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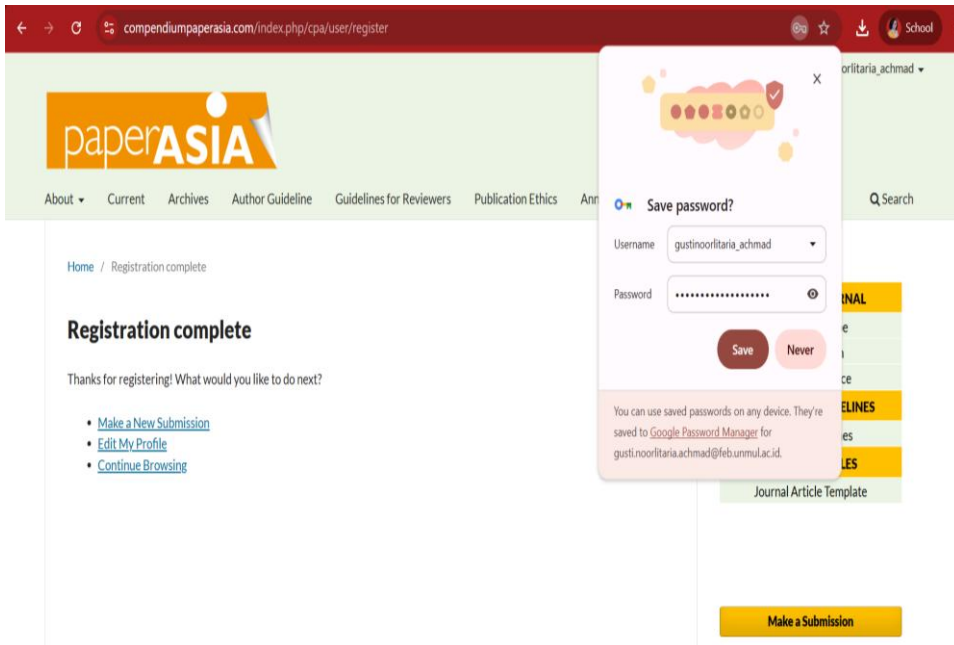
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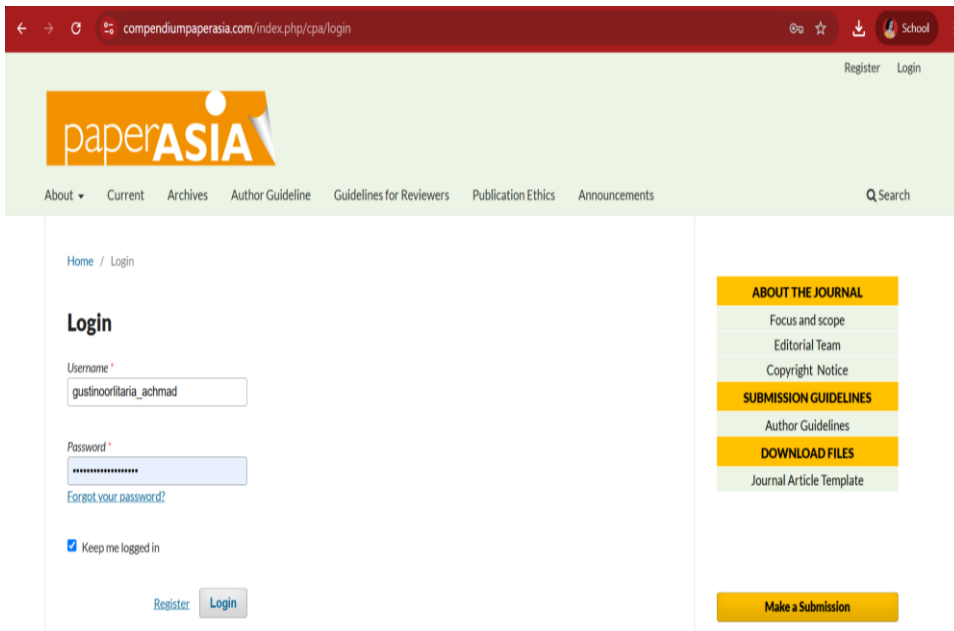
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Alur	Perihal/deskripsi	Timeline
Alur 1	Registrasi dan pengajuan manuskrip	14 Oktober 2025
Alur 2	<i>Screening awal</i>	15–24 Oktober 2025
Alur 3	Arahan kiriman ulang untuk ditinjau dan balasan penulis	25–26 Oktober 2025
Alur 4	Tindak lanjut perbaikan editorial	3 November 2025
Alur 5	Komentar lanjutan (revisi tahap pertama)	10 November 2025
Alur 6	Tindak lanjut perbaikan tahap pertama	12 November 2025
Alur 7	Komentar lanjutan (revisi tahap kedua)	24 November 2025
Alur 8	Tindak lanjut perbaikan tahap kedua	25 November 2025
Alur 9	Komentar lanjutan (revisi tahap ketiga)	26 November 2025
Alur 10	Tindak lanjut perbaikan tahap ketiga	30 November 2025
Alur 11	Komentar lanjutan (revisi tahap keempat)	9 Desember 2025
Alur 12	Tindak lanjut perbaikan tahap keempat	14 Desember 2025
Alur 13	Komentar lanjutan (revisi tahap kelima)	18 Desember 2025
Alur 14	Tindak lanjut perbaikan tahap kelima	26 Desember 2025
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Alur 16	Balasan penulis	4 Februari 2026
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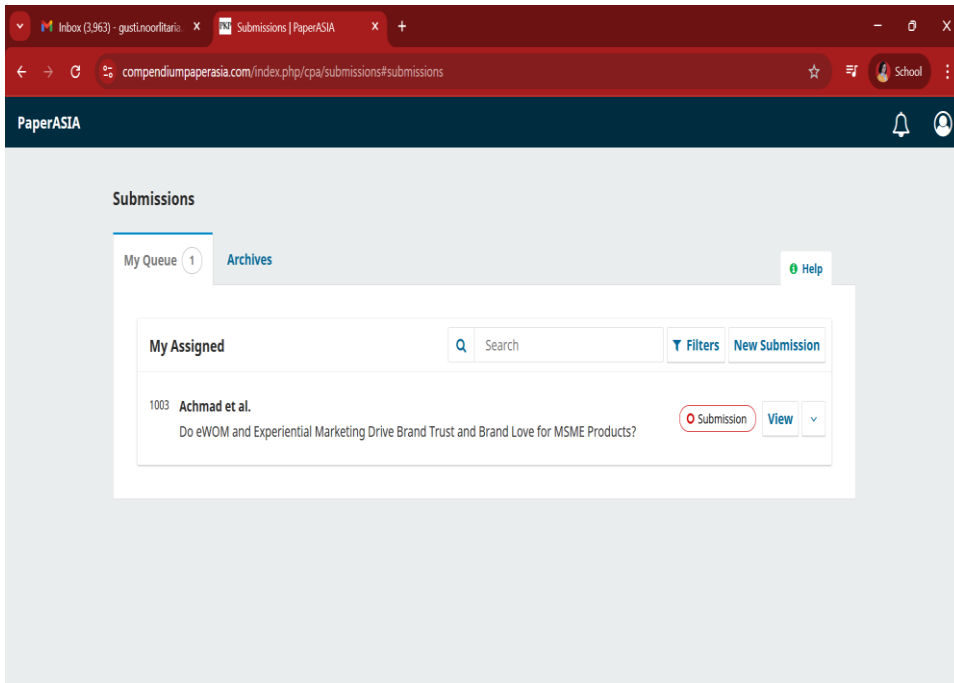
Alur 1- Registrasi dan pengajuan manuskrip: 14 Oktober 2025



