

Do eWOM and Experiential Marketing Drive Brand Trust and Brand Love for MSME Products?

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ABSTRACT

Research on brand trust and brand love influenced by electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and experiential marketing is essential because both aspects play a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions in the digital age. Understanding this relationship enables companies and organizations to design more effective marketing strategies that enhance trust and emotional attachment to brands. This study was conducted to explore the relationship between eWOM and experiential marketing on brand trust and brand love among micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) around the Ibu Kota Nusantara or Capital City of Nusantara (IKN). A quantitative approach was employed, involving a sample of 170 respondents who are consumers of MSME products. Data analysis was performed using the partial least squares (PLS) approach with the SmartPLS software. The empirical findings confirm three main points. First, eWOM ($\beta = 0.432$; $p = 0.000$) and experiential marketing ($\beta = 0.548$; $p = 0.000$) have a significant positive influence on brand trust. Second, eWOM has a positive but insignificant influence on brand love ($\beta = 0.013$; $p = 0.826$). Third, both experiential marketing ($\beta = 0.636$; $p = 0.000$) and brand trust ($\beta = 0.267$; $p = 0.002$) have a significant positive influence on brand love. This study enriches the literature on consumer behavior by demonstrating that experiential marketing exerts a stronger influence than eWOM in fostering brand trust and brand love. Lastly, the findings encourage MSME owners to prioritize experience-based marketing strategies to boost consumer trust and emotional attachment to the brand, rather than relying solely on the impact of eWOM, particularly in the context of MSMEs operating in emerging areas such as IKN.

KEYWORDS: eWOM, Experiential marketing, Brand trust, Brand love, IKN

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1. INTRODUCTION

The relocation of Indonesia's administrative center to a new growth area called the Ibu Kota Nusantara or Capital City of Nusantara (IKN) not only physically shifts the administrative hub but also transforms the city into a smart city (Junaidi et al., 2025). Moving the IKN from Jakarta to East Kalimantan will undoubtedly create business opportunities across various sectors, including micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Additionally, the relocation will stimulate growth in other sectors beyond MSMEs, such as agriculture, manufacturing, and supporting services such as tourism (Darma et al., 2025). According to Achmad et al. (2025), the IKN could become a key driver of business, investment, and technological advancement. While this presents significant opportunities, it also poses challenges for MSME players, not only in producing competitive products but also in developing human

resources capable of building high-quality and competitive enterprises (Althalets et al., 2025). MSME entrepreneurs should continue to develop their competencies to produce high-quality and competitive products. Mardiono et al. (2024) revealed that the growth of MSMEs will drive economic development in the IKN. Currently, 350 MSMEs are being trained by the IKN authorities to progress to a higher level of business development. These MSMEs receive assistance in marketing their products to the retail market, obtaining business identification numbers (NIB), and acquiring halal product certification. This aligns with the IKN's development goal of improving the welfare of the population, especially at the local level. It also serves as a long-term solution for community empowerment programs. The government aims for MSMEs in the IKN to eventually integrate into the industrial supply chain.

One effective way to increase consumer confidence

is to implement a product marketing strategy utilizing electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Mehyar et al. (2020) and Lim et al. (2022) define eWOM as statements made by potential customers, whether positive or negative. eWOM plays a crucial role in influencing consumer behavior. Positive recommendations or reviews from other consumers become a fundamental factor in consumer decision-making, thereby enhancing confidence in purchasing and using a brand's products. In addition to eWOM, experiential marketing is another important strategy. Experiential marketing focuses on engaging customers' emotions and feelings by creating coherent and memorable experiences, which foster customer satisfaction and loyalty toward specific products (Urdea & Constantin, 2021).

Although previous studies have discussed the influence of eWOM and experiential marketing on consumer behavior, most have focused separately on the impact of eWOM on purchase intention or consumer loyalty, and the effect of experiential marketing on customer satisfaction. Nevertheless, there is limited research that comprehensively examines the simultaneous relationship between these two factors in building brand trust or brand love, especially in the IKN region. In this scope, brand experience is shaped not only through direct interaction but also through consumer perceptions and social media reviews amid the demands of the digital era. This gap highlights the need for further research to investigate how the synergy between eWOM-based digital communication and brand experiences created by MSMEs in the IKN can collectively strengthen consumer trust and love for brands. Thus, this study aims to provide both theoretical and practical contributions by expanding the understanding of how emotional relationships and trust in brands are formed within an increasingly interactive digital marketing environment.

Linking the relationship between eWOM and experiential marketing with brand trust and brand love within the capacity of MSMEs in IKN is necessary. Both strategies are effective in strengthening the position of local brands amid increasingly digital and emotionally driven market competition. Erkan and Evans (2016) argue that eWOM generates consumer trust by providing information perceived as more credible and authentic than traditional advertising. Experiential marketing fosters emotional experiences that enhance attachment and love for the brand (Schmitt, 1999; Brakus et al., 2009). Brand love and brand trust were shown to increase repurchase intention and loyalty performance (David & Ali, 2025). Meanwhile, Maduretno and Junaedi (2022) identified that brand experience enhances both brand love and brand trust.

For MSMEs in emerging areas such as IKN, which are currently developing their economic and social identity, these strategies are ideal for building brand trust as a

foundation for loyalty and cultivating brand love as a long-term asset that is difficult to replicate. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the impact of eWOM and experiential marketing on brand trust, and secondly, to explore how eWOM, experiential marketing, and brand trust collectively influence brand love. The results of this study make a vital contribution to the development of experience-based and digital emotional marketing models, which remain rarely implemented at the MSME scale, particularly in the IKN region and its surroundings. The theoretical contribution of this study enhances the academic knowledge base in the field of marketing. Besides, the practical implications serve as a valuable evaluation tool, information source, and reference for MSME practitioners aiming to cultivate brand trust and brand love through intensive eWOM and experiential marketing strategies targeted at consumers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

2.1.1 Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

eWOM, also known as viral marketing, is a marketing strategy that utilizes digital media to disseminate information among consumers, akin to traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. This approach enables consumers, both current and former users of a product, to widely share their opinions and experiences via the internet. Primary channels for spreading these messages include social media platforms, online forums, and product review sites. As consumers increasingly rely on digital information, eWOM has become one of the most critical determinants of purchasing decisions (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Besides, in many instances, the impact of eWOM on consumer choices is regarded as comparable to, or even exceeding, the influence of direct word-of-mouth (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Reichelt et al., 2014). Consequently, eWOM is a critical factor in contemporary digital marketing strategies. It can be measured by analyzing consumer behavior in searching for and responding to product information online.

Several indicators of eWOM include the habit of reading reviews from other consumers, searching for information through digital reviews, and consulting with others via online media before making a purchase decision. Moreover, concerns about purchasing without reading reviews, along with the increased confidence gained from seeing other consumers' opinions, further demonstrate the significant role of eWOM in shaping perceptions and beliefs about a brand or product. These behaviors reflect consumers' growing reliance on experience-based information conveyed through digital platforms (Park et al., 2007; Ismagilova et al., 2020). According to Zhang (2023) and Ngo et al. (2024), three indicators determine the success of eWOM: (1)

intensity, defined as the number of statements made by consumers about products on social networking sites; (2) valence of opinion, referring to consumers' positive or negative responses to the product; and (3) content, which describes the information on the website regarding the benefits and uses of the product.

