoints have a more substantial positive impact on the CBR dimensions than exclusively in-store touchpoints. For testing differences between the group's path coefficients, the non-parametric approaches of permutation and PLS-MGA were used (Hair et al., 2018), revealing a significantly greater impact of group 2 than in group 1 in BE influencing AT ( $\Delta\beta = -0.242$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Other differences, however, do not exceed the threshold for statistical significance.

**Table 3. Estimates and results of the structural model**

Hypothesis	Path	Std. beta ( $\beta$ )	Result
H1a+	TR $\rightarrow$ LO	0.164**	Supported
H1b+	SA $\rightarrow$ LO	0.360**	Supported
H1c+	AT $\rightarrow$ LO	0.194**	Supported
H2d+	BE $\rightarrow$ LO	0.188**	Supported
H2a+	BE $\rightarrow$ TR	0.588**	Supported
H2b+	BE $\rightarrow$ SA	0.640**	Supported
H2c+	BE $\rightarrow$ AT	0.485**	Supported
Mediating effects	Path	Std. beta ( $\beta$ )	Result
H4a+	BE $\rightarrow$ TR $\rightarrow$ LO	0.096**	Partially supported
H4b+	BE $\rightarrow$ SA $\rightarrow$ LO	0.231**	Partially supported
H4c+	BE $\rightarrow$ AT $\rightarrow$ LO	0.094**	Partially supported
Total indirect effect	BE $\rightarrow$ LO	0.421**	
Total effect	BE $\rightarrow$ LO	0,609**	
Multigroup analysis	Path	Std. beta ( $\beta$ ) $\Delta$ (group 1 - group 2)	Result

H3a+	BE → LO	-0,042	Rejected
H3b+	BE → TR	-0,025	Rejected
H3c+	BE → SA	0,046	Rejected
H3d+	BE → AT	-0,242**	Supported
Control variables	Path	Std. beta (β)	
Age, professional status, frequency of visits	AG → AT; LO; SA; TR	0.101**; 0.073**; 0; -0.03	
	PS → AT; LO; SA; TR	0.083**; 0.027; -0.023; 0.061	
	FV → AT; LO; SA; TR	-0.204**; -0.157**; -0.117**; -0.06	

Note: \*\* represents significance at the 5% level.

Finally, as shown in Table 4, the adjusted R<sup>2</sup> values were used to evaluate the predictive capability. The latent variables regarding loyalty (BE, TR, SA, AT) show a moderate predictive capability (R<sup>2</sup>adj. = 0.678), whereas BE only shows weak predictive capabilities. The relative predictability, based on the contribution of the exogenous variables, varies between small and large, with f<sup>2</sup> values ranging from 0.046 (TR → LO) to 0.701 (BE → SA). By the blindfolding-based Stone-Geisser's Q<sup>2</sup> value, a small predictive relevance (0.202) was determined for the reflective construct TR. Nevertheless, trust has a medium relative predictive relevance with a q<sup>2</sup>-value of 0.221. (Hair et al., 2019).

**Table 4. Assessment of predictive capability and predictive relevance of the structural model**

Latent variable	Exogenous variable	R <sup>2</sup> adj. (predictive capability)	f <sup>2</sup> (effect size)	Q <sup>2</sup> (predictive relevance)	q <sup>2</sup> (effect size)
TR	BE	0.364** (weak)	0.510 (large)	0.202 (small)	0.221 (medium)
SA	BE	0.452** (weak)	0.701 (large)		
AT	BE	0.354** (weak)	0.342 (medium)		
LO	BE	0.678** (moderate)	0.049 (small)		
	TR		0.046 (small)		
	SA		0.194 (medium)		
	AT		0.074 (small)		

Note: \*\* represents significance at the 5% level.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to extend the knowledge of the combined use of in-store and online brand touchpoints in retail and analyze the impact on the consumer-brand relationship. Precisely, the extent to which this approach can compensate limited touchpoints at the point of sale has sought to be determined to implications consequently.

From a theoretical perspective, brand touchpoints resulting in an experience, which affects the consumer's trust, attachment, satisfaction, loyalty is consistent with prior research. Nevertheless, since shopping malls have hardly been addressed in this context, we could expand the present knowledge by linking the areas of experiential branding and consumer relationships with shopping malls as retail brands. Further, it was discovered that trust, attachment, and satisfaction partially mediate the impact of brand experience on loyalty. Thus, the SOR model suits this type of research, partly revealing the process of brand experience affecting consumers' behavioral responses. Finally, when both in-store and online touchpoints were perceived, the brand experience had a stronger impact on attachment than exclusively online touchpoints. This demonstrates the critical difference that online touchpoints offer when retail brands connect with and become more prominent to consumers.

From a practical perspective, the unique role of online touchpoints in the context of attachment can probably be explained by the fact that consumers can interact directly with the brand via social media (Shanahan et al., 2019). Since attachment in turn positively influences revisit intention and WOM, retail brands should leverage this strength, e.g., through additional social media channels, both at the time of the current pandemic and in the long term. Following

on from our findings, according to Guthrie et al. 2021, it can be stated for the Covid 19 crisis that retail brands do not need to offer usual retail-related content but content that fits the situation, e.g., by addressing problem- and emotion-oriented behaviors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which represent coping strategies of consumers during this pandemic. Shifting the focus to retail or mall branding, this study confirmed the presumed ability of brand experiences to strengthen CBR, thus representing a critical element in achieving a competitive advantage.

For reasons of parsimony, CBR have been modeled with four dimensions, although the corresponding research area identifies further. These could be incorporated into future research to depict a complete instead of partial mediations. With several dimensions, possible CBR types contributing to the typologies found in the literature could also be explored, allowing for more target group-specific implications. Moreover, other antecedents (e.g., brand personality) next to brand experience could be considered in following CBR studies. In addition, earned, shared, and paid touchpoints have been excluded from this study, providing opportunities for upcoming research. A further limitation results from using standardized rating scales. Jacoby (2002) emphasizes that emotion, cognition, and biochemical reactions jointly influence consumer behavior and should not be considered separately. Thus, additional use of magnitude scaling or psychobiological methods (e.g., priming) could remedy this problem. Ultimately, the sample represents only a part of the shopping mall's total customer base due to the low average age and high number of students.

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