The screenshot shows the registration page on [compendiumpaperasia.com](http://compendiumpaperasia.com/index.php/cpa/user/register). The page title is "Registration complete". A "Save password?" dialog box is open, showing the username "gustinoorlitaria_achmad" and a masked password. The dialog has "Save" and "Never" buttons. Below the dialog, there are links for "Make a New Submission", "Edit My Profile", and "Continue Browsing". A "Make a Submission" button is visible at the bottom right.



The screenshot shows the login page on [compendiumpaperasia.com](http://compendiumpaperasia.com/index.php/cpa/login). The page title is "Login". There are input fields for "Username" (containing "gustinoorlitaria_achmad") and "Password". A "Keep me logged in" checkbox is checked. There are "Register" and "Login" buttons. On the right side, there are navigation links: "ABOUT THE JOURNAL" (Focus and scope, Editorial Team, Copyright Notice), "SUBMISSION GUIDELINES" (Author Guidelines), "DOWNLOAD FILES" (Journal Article Template), and a "Make a Submission" button at the bottom.



1) Manukrip versi kiriman awal

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. Based on this premise, 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 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 Partial Least Squares (PLS) with SmartPLS software. The empirical findings confirm three main points: (1) eWOM and experiential marketing have a significant positive influence on brand trust; (2) eWOM has a positive but insignificant influence on brand love; and (3) both experiential marketing and brand trust 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 Capital City of Nusantara (IKN) will not only physically shift the administrative hub but also transform the city into a smart city (Juncaldi et al., 2025; Kuleh 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 like 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 enhancing human resources to develop capable, high-quality, and competitive enterprises (Althalets et al., 2025).

MSME entrepreneurs should continue to develop their competencies to produce high-quality, 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 advance to a higher level. These MSMEs are receiving assistance with 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.

The Department of Industry, Trade, Cooperatives, and SMEs of East Kalimantan Province (2023) reported that the total number of MSMEs in East Kalimantan Province reached 460,147 units in 2022. Among the districts and cities in East Kalimantan, Samarinda had the largest number of MSMEs, contributing 130,524 units, followed by Balikpapan with 127,675 units, and Mahakam Ulu with the fewest MSMEs at 586 units. The data also indicate that, of the 460,147 MSMEs categorized by three business sectors—industry, trade, and services—the industrial sector accounted for the largest share with 226,281 units (49.17%), followed by the trade sector with 195,704 units (42.53%), and the service sector with 38,162 units (8.29%). Specifically, MSMEs within the industrial sector are classified into three clusters: culinary MSMEs, processing industry MSMEs, and craft MSMEs. Among these, culinary MSMEs are the most dominant, comprising 215,026 units (95.02%) of industrial MSMEs, while processing industry MSMEs account for 8,157 units (3.61%) and craft MSMEs for 3,098 units (1.37%).

One effective way to increase consumer confidence is to implement a product marketing strategy utilizing eWOM. Lim et al. (2022) and Mehryar et al. (2020) define eWOM as positive and/or negative statements made by potential customers. 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).

By implementing marketing strategies through both eWOM and experiential marketing, brand trust and brand love can be fostered. Brand trust is defined as the confidence consumers feel when using a brand, based on the perception that the brand is reliable and genuinely cares about their interests and welfare (Monfort et al., 2025). Meanwhile, 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; Aro & Tähtinen, 2025; Pourazad et al., 2024). Sudaryanto et al. (2025) emphasize that eWOM is positively correlated with brand trust. However, this finding contrasts with the papers by Le et al. (2024) and Ngo et al. (2024), which report that while eWOM positively impacts brand trust, experiential marketing has a negative effect.

Subsequently, the relevance among eWOM, experiential marketing, and brand trust in relation to brand love have been explored in several manuscripts. For example, 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 or experiential marketing), personal experiences have been verified as a direct component influencing brand love. In the context of smartphones in Korea, brand trust moderates the relationship between brand experience and brand love, enhancing the mediating effect of brand love on the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty (Bae & Kim, 2023). At the Starbucks level, Li and Park (2025) found that brand satisfaction and brand trust positively interact with brand love and brand loyalty. Also, brand love positively encourages word-of-mouth (WOM). In an online shopping case study in India, brand love and brand trust were shown to increase repurchase intention and loyalty performance (David & Ali, 2025). Finally, Maduretno and Junaedi (2022) identified that brand experience enhances both brand love and brand trust in coffee shops in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, as its effects also extend to consumer loyalty.

A study 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. This is supported by Erkan and Evans (2016), who argue that eWOM generates consumer trust by providing information perceived as more credible and authentic than traditional advertising. Moreover, experiential marketing fosters emotional experiences that enhance attachment and love for the brand (Schmitt, 1999; Brakus et al., 2009). For MSMEs in emerging areas such as IKN—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 MSMEs 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)

Electronic word-of-mouth (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 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 influential aspects in purchasing decisions (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Besides, in many instances, the impact of eWOM on consumer choices is considered comparable to or even surpasses that of direct word-of-mouth (Reichelt et al., 2014; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Consequently, eWOM is a critical factor of 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. What's more, concerns about not reading reviews prior to buying, as well as increased confidence after 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 Ngo et al. (2024) and

Zhang (2023), 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—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, 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. Finally, 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 (Garg et al., 2022; Wiedmann et al., 2021).

2.1.3 Brand Trust

Brand trust refers to consumers' belief that a brand is reliable, capable of fulfilling its promised values, and attentive to the interests and safety of its consumers. 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. These elements are crucial because consumers tend to trust brands with a positive and reliable track record (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). Second, company characteristics encompass reputation, integrity, and consumer perceptions of the company's motives. Consumers are more likely to trust companies perceived as honest, ethical, and prioritizing their interests (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. Then, trust in a brand is shaped by elements such as reliability, honesty, trustworthiness, and the sense of security the brand provides to its consumers (Ghondagsaz & Engesser, 2022; Putra et al., 2023; Rather et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022). 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 is a concept derived from interpersonal love theory, applied to the relationship between consumers and brands. Love for a brand develops through consumers' positive experiences with a product, resulting in deep emotional and affective judgments toward that 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) strong affective 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; Bıçakcıoğlu et al., 2023).