2.1.2 Experiential Marketing

Experiential marketing is a strategy that emphasizes creating direct and meaningful experiences for consumers to build strong emotional connections between them and brands. This approach not only introduces products functionally but also engages consumers through interactions that are enjoyable, memorable, and relevant to their lives. Positive experiences, whether sensory, emotional, cognitive, or behavioral, can foster satisfaction, loyalty, and repeat purchase intent toward a brand (Schmitt, 1999; Brakus et al., 2009). Through two-way communication and deep engagement, experiential marketing can generate strong brand perceptions and differentiate brands from competitors, thereby helping companies retain consumers over the long term (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010).

Experiential marketing can be evaluated through five key dimensions that capture consumers' collective experiences with a brand. The first dimension, sensory experience, involves stimulating the five senses, including sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell, to create brand differentiation and enhance perceived value. The second dimension, emotional experience, aims to evoke positive feelings through visual elements, brand communication, product design, and digital environments such as websites, thereby fostering emotional attachment. Third, cognitive experience encourages consumers to think creatively and critically by incorporating elements of surprise, advanced technology, and inspirational messages, thereby shaping perceptions of the brand's future quality and value.

Fourth, behavioral experience focuses on consumers' physical activities and lifestyles, as reflected in their actions and social interactions, to cultivate long-term relationships with the brand. Fifth, relational experience broadens consumer engagement by connecting them to larger communities, cultures, or social values through symbolic brand representations. Together, these five dimensions synergistically enhance the overall brand experience and influence consumer loyalty (Wiedmann et al., 2021; Garg et al., 2022).

2.1.3 Brand Trust

Brand trust is defined as the confidence consumers feel when using a brand, based on the perception that the brand is reliable and genuinely prioritizes their interests and welfare (Monfort et al., 2025). This trust is developed

through continuous interactions between consumers and brands, which not only demonstrate the brand's ability to meet functional needs but also foster deep emotional connections. Brand trust reflects consumers' willingness to accept risks and continue choosing certain brands based on their perception of the brand's reliability, integrity, and good intentions. Trust in a brand is a crucial element in the consumer decision-making process, as it encourages loyalty, increases the likelihood of repeat purchases, and enhances the brand's value as a strategic asset for the company (Ebrahim et al., 2020; Rather, 2021). In the increasingly complex landscape of market competition, brand trust serves not only as a differentiating factor but also as the foundation for a long-term relationship between the brand and its customers.

Brand trust is influenced by three primary elements: brand characteristics, company characteristics, and the nature of the relationship between consumers and the brand. First, brand characteristics include brand predictability and the brand's competence in meeting consumer needs (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). Second, company characteristics encompass reputation, integrity, and consumer perceptions of the company's motives (Liao et al., 2023). Third, consumer-brand characteristics involve emotional closeness and identity alignment between consumers and brands, including previous positive experiences, shared values, and the influence of social environments such as peer support (Ghondagsaz & Engesser, 2022; Rather et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022; Putra et al., 2023). Overall, brand trust emerges from complex interactions among perceptions of quality, integrity, and consistent emotional connections between consumers and brands.

2.1.4 Brand Love

Brand love refers to the emotional connection consumers develop when they achieve a deep level of integration with the brand and can express their affection for it, thereby creating a strong need for the brand (Batra et al., 2012; Pourazad et al., 2024; Aro & Tähtinen, 2025). Love for a brand develops through consumers' positive experiences with a product, resulting in deep emotional and affective judgments toward the brand (Magano et al., 2024). Brand love reflects a strong emotional attachment, where consumers perceive the brand as part of their identity and self-expression. This feeling is triggered not only by satisfaction but also by the perception that the brand is superior to others and capable of fulfilling consumers' personal and symbolic needs (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Fetscherin & Heilmann, 2016). From another perspective, brand love arises from consumers' experiences with a brand, leading to evaluation and affection for it (Rodrigues et al., 2015). The main characteristics and indicators of brand love include (1) passion for the brand, (2) emotional

attachment, (3) consistent positive evaluation, (4) powerful emotional response, and (5) explicit expression of love for the brand. Recent research also shows that brand love plays a significant role in fostering long-term customer loyalty, positive word of mouth, and resistance to competing brands (Kumar & Kaushik, 2022).

2.2 The Basis for Hypothesis Formation

Substantively, the relevance among eWOM, experiential marketing, and brand trust in relation to brand love has been explored in several manuscripts. First, empirical evidence demonstrates that eWOM significantly influences the formation of brand trust. Information shared online by consumers, whether in the form of reviews, testimonials, or recommendations, can shape positive perceptions of a brand's credibility and reliability. Consumers tend to trust reviews that are external and based on the genuine experiences of other users, making eWOM a source of information considered more objective than traditional advertising. The greater the number of consistent positive reviews about a brand, the higher the likelihood that consumers will develop trust in the brand (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Ismagilova et al., 2020; Le et al., 2024; Ngo et al., 2024; Sudaryanto et al., 2025). Meanwhile, trust derived from eWOM is also affected by perceptions of the message's authenticity, the expertise of the information source, and the relevance of the shared experience.

Second, experiential marketing strongly influences brand trust because it provides direct experiences that engage sensory, emotional, cognitive, lifestyle, action, and relational dimensions. Through these experiences, consumers perceive the brand as trustworthy, relevant, and consistent in meeting their expectations, particularly in the context of travel and tourism. This is validated by Khoirunnisa and Astini (2021) and Xu et al. (2022), who found that all dimensions of experiential marketing, including thinking, relating, emotional, and sensory, positively impact brand trust in integrated tourism experiences.

Third, eWOM and brand love are closely interconnected in recent international literature. eWOM serves not only as a channel of information but also as an emotional and social catalyst that fosters consumer closeness to a brand. This relationship is verified by Alshreef et al. (2023), Paruthi et al. (2023), and Istiqomah and Setyawan (2025), who found that customer value perceptions, both hedonic and utilitarian, drive the dimensions of brand love, including passion, commitment, and intimacy. Moreover, eWOM moderates this relationship; for instance, the association between hedonic value and brand love is stronger when positive eWOM is high. Rahman et al. (2021) expanded the holistic causal model of brand love by including antecedents such as personal experiences, brand satisfaction, and brand fit with the inner self. Although not all variables are

identical (e.g., eWOM), personal experiences have been verified as a direct component influencing brand love.

Fourth, experiential marketing, a strategy that focuses on creating direct and meaningful experiences for consumers, can foster brand love through mechanisms such as authenticity, emotion, and deep interaction. A cross-cultural study by Bae and Kim (2023) and Rodrigues et al. (2023) shows that when consumers have a strong brand experience, particularly one supported by perceptions of brand authenticity, they are more likely to develop love for the brand. Furthermore, brand experiences mediated by perceptions of authenticity positively influence brand love. Prakosa and Kuswati (2025) report that brand love serves as a strong mediator in the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. Thus, experiential marketing is not only about satisfying customers through functional or aesthetic attributes but also about building emotional attachment and deep perceptions that foster brand love.

Fifth, brand trust, reflecting consumer confidence in a brand's adaptability, consistency, and integrity, plays a vital role in fostering brand love, which is the deep emotional bond between consumers and brands. When consumers perceive a brand as transparent, capable of delivering on its promises, and consistent in providing quality experiences, this trust strengthens the emotional and affective foundations of the consumer-brand relationship, supporting the development of brand love. For example, Na et al. (2023), Suharsono (2024), and Li and Park (2025) describe that brand trust positively influences brand love and mediates the relationship between brand loyalty and brand experience for smartphone products.

By implementing marketing strategies through both eWOM and experiential marketing, brand trust and brand love can be fostered. Accordingly, all hypotheses are formulated and proposed as follows:

H1: eWOM has a significant positive effect on brand trust.

H2: Experiential marketing has a significant positive effect on brand trust.

H3: eWOM has a significant positive effect on brand love.

H4: Experiential marketing has a significant positive effect on brand love.

H5: Brand trust has a significant positive effect on brand love.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

In this study, the models examined are eWOM and experiential marketing as exogenous variables, while brand trust and brand love are designated as endogenous variables. In summary, endogenous variables are dependent variables explained by exogenous variables; conversely, exogenous variables

are those that explain or influence endogenous variables. As illustrated in **Figure 1**, there are two relationship paths corresponding to the five proposed hypotheses. First, the linkages between eWOM and experiential marketing to brand trust. Second, the linkages among eWOM, experiential marketing, and brand trust to brand love. Overall, the model path analyzed represents direct relationships.

Conceptually, the rationality linking these constructs is based on the following three arguments. First, in today's digital marketing landscape, experiential marketing and eWOM strategies play a synergistic role in strengthening the foundation of brand trust and fostering deep emotional bonds in the form of brand love. At the same time, experiential marketing provides consumers with direct, multisensory experiences that reinforce perceptions of brand credibility, consistency, and competence, which in turn build brand trust. Second, eWOM serves as social validation of these experiences, whereby when positive reviews from other consumers are disseminated online, they build perceptions of brand reliability and transparency, thereby strengthening brand trust, as evidenced by Willia and Thabrani (2023). Second, when brand experience consumption is perceived as meaningful and affirmed by the community through eWOM, affective attachments such as brand love are formed (Rahman et al., 2021). Third, experiential marketing creates an internal and emotional foundation, while eWOM provides an external and social framework that holistically strengthens trust in the brand and, in turn, triggers consumer love for the brand.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Variables and Operational Definitions

According to their classification, both exogenous and endogenous variables have distinct parameters. **Table 1** presents the research variables, including their definitions, indicators, references, and measurements. The four variables collectively have 17 indicators, distributed in varying proportions. Experiential marketing and brand love each have five indicators, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has three indicators, and brand trust is supported by four indicators.

3.2 Sources and Techniques of Data Collection

This study was conducted using primary data obtained from respondents through the distribution of questionnaires. The data collection employed purposive sampling to select participants who met the criteria established by the researcher, ensuring that the chosen samples could provide information aligned with the study's objectives. Data collection was facilitated through an online questionnaire (Google Forms), which was distributed to respondents via a shared link. Respondents completed the questionnaire by rating statements corresponding to the indicators of each variable and submitted their responses to the enumerator for tabulation. The questionnaire statements were measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. In this study, the Likert scale was modified to reflect the level of relevance, with the following labels: 1 = not relevant, 2 = less relevant, 3 = neutral, 4 = relevant, and 5 = very relevant.

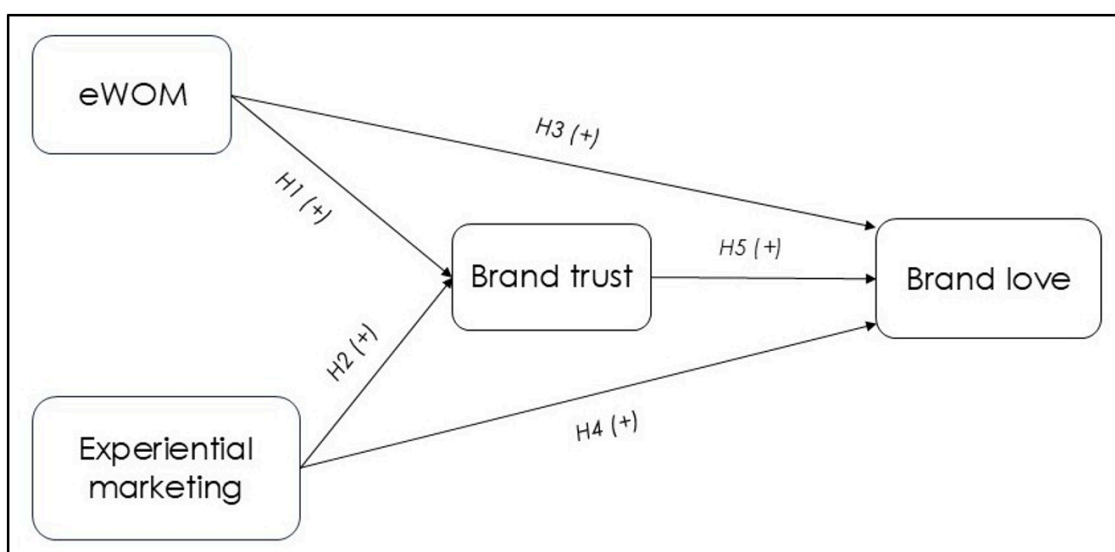


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Table 1: Details of the variables studied

Variable and definition	Indicator	Scale	Adopted from
eWOM (X1): Positive and/or negative statements made by potential, current, and former customers about a product.	X1.1: Consumer acceptance of products on social networking sites. X1.2: Positive and negative consumer responses to products. X1.3: Information content from websites about the benefits and uses of products.	Likert (1–5)	Lim et al. (2022), Mehryar et al. (2020), Ngo et al. (2024), and Zhang (2023)
Experiential marketing (X2): A marketing approach that engages customers' emotions and feelings by creating positive and memorable experiences, fostering customer satisfaction and loyalty to the product.	X2.1: Product experience through the five senses: sight, touch, smell, sound, and taste. X2.2: Influencing consumers' emotions through social media concerning product usage. X2.3: Encouraging consumers to engage with products and think creatively about them. X2.4: Creating consumer experiences and shaping perceptions of products. X2.5: Connecting consumers with the culture and social environment represented by the product brand.	Likert (1–5)	Garg et al. (2022), Urdea & Constantin (2021), and Wiedmann et al. (2021)
Brand trust (Y1): Refers to a form of consumer confidence in a brand, indicating the belief that the brand can be consistently relied upon.	Y1.1: Consumers' perception of product trustworthiness. Y1.2: Consumer confidence and perceptions of product reliability. Y1.3: Consumers' perception of a product's trustworthiness as an honest brand. Y1.4: Consumer confidence in product safety.	Likert (1–5)	Ghondaghsaz and Engesser (2022), Putra et al. (2023), Rather et al. (2022), and Tran et al. (2022)
Brand love (Y2): The feeling experienced when using a brand that evokes affection toward it.	Y2.1: The product is recognized as a well-branded item. Y2.2: Consumers' evaluation of their attachment to the product. Y2.3: Consumers' positive assessment of the product. Y2.4: Positive emotional response to the product. Y2.5: Consumers' expressions of affection for the product.	Likert (1–5)	Magano et al. (2024) and Rodrigues et al. (2015)

3.3 Sample Characteristics

In accordance with purposive sampling techniques, data samples are determined based on the characteristics of the population units to be surveyed. The rationale for purposive sampling was that the respondents had direct experience as consumers of MSME products and could therefore provide information relevant to the study objectives, particularly for analyzing consumer behavior toward MSME products in East Kalimantan. Accordingly, the population included individuals who had purchased or used local MSME products, resided in or were active within the study area, and were at least 17 years old, an age considered productive and capable of providing rational assessments of the products. In multivariate analyses, such as confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM), sample sizes follow the guidelines developed by Hair (2014), which recommend 5 to 10 times the number of indicators or a minimum sample size of 100 or greater. In this study, the minimum sample size was calculated using the rule of multiplying the number of indicators (statement items) by 5 to 10. Accordingly, the sample size applied was 170, derived from 10 × 17. The sample consisted of consumers of MSME industry products selected from seven cities/districts in East Kalimantan Province: (1) Samarinda, (2) Balikpapan, (3) Bontang, (4) Kutai Kartanegara, (5) Paser, (6) Kutai Timur, and (7) Penajam Paser Utara (PPU).