2.2 The Basis for Hypothesis Formation

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 that brand (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Meanwhile, trust arising 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. A study by Erkan and Evans (2016) finds that eWOM significantly influences purchase intention through the mediation of brand trust, especially in digital contexts and on social media platforms, where user interactions create a social effect that enhances brand credibility. Accordingly, Hypothesis one is formulated as follows:

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

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 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. Specifically, research on local fashion products in Indonesia highlights that experiential marketing enhances consumer trust in the brand, which in turn mediates repurchase intention (Khoirunnisa & Astini, 2021). Hypothesis two is stated as follows:

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

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 confirmed by Alshreef et al. (2023), 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. Additionally, Paruthi et al. (2023) demonstrate that consumer community identification and brand relationship quality enhance online consumer engagement, which subsequently triggers brand love. In turn, brand love encourages positive eWOM. For example, research on the Indonesian halal skincare market indicates that eWOM significantly influences brand attitude and brand love, which then drive consumer purchase intention (Istiqomah & Setyawan, 2025). Based on these findings, the following three hypotheses were developed:

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

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 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 that brand. Furthermore, brand experiences mediated by perceptions of authenticity positively influence brand love. In the case of Le Minerale products, Prakosa and Kuswati (2025) report that brand love serves as a strong mediator in the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. Simultaneously, brand love can also drive strong experiences that help maintain loyalty. In Korea, positive brand experiences directly shape brand love, which subsequently strengthens brand loyalty toward smartphone products (Bae & Kim, 2023). 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. The fourth hypothesis is described below:

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

Brand trust—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 believe that a brand is transparent, delivers on its promises, and consistently promotes quality experiences, that trust strengthens the emotional and affective factors at the core of the consumer-brand relationship, which underpins brand love. For example, Na et al. (2023) describe that brand trust positively influences brand love and mediates the relationship between brand loyalty and brand experience for smartphone products in China. Similarly, in Korea, brand trust moderates the effect of brand experience on brand love, with brand love subsequently mediating the impact of brand experience on loyalty (Bae & Kim, 2023). In Indonesia, brand trust significantly influences brand love; however, its effects on other variables such as WOM or commitment may not

be consistent among Wardah Cosmetics consumers (Suharsono, 2024). Based on this empirical evidence, the following five hypotheses are proposed:

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. Broadly speaking, the model path analyzed represents direct relationships.

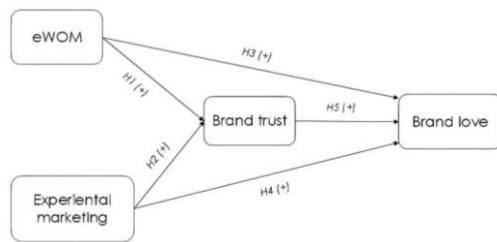


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

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 5 indicators, eWOM has 3 indicators, and brand trust is supported by 4 indicators.

Table 1: Details of the variables studied

Variables and definitions	Indicators	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), Mehyar 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 dan 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)	Ghondagsaz dan 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.	Likert (1–5)	Magano et al. (2024) dan Rodrigues et al. (2015)

3.2 Sources and Techniques of Data Collection

This study was conducted using primary data obtained directly from the original source through the distribution of questionnaires to respondents. 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 by an online questionnaire (Google Forms), which was distributed to respondents via a link. Respondents completed the questionnaire based on statements corresponding to the indicators for 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.

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. 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 by multiplying 5 to 10 times the number of indicators (statement items) in the questionnaire. Based on this instrument, the optimal and ideal sample size 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 two months (August 2025–September 2025).

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a SEM technique called partial least squares (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) conducted a descriptive statistical analysis based on average scores (indexes), which were grouped into score ranges using the three-box method calculation:

- Upper limit of score range: $(\% \text{ frequency} \times 5) \div 5 = (100 \times 5) \div 5 = 100$
- 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., 2019; 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. 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. However, 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 (Oktawiranti et al., 2025; Surapati et al., 2025). The decision-making framework for hypothesis testing in explaining causality between variables is structured as follows:

- 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.
- 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 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.

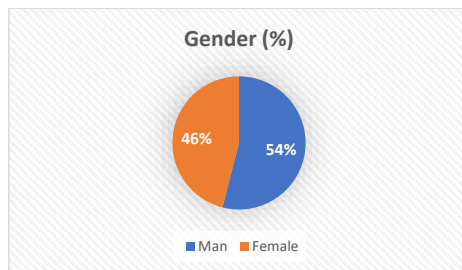


Figure 2: Respondents' demographics based on gender

Of the 170 respondents surveyed, 91 (54%) were male and 79 (46%) were female (see Figure 2). As shown in Figure 3, the majority of respondents were aged 26–35 years, totaling 91 individuals (54%). Also, 44 respondents (25%) were over 36 years old, while the remaining 35 respondents (21%) were between 17 and 25 years old. Figure 4 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 respondents (12%) were housewives (IRT) and not employed, and 15 respondents (9%) were entrepreneurs.

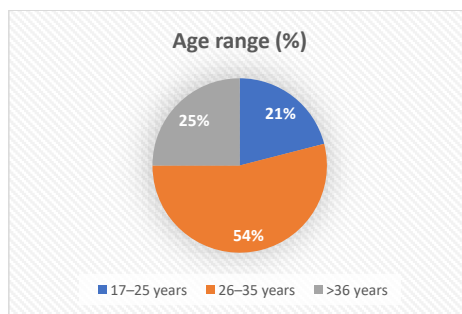


Figure 3: Respondents' demographics by age group

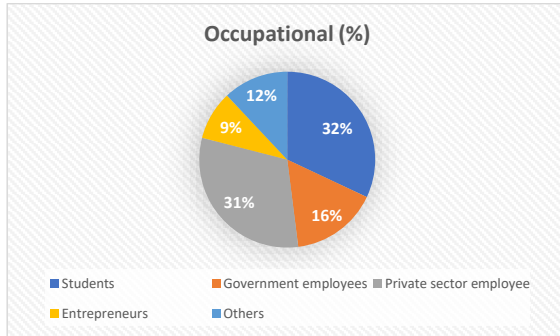


Figure 4: Respondent demographics based on occupational background

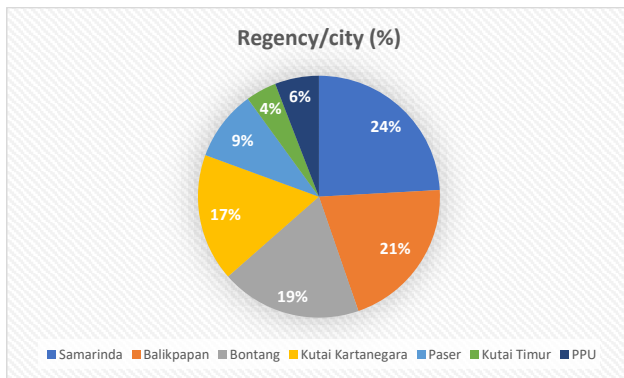


Figure 5: Respondent demographics based on place of residence

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 province, 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 (see Figure 5). There are also 16 respondents (9%) from Paser, 10 respondents (6%) from PPU, and 7 respondents (4%) from Kutai Timur.