Data collection through surveys was conducted over a two-month period (August 2025–September 2025).

3.4 Research Instruments

Prior to the partial least squares (PLS) analysis stage, questionnaire data were validated through three pilot tests: (1) preliminary testing, (2) ethical approval, and (3) common method bias (CMB) assessment. Preliminary testing was performed to evaluate the clarity and validity of the questionnaire items before their use in the main study. Initially, the test was administered to 25–35 respondents whose characteristics closely matched those of the target population. Respondents were then asked to provide feedback regarding the clarity of the instructions and language, the time required to complete the questionnaire, and its overall length. The preliminary test data were investigated using corrected item-total correlation, whereby any item demonstrating a correlation coefficient below 0.3 was designated for removal or revision.

Furthermore, ethical approval ensures that this study adheres to the ethical principles governing research involving human participants. The documents include a detailed description of the data collection procedures, research information sheets, informed consent forms, and copies of the questionnaire. The ethical safeguards

implemented include voluntary participation, the ability of respondents to withdraw at any time, and the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality of respondent data. CMB was assessed to minimize errors arising from collecting all data from a single source (the same respondents) using Harman's single-factor test; if a single factor does not account for more than 50% of the variance, then CMB is considered not to be a problem. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Research Ethics Commission of the Master of Management Postgraduate Programme, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Mulawarman. The approval was granted under contract number 2731/UN17/HK.02.03/2023 on 29 August 2023.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a SEM technique called PLS to predict the causal relationships between eWOM and experiential factors on brand trust and brand love. Statistical calculations were performed using SmartPLS software. In the PLS analysis, three stages were examined. First, descriptive statistics were used to identify respondents' response trends for each variable. According to Utami et al. (2024), a descriptive statistical analysis was conducted based on average scores (indexes), which were categorized into score ranges using the three-box method calculation as follows:

- a. Upper limit of score range: $(\% \text{ frequency} \times 5) \div 5 = (100 \times 5) \div 5 = 100$
- b. Lower limit of score range: $(\% \text{ frequency} \times 1) \div 5 = (100 \times 1) \div 5 = 20$

The resulting index scores range from 20 to 100, spanning a total range of 80. Using the three-box method, this range is divided into three equal parts, each measuring approximately 26.6. These intervals serve as reference indices based on the following interpretations: (1) 20–46.6 = low, (2) 46.7–73.3 = moderate, and (3) 73.4–100 = high.

Second, the outer model navigates how each indicator block relates to its latent variable. A crucial step in the outer model is testing construct validity. One method to assess construct validity is to evaluate the strength of the correlation between the construct and its indicator items, as well as the weak relationship with other variables. Construct validity comprises convergent validity and discriminant validity (Cheung et al., 2024; Engellant et al., 2016; Mellor & Elliott, 2025). Convergent validity detects the degree of correlation between the construct and its indicators, typically assessed using the average variance extracted (AVE) with a threshold of 0.5. An AVE value greater than 0.5 indicates that the correlation between the construct and its indicators is adequate. Another component of the outer model is discriminant validity, which ensures that

different construct measures are not highly correlated. Discriminant validity is tested using reflective indicators through cross-loadings. Similar to AVE, the criterion for discriminant validity requires that each variable's cross-loading be greater than 0.5. In addition to these two methods, the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) are also used to assess discriminant validity in the evaluation of reflective measurement models in PLS. The Fornell-Larcker criterion is accepted if the square root of AVE ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$) for each construct exceeds its correlations with other constructs. For HTMT, discriminant validity is considered acceptable if the HTMT value is below 0.9. The final component of the outer model is the reliability test, which verifies the accuracy, consistency, and precision of the instrument in measuring a construct with reflective indicators. This is assessed using Cronbach's alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR). The general rule for evaluating construct reliability is that the CR value should exceed 0.6. Nevertheless, since CA tends to underestimate construct reliability by producing lower values, it is preferable to use CR as the primary measure.

Third, the inner model in PLS is a component of the structural model that illustrates causal relationships between latent variables, specifically from exogenous to endogenous variables. This is typically represented through path coefficients and determination coefficients (R^2) of the endogenous latent variables. Generally, the estimation of path coefficients and the measurement of R^2 in the inner model serve as parameters of how well the exogenous variables explain the variance in the endogenous variables (Buitrago et al., 2021). Moreover, hypothesis testing to determine acceptance or rejection relies on *t*-statistics and *p*-values to assess the partial influence of exogenous variables on endogenous variables (Surapati et al., 2025). The decision-making framework for hypothesis testing in explaining causality between variables is structured as follows:

- a. If the *t*-statistic is below 1.96 and the significance value is greater than the specified probability level ($p > 0.05$), then the hypothesis is rejected, indicating that the exogenous variable has no significant effect on the endogenous variable.
- b. If the *t*-statistic is greater than 1.96 and the significance value is less than the specified probability level ($p < 0.05$), then the hypothesis is accepted, indicating that the exogenous variable has a significant effect on the endogenous variable.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Respondent Demographics

The respondents in this study were consumers of MSME industries (culinary, processing, and handicrafts) who had prior experience with and in-depth knowledge of MSME products. The sample consisted of 170

respondents, whose demographic characteristics were identified based on gender, age range, occupational background, place of residence, and MSME product consumption patterns as reflected in their clusters.

Of the 170 respondents surveyed, 91 (54%) were male, while 79 (46%) were female. The majority of respondents were aged 26–35 years, totaling 91 individuals (54%). In addition, 44 respondents (25%) were aged above 36 years, while the remaining 35 respondents (21%) were between 17 and 25 years old. **Table 2** provides a quantitative breakdown of respondents' occupations: 54 respondents (32%) were high school or university students, 53 respondents (31%) were employed in the private sector, 27 respondents (16%) worked in the government sector, 21 others respondents (12%) were housewives (IRT) and not employed, and 15 respondents (9%) were entrepreneurs.

Table 2: Respondent demographics

Characteristic	Item	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	91	54
	Female	79	46
Age group	17–25	35	21
	26–35	91	54
	>36	44	25
Occupational background	Students	54	32
	Government employees	27	16
	Private sector employees	53	31
	Entrepreneurs	15	9
	Others	21	12
Place of residence	Samarinda	41	24
	Balikpapan	35	21
	Bontang	32	19
	Kutai Kartanegara	29	17
	Paser	16	9
	Kutai Timur	7	4
Product consumption level	PPU	10	6
	Culinary	58	34
	Processing industry	37	22
	Crafts	75	44

Based on the region of origin, 41 respondents (24%) lived in Samarinda. It is important to note that Samarinda is the capital of East Kalimantan, where most MSMEs are rapidly growing in the province's economic center. In fact, 35 respondents (21%) were from Balikpapan, and 32 respondents (19%) were from Bontang. This indicates that MSMEs are also expanding in other cities within East Kalimantan, such as Balikpapan and Bontang. Descriptively, 29 respondents (17%) reside in Kutai Kartanegara, which is geographically close to Samarinda. Therefore, it is natural that MSMEs there are growing rapidly due to the economic spillover effect from Samarinda. There are also 16 respondents (9%) from Paser, 10 respondents (6%) from Penajam Paser Utara (PPU), and 7 respondents (4%) from Kutai Timur.