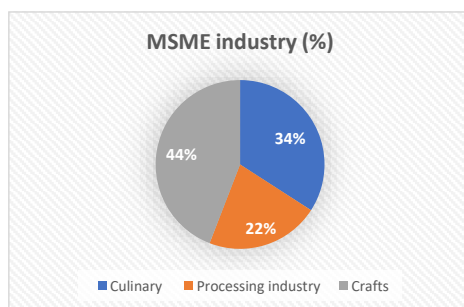


Figure 6: Respondent demographics based on product consumption level

Referring to Figure 6, 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 2 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 89.38, followed by indicator X1.1 at 79.64, 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 88.56, 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 94.92, followed by X2.3 at 89.38, X2.1 at 87.24, X2.5 at 86.98, and X2.2 at 84.3.

Table 2: Summary of descriptive statistics regarding respondents' statements

Variables	Indicators (codes)	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	79.64	High
	Valence of opinion (X1.2)	2	2	1	1	4	3.9	35	34.3	60	58.8	89.38	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	80.8	High
Experiential marketing	Sense (X2.1)	0	0	2	2	8	7.8	43	42.2	49	48	87.24	High
	Feel (X2.2)	0	0	1	1	16	15.7	45	44.1	40	39.2	84.3	High
	Think (X2.3)	1	1	2	2	4	3.9	36	35.3	59	57.8	89.38	High
	Act (X2.4)	0	0	0	0	3	2.9	20	19.6	79	77.5	94.92	High
	Relate (X2.5)	0	0	1	1	12	11.7	39	38.2	50	49	86.98	High
Average					20	19.6	47	46.1	33	32.4	88.56	High	
Brand trust	Trustworthiness (Y1.1)	1	1	1	1	20	19.6	47	46.1	33	32.4	81.64	High
	Reliable (Y1.2)	4	3.9	2	2	7	6.9	13	12.7	76	74.5	90.38	High
	Honesty (Y1.3)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	34	33.3	64	62.7	91.48	High
	Safety (Y1.4)	0	0	0	0	5	4.9	61	59.8	36	35.3	86.08	High
Average											87.39	High	
Brand love	The appeal of a product (Y2.1)	0	0	1	1	23	22.5	46	45.1	32	31.4	81.38	High
	Interest in the product (Y2.2)	0	0	2	2	16	15.7	37	36.3	47	46.1	85.36	High
	Positive evaluation of the product (Y2.3)	1	1	0	0	3	2.9	41	40.2	57	55.9	90	High
	Positive feelings toward the product (Y2.4)	0	0	0	0	11	10.8	45	44.1	46	45.1	86.86	High
	Love for the product (Y2.5)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	32	31.4	66	64.7	91.96	High
Average											87.11	High	

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 87.39, classified as high. For comparison, indicator Y1.3 had the highest index at 91.48, followed by Y1.2 at 90.38, Y1.4 at 86.08 in third place, and finally Y1.1 with an index of 81.64. 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 87.11, also classified as high. Specifically, the index scores for each

indicator were: Y2.5 at 91.96 (first place), Y2.3 at 90 (second place), Y2.4 at 86.86 (third place), Y2.2 at 85.36 (fourth place), and Y2.1 at 81.38 (fifth place). Overall, although all variables have high average index scores, experiential marketing ranks highest, followed by brand trust, brand love, and finally eWOM.

4.3 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 CR and CA tests. First, the results for convergent validity are presented in Table 3. 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 initial model's factor loading results, shown in Figure 7, confirm that no indicators were removed from the structural model, as all were valid following convergent validity testing. Empirically, all indicators across both variables satisfy the minimum AVE requirement (> 0.5).

Table 3: Outer loadings results

Indicators	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			0.65	
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

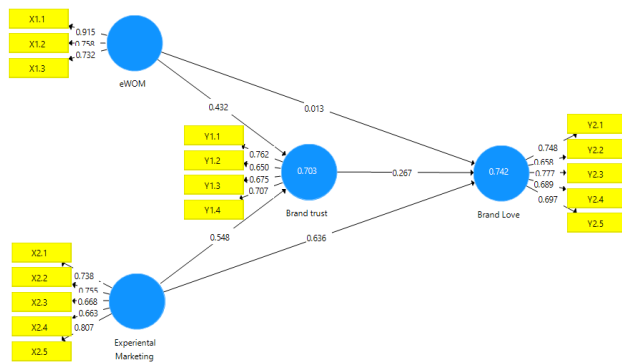


Figure 7: Analysed structural model

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 4 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. These findings indicate that each latent variable exhibits good discriminant validity, although some latent variables have measures that are highly correlated with other constructs. Furthermore, 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 5).

Table 4: Cross-loadings results

Indicators	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	0.37
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	0.65	0.766
Y1.3	0.36	0.535	0.675	0.538
Y1.4	0.279	0.65	0.707	0.63
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	0.58	0.616	0.697

Table 5: AVE value of each variable

Variables	AVE	AVE (minimum)	Interpretation
eWOM	0.649	≥ 0.5	Fulfilling assumptions
Experiential marketing	0.53	≥ 0.5	Fulfilling assumptions
Brand trust	0.675	≥ 0.5	Fulfilling assumptions
Brand love	0.511	≥ 0.5	Fulfilling assumptions

Table 6: Reliability test results

Variables	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

Third, CR and CA values are used to assess the reliability between the indicators of the constructs they represent. 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 6 above 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.

4.4 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 7 presents the R^2 estimation results. In this study, two exogenous variables—eWOM and experiential marketing—are analyzed for their influence on two endogenous variables: brand trust and brand love.

Table 7: Determination test results

Variables	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 0.703, indicating that 70.3% of the variance in brand trust is explained by eWOM and experiential marketing, while the remaining 29.7% (0.297) represents residual factors outside the model. In the brand love formation model, the R^2 value is 0.742, meaning that 74.2% of the variance in brand love is explained by eWOM, experiential marketing, and brand trust, with 25.8% (0.258) 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. The following are the Q^2 values for the structural model:

$$Q^2 = 1 - (1 - R^2 \text{ Model 1}) (1 - R^2 \text{ Model 2})$$

$$Q^2 = 1 - (1 - 0.703) (1 - 0.742)$$

$$Q^2 = 1 - (0.297) (0.258)$$

$$Q^2 = 1 - 0.077$$

$$Q^2 = 0.923$$

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. Table 8 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).

Table 8: Details of hypothesis testing results

Lingkages	<i>t</i> -statistics	<i>p</i> -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

Table 8 also confirms 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 around the IKN 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 promotions (e.g., WOM), consumers tend to trust product promotions conducted online more, making the combination of the two—namely eWOM—an important tool to reduce uncertainty in news, information, and advertising. These findings align with several publications demonstrating that eWOM significantly influences brand trust, especially among young consumers and within digital contexts. 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 found 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 all 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. In their scientific work, Xu et al. (2022) found that experiential marketing dimensions such as think, feel, relate, and sense influence brand trust among integrated resort tourists in Korea; the stronger the sensory, social, intellectual, and emotional experiences provided by a resort, the higher the level of brand trust. In Indonesia, specifically in the context of restaurant food products, positive customer experiences with brand experience have been closely linked to maintaining brand trust (Azzam et al., 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). This body of research demonstrates that experiential marketing not only fosters positive customer perceptions but also directly helps build brand trust as a fundamental link between brands and consumers.

Third, empirical testing found that the role of eWOM can increase brand love; however, its influence is not strong enough to be considered significant (H3 rejected). These results imply that the presence or absence of eWOM for MSME products in the IKN region does not significantly affect overall brand trust. The controversy surrounding eWOM's lack of significant influence appears to stem from the ineffective use of social media in promoting products, which fails to generate brand love among consumers. This also indicates that the intensity, valence of opinion, and content have not fully captured consumers' attention to make MSME products beloved brands. Some existing papers report that eWOM positively affects brand love or related variables in a significant way. 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).

Fourth, empirical testing has demonstrated 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 five dimensions of experiential marketing—sense, feel, think, act, and relate—are crucial for stimulating consumer love for a product brand. 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, within the context of coffee shops and halal-labeled food products, 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 final empirical test found that brand trust significantly increases brand love (H5 accepted). Consistent with existing findings, consumers exhibit a high level of trust in MSME products, which strengthens their affection for the brand. 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, on an Indonesian scale, research by Siahaan et al. (2023) reports that brand trust significantly influences brand love through a positive pathway.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Main Findings

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, two key conclusions were drawn: (1) both eWOM and experiential marketing have a significant positive impact on brand trust; and (2) although eWOM, experiential marketing, and brand trust are all positively related to brand love, only eWOM has an insignificant effect, whereas experiential marketing and brand trust significantly contribute to building brand love.

6.2 Managerial Implications

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.

6.3 Theoretical Implications

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. However, this study has limitations that should be acknowledged. For future research, it is recommended to dissect additional variables within the brand trust and brand love models beyond eWOM and experiential marketing. The research scope could be extended beyond MSMEs within industry clusters, incorporating larger sample sizes. Additionally, 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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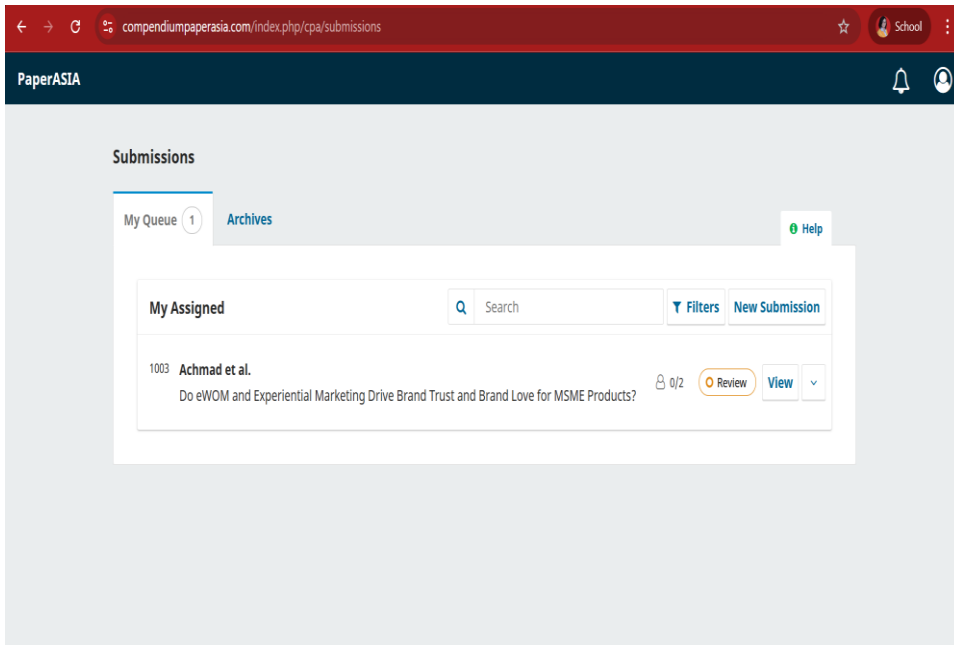
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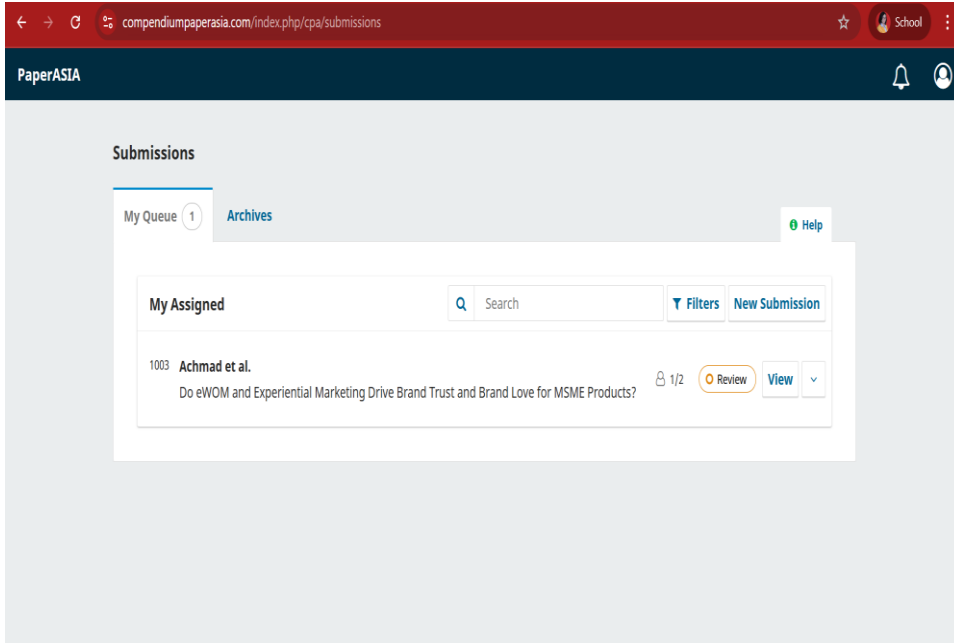
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Alur 2- Screening awal: 15–24 Oktober 2025