Among the research focus on the MSME industry clusters, 75 respondents (44%) preferred products from handicraft MSMEs, 58 respondents (34%) purchased culinary MSME products, and the remaining 37 respondents (22%) consumed processed MSME industry products. Yellow rice from culinary MSMEs is the most popular item because it is a traditional food that reflects local wisdom. Besides, consumers generally appreciate processed MSME products such as Amplang crackers made from fish. Handicraft MSME products that are well-known and attract many consumers include Dayak batik, characterized by distinctive motifs and traditional craftsmanship inspired by Dayak carvings and natural elements that hold sacred or symbolic significance for the indigenous people of East Kalimantan.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of respondents' answers based on the questionnaire. The characteristics of respondents' perceptions, specifically consumer assessments of the statements within each variable, are calculated using index scores. First, on a scale of 1 to 5, the majority of respondents tended to select option 4 (relevant) for the eWOM variable (X1). This is reflected in the average index score of 80.8 for this variable, indicating a high level. All indicators were also classified as high; among them, indicator X1.2 had the highest index at 89.4, followed by indicator X1.1 at 79.6, and indicator X1.3 at 73.4. Second, the experiential marketing variable (X2) is supported by respondents' relevant statements on the questionnaire (scale 4). The average index score for this variable is 88.6, which also falls into the high category. Similar to the eWOM variable, all indicators within the experiential marketing variable are rated high. Among the five indicators, indicator X2.4 ranks first with an index of 94.9, followed by X2.3 at 89.4, X2.1 at 87.2, X2.5 at 87.0, and X2.2 at 84.3.

Third, the statements regarding the brand trust variable (Y1) were generally considered relevant by respondents, as most tended to choose scale 4. This aligns with all indicators and is acceptable, with the average index score being 87.4, classified as high. For comparison, indicator Y1.3 had the highest index at 91.5, followed by Y1.2 at 90.4, Y1.4 at 86.1 in third place, and finally Y1.1 with an index of 81.6. Fourth, the statements related to the brand love variable (Y2) also demonstrated strong relevance, as most respondents selected scale 4. The average index score for the brand love indicators was 87.1, also classified as high. Specifically, the index scores for each indicator were: Y2.5 at 91.7 (first place), Y2.3 at 90.0 (second place), Y2.4 at 86.9 (third place), Y2.2 at 85.4 (fourth place), and Y2.1 at 81.4 (fifth place). Overall, although all variables have high average index scores, experiential marketing ranks highest, followed by brand trust, brand love, and finally eWOM.

Table 3: Summary of descriptive statistics regarding respondents' statements

Variable	Indicator (code)	Answer scale (Likert)										Index	Category
		1		2		3		4		5			
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
eWOM	Intensity (X1.1)	2	2	8	7.8	15	14.7	43	42.5	34	33.3	79.6	High
	Valence of opinion (X1.2)	2	2	1	1	4	3.9	35	34.3	60	58.8	89.4	High
	Content (X1.3)	2	2	8	7.8	30	29.4	44	43.3	18	17.6	73.4	High
	Average					8	7.8	43	42.2	49	48	87.2	High
Experiential marketing	Sense (X2.1)	0	0	2	2	16	15.7	45	44.1	40	39.2	84.3	High
	Feel (X2.2)	1	1	2	2	4	3.9	36	35.3	59	57.8	89.4	High
	Act (X2.4)	0	0	0	0	3	2.9	20	19.6	79	77.5	94.9	High
	Relate (X2.5)	0	0	1	1	12	11.7	39	38.2	50	49	87.0	High
	Average					20	19.6	47	46.1	33	32.4	81.6	High
Brand trust	Trustworthiness (Y1.1)	1	1	1	1	7	6.9	13	12.7	76	74.5	90.4	High
	Reliable (Y1.2)	4	3.9	2	2	3	2.9	34	33.3	64	62.7	91.5	High
	Honesty (Y1.3)	0	0	1	1	5	4.9	61	59.8	36	35.3	86.1	High
	Safety (Y1.4)	0	0	0	0	5	4.9	61	59.8	36	35.3	86.1	High
Average					23	22.5	46	45.1	32	31.4	81.4	High	
Brand love	The appeal of a product (Y2.1)	0	0	1	1	16	15.7	37	36.3	47	46.1	85.4	High
	Interest in the product (Y2.2)	1	1	0	0	3	2.9	41	40.2	57	55.9	90.0	High
	Positive evaluation of the product (Y2.3)	0	0	0	0	11	10.8	45	44.1	46	45.1	86.9	High
	Positive feelings toward the product (Y2.4)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	32	31.4	66	64.7	92	High
	Love for the product (Y2.5)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	32	31.4	66	64.7	92	High
Average					23	22.5	46	45.1	32	31.4	81.4	High	
Average					87.4	High							

4.3 Preliminary Testing and CMB

First, corrected item-total correlation was used to assess the validity of the items in the questionnaire. This preliminary test detects the extent to which each item consistently contributes to the overall construct being measured. Basically, items with corrected item-total correlation values meeting the threshold (r -table = 0.3) are considered valid and retained, whereas items falling below this threshold are excluded. Based on **Table 4**, four variables comprising a total of 17 indicator items have r -values above 0.3. In other words, all indicator items align well with the overall job satisfaction construct. The eWOM constructs, which consist of three indicators, showed r -values between 0.376 and 0.521. Experiential marketing, comprising five indicators, produced r -values ranging from 0.394 to 0.694. The four indicators of brand trust generated r -values between 0.314 and 0.502. Meanwhile, brand love, with five indicators, demonstrated r -values ranging from 0.372 to 0.587.

Table 4: Summary of preliminary test results and CMB

Indicator	r-value	Total variance explained		
		Eigenvalue	Percentage of variance (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
X1.1	0.521	6.12	36.00	36.00
X1.2	0.393	2.15	12.65	48.65
X1.3	0.376	1.45	8.53	57.18
X2.1	0.694	1.12	6.58	63.76
X2.2	0.439	0.89	5.23	68.99
X2.3	0.394	0.77	4.55	73.54
X2.4	0.478	0.69	4.05	73.54
X2.5	0.415	0.59	3.48	81.07
Y1.1	0.502	0.52	3.08	84.15
Y1.2	0.342	0.48	2.82	86.97
Y1.3	0.488	0.42	2.47	89.44
Y1.4	0.314	0.36	2.13	91.57
Y2.1	0.587	0.33	1.94	93.51
Y2.2	0.463	0.30	1.77	95.28
Y2.3	0.393	0.27	1.75	97.03
Y2.4	0.372	0.24	1.59	98.62
Y2.5	0.557	0.20	1.38	100.00

Second, the common method bias (CMB) test employed Harman's Single-Factor by conducting an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on all questionnaire items without rotation to determine whether a single factor accounted for the majority of the variance. The CMB test results, examining the influence of eWOM and experiential factors on brand trust and brand love, indicate that one factor explains 36% of the total variance across 24 indicators. Since this value is below the 50% threshold, it can be concluded that the questionnaire data is relatively free from CMB, with no significant indication of CMB.

4.4 Evaluation of Measurement Models

The outer model, also known as the measurement model, assesses the reliability and validity of the model under study. It illustrates how each indicator relates to its corresponding latent variable. To evaluate the validity of a construct, tests for convergent validity, discriminant validity, and AVE are conducted, while construct reliability is assessed using composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha (CA) tests. First, the results for convergent validity are presented in **Table 5**. It can be concluded that most indicators within each variable have factor loadings exceeding 0.5, classifying them as valid. Data processed with SmartPLS shows that the outer loadings for each variable range from 0.65 to 0.915. This indicates that all indicators used as construct measures demonstrate convergent validity. The factor loading results of the initial model, as shown in **Figure 2**, prove that no indicators were removed from the structural model, as all met the criteria for convergent

validity. Empirically, all indicators across both variables satisfied the minimum AVE requirement (> 0.5).