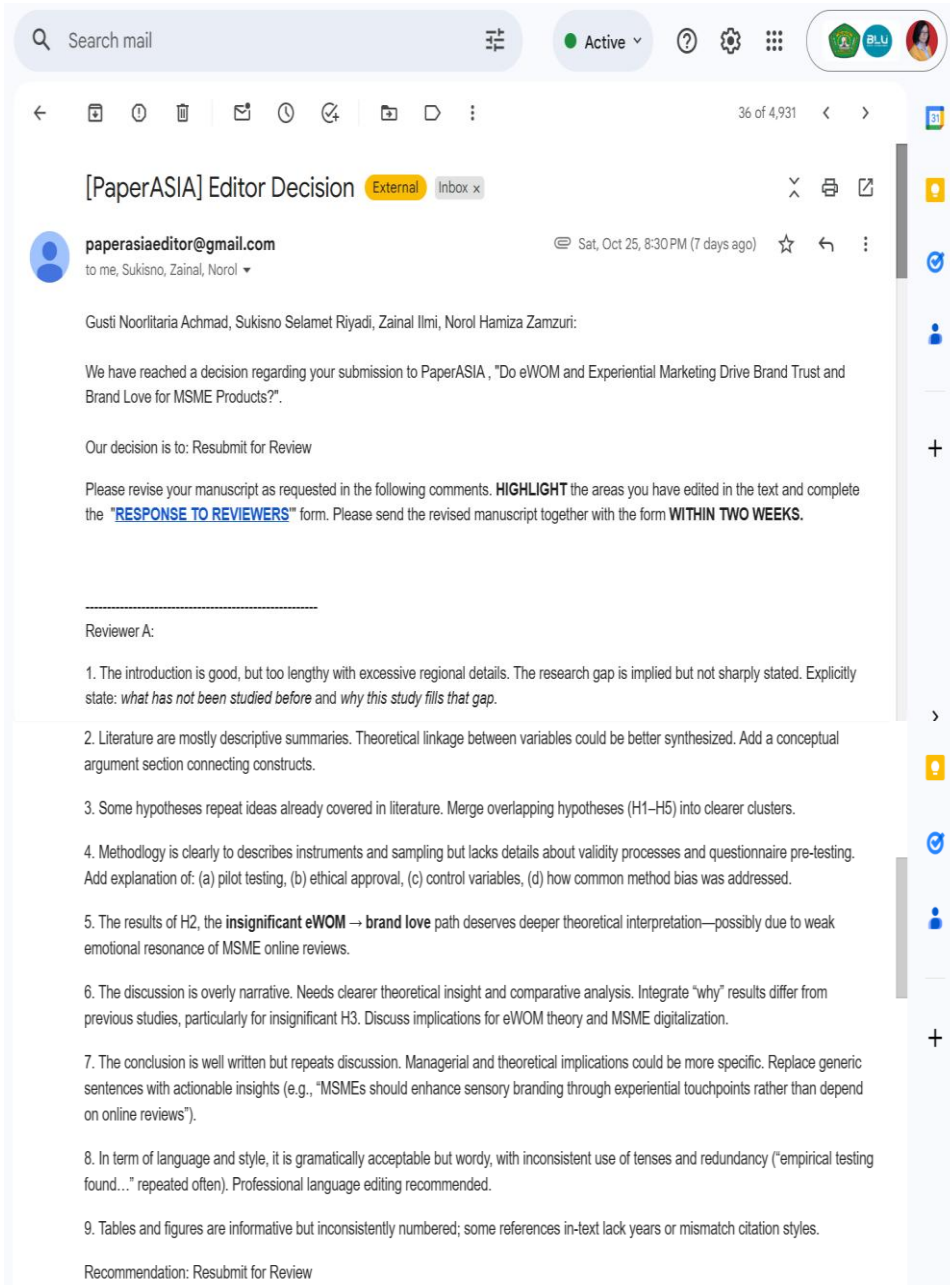


The screenshot shows the PaperASIA Submissions page. The browser address bar displays "compendiumpaperasia.com/index.php/cpa/submissions". The page header includes the PaperASIA logo and navigation icons. The main content area is titled "Submissions" and features tabs for "My Queue" (with a notification badge of 1) and "Archives". A "Help" button is visible in the top right. Below the tabs is a "My Assigned" section with a search bar, "Filters", and "New Submission" buttons. A submission entry is listed with ID "1003", author "Achmad et al.", and title "Do eWOM and Experiential Marketing Drive Brand Trust and Brand Love for MSME Products?". The review progress is shown as "0/2", with "Review" and "View" buttons.



This screenshot is identical to the one above, but the review progress for the submission "1003" has updated to "1/2". The "Review" button remains highlighted, and the "View" button is still present.

Alur 3- Arahan kiriman ulang untuk ditinjau dan balasan penulis: 25–26 Oktober 2025



The screenshot shows an email interface with a search bar at the top. The email is from 'paperasiaeditor@gmail.com' and is dated 'Sat, Oct 25, 8:30 PM (7 days ago)'. The subject is '[PaperASIA] Editor Decision'. The email content includes the following text:

Gusti Noorlitaria Achmad, Sukisno Selamat Riyadi, Zainal Ilmi, Norol Hamiza Zamzuri:

We have reached a decision regarding your submission to PaperASIA, "Do eWOM and Experiential Marketing Drive Brand Trust and Brand Love for MSME Products?".

Our decision is to: Resubmit for Review

Please revise your manuscript as requested in the following comments. **HIGHLIGHT** the areas you have edited in the text and complete the **"RESPONSE TO REVIEWERS"** form. Please send the revised manuscript together with the form **WITHIN TWO WEEKS**.