Table 5: Outer loadings results

Indicator	eWOM	Experiential marketing	Brand trust	Brand love
X1.1	0.915			
X1.2	0.758			
X1.3	0.732			
X2.1		0.738		
X2.2		0.755		
X2.3		0.668		
X2.4		0.663		
X2.5		0.807		
Y1.1			0.762	
Y1.2			0.650	
Y1.3			0.675	
Y1.4			0.707	
Y2.1				0.748
Y2.2				0.658
Y2.3				0.777
Y2.4				0.689
Y2.5				0.697

Second, the discriminant validity test is based on cross-loading. An indicator is considered to demonstrate discriminant validity if its cross-loading value on the intended variable is higher than its loadings on other variables. In addition to convergent validity, construct validity is also assessed using the AVE. The ideal AVE value should exceed the threshold of 0.5. **Table 6** summarizes the cross-loading results for each indicator of the latent variables, showing that the loading factor values are higher on their respective latent variables than on others.

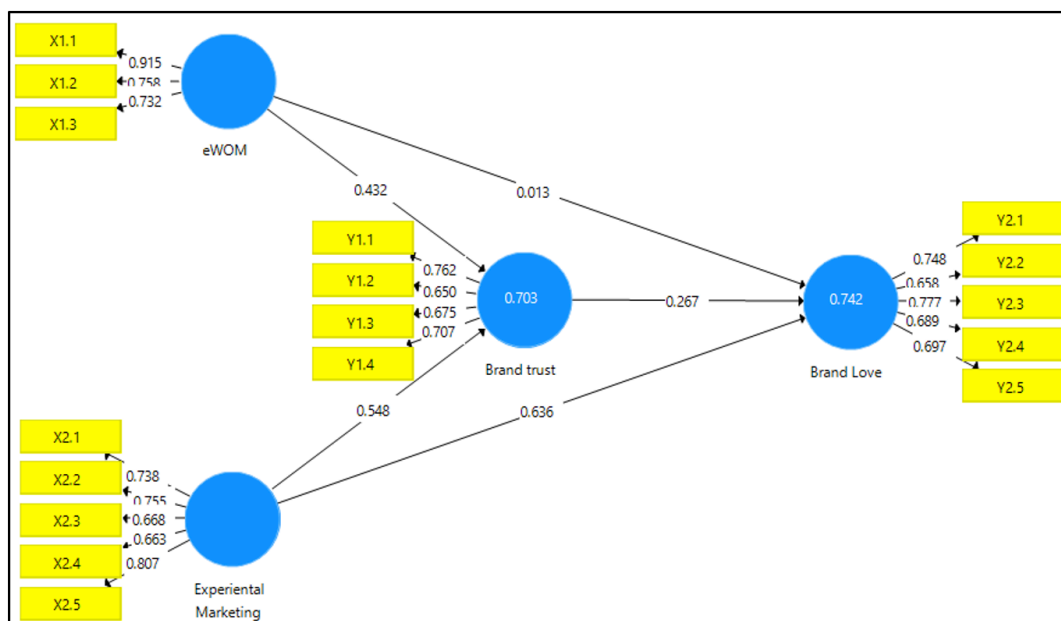


Figure 2: Structural model

These findings indicate that each latent variable exhibits good discriminant validity, although some latent variables have measures that are highly correlated with other constructs. Some cross-loading values on the indicators appear unusual because they are relatively high for certain constructs. For example, the X2.5 indicator has a loading of 0.807 on the brand love construct, which is relatively high and may suggest conceptual overlap between consumers' experiences of connectedness and their affection for the brand itself. This value is reasonable, as the indicator can naturally evoke emotional closeness, meaning that some of its variance is explained by the brand love construct. However, as long as the primary loading remains higher on the original construct, this finding can be interpreted as a mutually reinforcing conceptual relationship rather than a critical validity issue. The AVE values for all constructs exceed the required threshold of 0.5, confirming their validity. Therefore, all constructs demonstrate adequate convergent validity (see **Table 7**).

Table 6: Cross-loadings results

Indicator	eWOM	Experiential marketing	Brand trust	Brand love
X1.1	0.915	0.374	0.346	0.379
X1.2	0.758	0.372	0.314	0.370
X1.3	0.732	0.292	0.244	0.256
X2.1	0.305	0.738	0.626	0.544
X2.2	0.293	0.755	0.631	0.559
X2.3	0.416	0.688	0.581	0.661
X2.4	0.271	0.663	0.462	0.453
X2.5	0.361	0.807	0.661	0.807
Y1.1	0.247	0.649	0.762	0.678
Y1.2	0.406	0.792	0.650	0.766
Y1.3	0.360	0.535	0.675	0.538
Y1.4	0.279	0.650	0.707	0.630
Y2.1	0.357	0.749	0.688	0.748
Y2.2	0.282	0.443	0.438	0.658
Y2.3	0.425	0.793	0.699	0.777
Y2.4	0.317	0.685	0.697	0.689
Y2.5	0.348	0.580	0.616	0.697

Table 7: AVE value of each variable

Variable	AVE	AVE (minimum)	Interpretation
eWOM	0.649	≥ 0.5	Fulfilling assumptions
Experiential marketing	0.530	≥ 0.5	Fulfilling assumptions
Brand trust	0.675	≥ 0.5	Fulfilling assumptions
Brand love	0.511	≥ 0.5	Fulfilling assumptions

In evaluating the reflective measurement model, the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) test were used to obtain initial indications of discriminant validity. Despite that, these results are preliminary and must be retested on the main research sample, as small sample sizes can affect the reliability of the estimates. The Fornell-Larcker criterion assesses whether a construct shares more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs. Specifically, the

$\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ should be greater than the correlations between constructs (Hair & Alamer, 2022). In contrast, the HTMT ratio is a more sensitive measure for assessing discriminant validity. According to Henseler et al. (2015), HTMT values below 0.9 are considered acceptable as a minimum threshold.

The bold diagonal values in **Table 8** represent the $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ for each construct, while the off-diagonal values indicate inter-construct correlations. The results of the Fornell-Larcker test show that each construct's diagonal $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ value is greater than its correlations with other constructs in the same row or column. Referring to **Table 8**, the $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ value for brand love is 0.715, which exceeds the correlation between brand love and brand trust (0.705). A similar pattern is observed for the eWOM construct, which has an $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ of 0.748, in which this value is higher than its correlation with experiential marketing (0.728). In other words, the $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ for eWOM is greater than its correlations with other constructs.

Table 8: Results of the Fornell-Larcker criteria

Variable	Brand love	Brand trust	eWOM	Experiential marketing
Brand love	0.715			
Brand trust	0.726	0.705		
eWOM	0.548	0.412	0.748	
Experiential marketing	0.841	0.722	0.504	0.728

Figure 3 presents the HTMT ratios between latent constructs. Based on the HTMT test results above, half of the ratio values between constructs fall below the threshold of 0.9, indicating that discriminant validity is fulfilled. The highest HTMT value is between the eWOM and brand love constructs (0.806), which remains within the acceptable limit (< 0.90). This quantitative evidence suggests that although these two constructs are closely related, they can still be conceptually distinguished. On the other hand, the HTMT values between experiential marketing and eWOM (0.715) and between eWOM and brand trust (0.625) are well below the maximum threshold, indicating that each construct is distinct and conceptually independent. Only half of the measurement models in this study meet the discriminant validity requirements based on the HTMT criteria. Conversely, the other half of the constructs have HTMT values exceeding the threshold. Statistically, the value between experiential marketing and brand love is 1.066, the highest among the constructs, followed by experiential marketing and brand trust (0.956) and brand trust and brand love (0.953).

Third, CR and CA values are used to assess the reliability between the indicators of the constructs they represent (see **Table 9**). Both are considered good if their values exceed 0.6 (recommended), although factor values as low as 0.5 are still acceptable. Ideally, high CR and CA

values indicate that reliability has been maximized. In this study, a threshold of 0.6 was used as the standard. **Table 9** shows that the CR and CA values for all variables meet the required criteria (> 0.6), indicating that the variables of eWOM, experiential marketing, brand trust, and brand love exhibit a high level of reliability.

Table 9: Reliability test results

Variable	CR	CA	Interpretation
eWOM	0.733	0.819	Fulfilling assumptions
Experiential marketing	0.777	0.788	Fulfilling assumptions
Brand trust	0.663	0.672	Fulfilling assumptions
Brand love	0.761	0.771	Fulfilling assumptions

4.5 Evaluation of Inner Models

Two key points are essential when evaluating the inner model in PLS. First, model feasibility testing begins by examining the R-squared (R^2) values for each dependent latent variable. **Table 10** presents the R^2 estimation results. In this study, two exogenous variables, namely eWOM and experiential marketing, are analyzed for their influence on two endogenous variables: brand trust and brand love.

Table 10: Determination test results

Variable	R^2	Residual	Interpretation
Brand trust	0.703	0.297	Strong model
Brand love	0.742	0.258	Strong model

The R^2 value for the brand trust formation model is 70.3%, indicating that the variance in brand trust is explained by

eWOM and experiential marketing, while the remaining 29.7% represents residual factors outside the model. In the brand love formation model, the R^2 value is 74.2%, meaning that the variance in brand love is explained by eWOM, experiential marketing, and brand trust, with 25.8% attributed to residual factors not included in the model. Both Model 1 (brand trust) and Model 2 (brand love) demonstrate strong structural variance. Based on the calculation formula below, the predictive relevance (Q^2) is 0.923. Statistically, this indicates that the model is robust, as the Q^2 value is greater than zero.

Secondly, to investigate causality in the structural model under study, one can examine the t-statistic values and significance levels between exogenous and endogenous variables, as reported in the SmartPLS output. For the record, the arrow indicates a partial relationship or a direct effect between the variables being tested. As indicated by the arrows, the relationships tested include the direct effects of e-WOM and experiential marketing on brand trust (H1 and H2), the effects of e-WOM and experiential marketing on brand love (H3 and H4), and finally, the effect of brand trust on brand love (H5). **Table 11** shows that eWOM has a positive and significant impact on brand trust, with a t-statistic of 6.107 (>1.96) and a p-value of 0.000 (<0.05). Additionally, the relationship between experiential marketing and brand trust is significantly positive, with a t-statistic of 8.242 (>1.96) and a p-value of 0.000 (<0.05). Conversely, eWOM has a positive but insignificant impact on brand love, as indicated by a t-statistic of 0.220 (<1.96) and a p-value of 0.826 (>0.05).

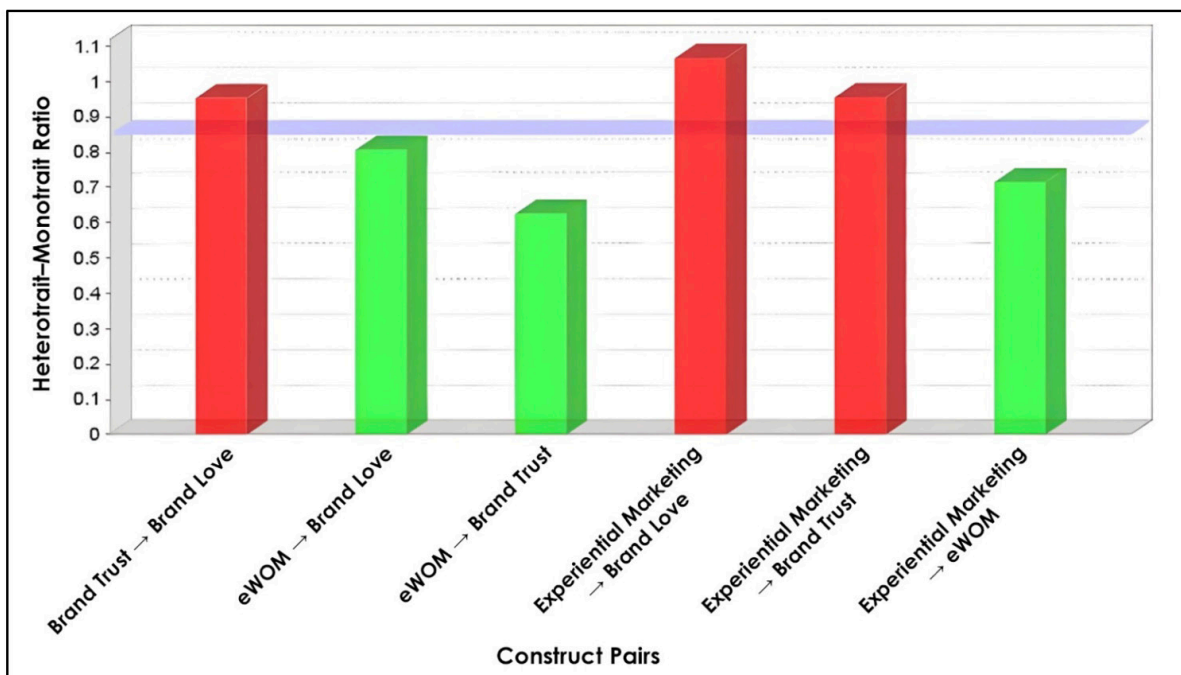


Figure 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio

Table 11: Details of hypothesis testing results

Relationship	t-statistics	p-values	Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
eWOM → Brand trust	6.107	0.000	0.432	0.440	0.071	H1: accepted
Experiential marketing → Brand trust	8.242	0.000	0.548	0.545	0.066	H2: accepted
eWOM → Brand love	0.220	0.826	0.013	0.008	0.059	H3: rejected
Experiential marketing → Brand love	9.811	0.000	0.636	0.635	0.065	H4: accepted
Brand trust → Brand love	3.149	0.002	0.267	0.272	0.085	H5: accepted

Note: The arrow (→) indicates a positive relationship.

Table 11 also validates that both experiential marketing and brand trust have a significant positive influence on brand love. The hypothesis test results for the effect of experiential marketing on brand love show a *t*-statistic of 9.811 (>1.96) and a *p*-value of 0.000 (<0.05). The final test indicates that the influence of brand trust on brand love is supported, with a *t*-statistic of 3.149 (>1.96) and a *p*-value of 0.002 (<0.05). Among these five paths, the direct relationship between experiential marketing and brand love is the strongest.

5. DISCUSSION

In this section, the main findings are presented and justified by previous research. First, empirical testing revealed that the presence of eWOM significantly increases brand trust (H1 accepted). eWOM promoted by MSME players in the IKN region has been shown to influence trust in product brands. The use of social media as a communication network and a source of information about MSME products can foster consumer brand trust. To date, aspects such as intensity, valence of opinion, and content have been key considerations for consumers when trusting MSME product brands. Unlike conventional promotional methods (e.g., WOM), consumers tend to regard online promotions as more trustworthy. This makes the combination of both approaches, namely eWOM, an important tool to reduce uncertainty surrounding product-related news, information, and advertising. For comparison, Indrawan et al. (2024) found that eWOM influences brand trust, which in turn positively mediates the relationship between product quality and purchasing decisions. Prihatna et al. (2024) also revealed that the quality of information from eWOM is a crucial mediating factor that enhances the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements and social media marketing activities in building brand trust among Generation Z.