Reviewer A:

1. The introduction is good, but too lengthy with excessive regional details. The research gap is implied but not sharply stated. Explicitly state: *what has not been studied before* and *why this study fills that gap*.
2. Literature are mostly descriptive summaries. Theoretical linkage between variables could be better synthesized. Add a conceptual argument section connecting constructs.
3. Some hypotheses repeat ideas already covered in literature. Merge overlapping hypotheses (H1–H5) into clearer clusters.
4. Methodology is clearly to describes instruments and sampling but lacks details about validity processes and questionnaire pre-testing. Add explanation of: (a) pilot testing, (b) ethical approval, (c) control variables, (d) how common method bias was addressed.
5. The results of H2, the **insignificant eWOM → brand love** path deserves deeper theoretical interpretation—possibly due to weak emotional resonance of MSME online reviews.
6. The discussion is overly narrative. Needs clearer theoretical insight and comparative analysis. Integrate "why" results differ from previous studies, particularly for insignificant H3. Discuss implications for eWOM theory and MSME digitalization.
7. The conclusion is well written but repeats discussion. Managerial and theoretical implications could be more specific. Replace generic sentences with actionable insights (e.g., "MSMEs should enhance sensory branding through experiential touchpoints rather than depend on online reviews").
8. In term of language and style, it is gramatically acceptable but wordy, with inconsistent use of tenses and redundancy ("empirical testing found..." repeated often). Professional language editing recommended.
9. Tables and figures are informative but inconsistently numbered; some references in-text lack years or mismatch citation styles.

Recommendation: Resubmit for Review

Reviewer B:

1. Present the demographic result in one table. No need to do a pie chart.
2. Measurement model: missing on the Fornell-Larcker result and HTMT result. Explain the result with citations.
3. Do a subsection on limitation of study.
4. On sample characteristics, explain the characteristics of the population units to be surveyed.

Recommendation: Revisions Required

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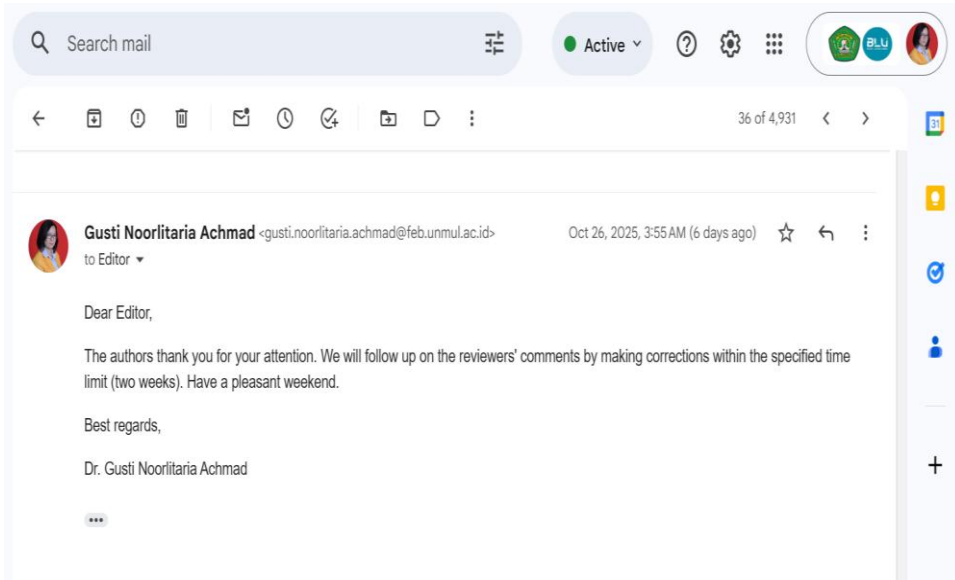
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Submissions

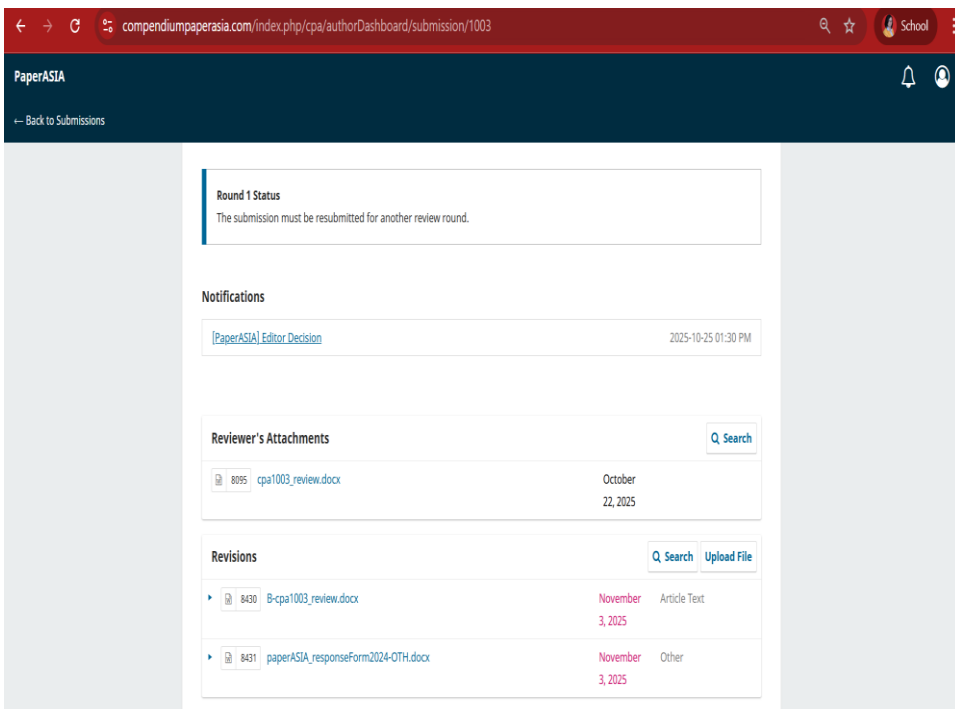
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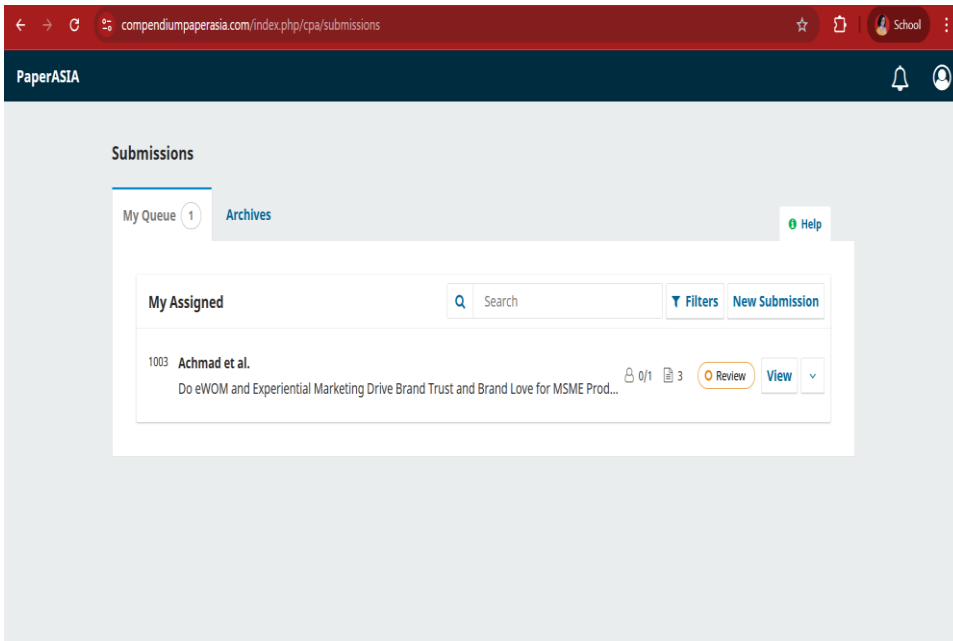
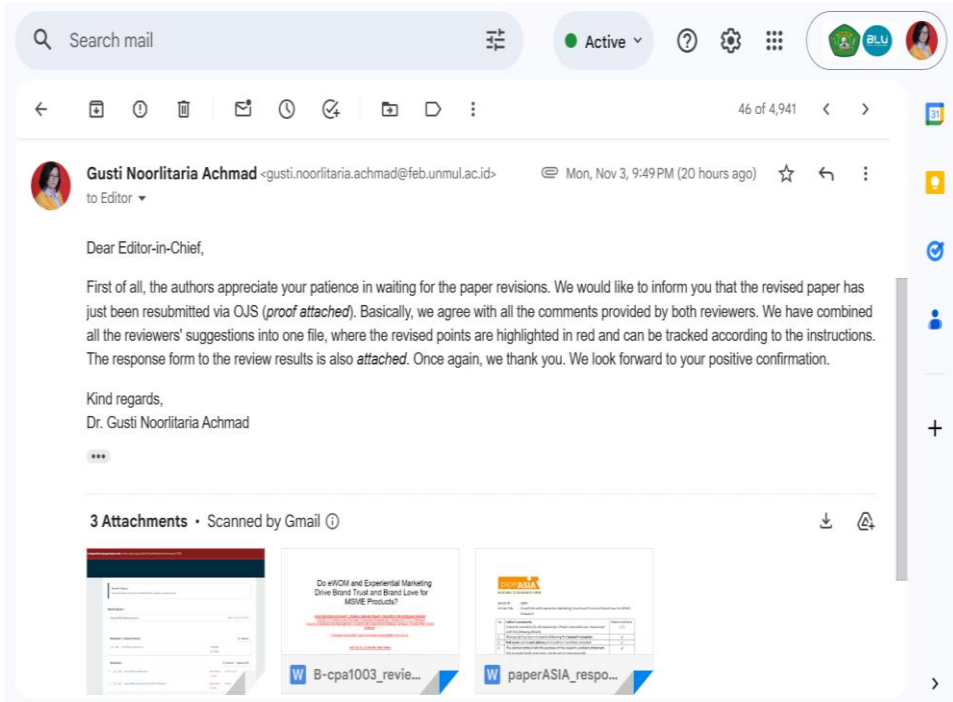
My Assigned Search Filters New Submission