Secondly, empirical testing discovered that the presence of experiential marketing can significantly increase brand trust (H2 accepted). These results suggest that if consumers have the experience they expect when using MSME products, they will develop trust in MSME products in the IKN. Sense, feel, think, act, and relate are vital components that foster consumer trust in a brand. Several cross-country studies have demonstrated that experiential marketing positively

and significantly enhances brand trust, which in turn strengthens behavioral intent and brand loyalty. Xu et al. (2022) found that the stronger the sensory, social, intellectual, and emotional experiences provided by a resort, the higher the level of brand trust in Korea. In Indonesia, positive customer experiences with brand experience have been closely linked to maintaining brand trust (Azzam & Widjayanti, 2024). Furthermore, empirical evidence on e-commerce users in Vietnam supports the notion that experiential elements, such as intellectual and behavioral experiences, collectively strengthen brand trust, which ultimately influences brand association and loyalty (Sang & Cuong, 2025).

Third, the results show that the role of eWOM can increase brand love; however, its influence is not strong enough to reach statistical significance (H3 rejected). Debate over eWOM's insignificant influence often points to the ineffective use of social media platforms in promoting products, thereby diminishing its potential to elicit brand love among consumers. For example, Alshreef et al. (2023) found that eWOM moderates the effects of utilitarian and hedonic value on subdimensions of brand love, with generally significant positive effects. Other discussion indicates that brand love has a significant positive influence on eWOM, and conversely, eWOM also significantly positively influences variables such as brand love (Liu & Yan, 2022; Permata & Kusumawati, 2024). Theoretically, the negligible impact of eWOM on brand love may stem from the limited emotional resonance of online reviews for MSMEs. Although users provide online reviews or recommendations for MSME products, these reviews may be insufficient to evoke strong emotional responses such as attachment, positive assessment, emotional engagement, and expressions of love, which are core indicators of brand love.

For MSMEs with limited capacity to generate content rich in brand experience, eWOM may appear ordinary, resulting merely in the passive transfer of information rather than fostering a brand experience that cultivates commitment, passion, and intimacy in consumers, which are essential components of brand love (Alshreef et al., 2023). Relational marketing and consumer-brand attachment frameworks suggest that eWOM primarily functions as informational communication between consumers, influencing brand perceptions such as perceived risk, information quality, and credibility. In

contrast, brand love is more affective and emotional in nature, encompassing commitment, desire, and attachment, which require brand identification, deep brand experience, and long-term emotional interaction (Alshreef et al., 2023; Habib et al., 2021). Consistent with existing phenomena, this indicates that important mediators or moderators, such as brand identification, brand experience, brand trust, and consumer involvement, may weaken or disrupt the direct link between eWOM and brand love in this case.

Fourth, empirical investigation has confirmed that experiential marketing significantly increases brand love (H4 accepted). Essentially, when consumers have an experience that meets their expectations, it fosters affection for MSME products. The findings of this study align with several cross-country studies that underscore the positive impact of brand experience or experiential marketing on brand love. For instance, in China, Na et al. (2023) report that brand experience significantly influences trust, brand loyalty, and brand love. Similarly, Sohaib et al. (2023) find that brand experience cultivates brand love, which ultimately creates brand equity. In Korea, Kim et al. (2021) conclude that experiential value has a positive and significant effect on brand love for coffee shops. In other countries, such as Indonesia, Hakim and Apriyana (2024) and Prastiwi et al. (2025) emphasize that brand experience, supported by behavioral, intellectual, and sensory aspects, has a direct, positive, and significant impact on brand love among consumers.

Fifth, the ultimate empirical result showed that brand trust significantly increases brand love (H5 accepted). Through trust, reliability, honesty, and a sense of security, consumer love for MSME product brands grows. Similarly, brand trust significantly influences brand love among students in China (Na et al., 2023). This phenomenon is also observed in Northern India, where brand trust has a positive and significant effect on brand love as part of the mediation chain in that relationship (David & Ali, 2025). Moreover, in the Indonesian context, Siahaan et al. (2023) found that brand trust significantly influences brand love through a positive pathway. Both eWOM and experiential marketing substantially influence brand trust, reinforcing the literature that identifies brand trust as a foundational element in the influence pathway of digital marketing and consumer experience (Ramadhina & Mangruwa, 2023). Experiential marketing has a significant effect on brand love, whereas eWOM does not, suggesting that the cognitive-emotional pathway, enabled by deep experiences and direct interactions, is more effective in forming emotional bonds with brands than consumer-to-consumer information exchange (Madeline & Sihombing, 2019). In line with this, brand trust significantly influences brand love, reinforcing the understanding that trust is a cognitive prerequisite for affective attachment to a brand (Kalyoncuoğlu, 2017).

Regarding eWOM theory, these results suggest that while eWOM may be more effective at building trust initially, it does not automatically lead to brand love unless supported by experiential elements that generate emotional attachment. For the digitalization of MSMEs, relying solely on an online marketing strategy focused on eWOM is insufficient to foster brand love.

6. CONCLUSION

This study was designed to analyze brand trust and brand love, as well as the factors that influence them, namely, eWOM and experiential marketing, using a case study of MSME products in the IKN region. Employing the PLS method, this study's findings enrich the conclusions by elucidating the relationships among digital marketing variables (e.g., eWOM), experiential marketing, brand trust, and their collective impact on brand love amid the challenges faced by MSMEs in the digital era.

Based on research findings indicating that eWOM and experiential marketing significantly impact brand trust, MSME owners in the industry should actively encourage consumers to share their positive experiences online and develop strong, interactive, and emotionally engaging brand experiences. Both strategies have been shown to build consumer trust in the brand. Although eWOM also exhibits a positive relationship with brand love, its influence is not statistically significant; therefore, eWOM-based strategies should not be the sole approach to fostering consumer affection for the brand. Instead, subsequent efforts should focus on enhancing the quality of experiential marketing and strengthening brand trust, as both have been demonstrated to reinforce brand love. Consequently, MSME management must design brand experiences that engage emotional aspects consistently while maintaining brand credibility and integrity to cultivate lasting emotional connections between the brand and consumers. They should strengthen sensory branding across touchpoints instead of relying only on the immediate impact of online reviews.

The theoretical implications of this study enrich the understanding of marketing literature by confirming that eWOM and experiential marketing are important determinants in shaping brand trust, which has previously focused primarily on rational aspects or product quality alone. Overall, this study expands the model of inter-construct relationships in consumer behavior research by positioning brand trust as a key element that bridges digital experiences and perceptions with consumers' emotional connection to the brand. Nonetheless, this study has limitations that should be acknowledged. Critically, the first shortcoming is the variable model, which does not yet incorporate other potentially relevant variables that should be included and discussed. For future research,

it is recommended to dissect additional variables within the brand trust and brand love models beyond eWOM and experiential marketing. The second limitation pertains to the cross-sectional survey design and the use of relatively simple measurement instruments, as the data were collected from only one region and similar case studies. The research scope could be extended beyond MSMEs within industry clusters, incorporating larger sample sizes. The third limitation pertains to the generalizability of the results. It is advisable that case studies extend beyond regional boundaries to include cross-country analyses, thereby yielding more diverse results and insights.

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