1003	Achmad et al.			
	Do eWOM and Experiential Marketing Drive Brand Trust and Brand Love for MSME Products?	2/2	Review	View
	⚠ The submission must be resubmitted for another review round.			



Alur 4- Tindak lanjut perbaikan editorial: 3 November 2025





2) Tanggapan peninjau dan komentar penulis (tahap editorial)



Article ID : 1003
 Article Title : Do eWOM and Experiential Marketing Drive Brand Trust and Brand Love for MSME Products?

No	Editor's comments: (General comments for all manuscripts. Please crosscheck your manuscript with the following details)	Please tick here (/)
1	Manuscript has been revised by following the Journal's template	✓
2	Full name and e-mail address of all authors have been provided	✓
3	The abstract state briefly the purpose of the research, problem statement, the principal results and major conclusions in one paragraph	✓
4	Manuscript have been proofread and free from any grammatical errors	✓
7	Clear, readable, and high-resolution of all figures have been provided	✓
10	Please use APA style for the reference list Also, please write together with DOI with hyperlink for each reference, if any.	✓

Reviewer A

No.	Reviewer Comment	Author Respond	Page Number
1.	The introduction is good, but too lengthy with excessive regional details. The research gap is implied but not sharply stated. Explicitly state: what has not been studied before and why this study fills that gap.	Thank you for taking the time to provide guidance and highlight the shortcomings of this study. The research gap is explicitly stated. We have added a new paragraph that specifically explains what has not been studied before and why this study fills that gap. More details can be found in the Introduction (paragraph 4).	pp. 2–3
2.	Literature are mostly descriptive summaries. Theoretical linkage between variables could be better synthesized. Add a conceptual argument section connecting constructs.	Essentially, the theoretical relationship between variables has been linked in sub-Section 2.2 (Basis for Hypothesis Formation). However, the authors expand on the theoretical relevance and deepen the synthesis by moving paragraph 6 to this section. This was done in response to your first comment. The proposed hypotheses are currently combined into a single section to strengthen and enrich the reader's understanding.	pp. 5–6 p. 6

		Furthermore, we also added a conceptual argument section that specifically discusses the relationship between variable constructs (see additional paragraph below Figure 1).	p. 6
3.	Some hypotheses repeat ideas already covered in literature. Merge overlapping hypotheses (H1–H5) into clearer clusters.	In line with our response to point 2, the ideas in the hypothesis were refined and combined into one so that they did not overlap, forming a clearer group.	p. 5
4.	Methodology is clearly to describes instruments and sampling but lacks details about validity processes and questionnaire pre-testing. Add explanation of: (a) pilot testing, (b) ethical approval, (c) control variables, (d) how common method bias was addressed.	In response to your request, we have added a new sub-section titled 3.4 (research instruments) concerning three pilot tests in the questionnaire data validation process. This sub-section contains preliminary testing, ethical approval, and methods for addressing common method bias (CMB). Please refer to the Methodology section. Subsequently, the interpretation of the three pilot tests is explained in the Results chapter. Further details can be found in the new subchapter (4.3. Preliminary Testing and CMB).	pp. 7–8 p. 12
5.	The results of H2, the insignificant eWOM → brand love path deserves deeper theoretical interpretation—possibly due to weak emotional resonance of MSME online reviews.	We believe there may be an error on your part, where the correct hypothesis is hypothesis three and not hypothesis two. The results are insignificant between eWOM and brand love (H3 rejected). Therefore, referring to your recommendation, we conducted an in-depth theoretical interpretation, particularly regarding the weak emotional resonance of MSME online reviews. Please review paragraph 3 again.	pp. 16–17
6.	The discussion is overly narrative. Needs clearer theoretical insight and comparative analysis. Integrate “why” results differ from previous studies, particularly for insignificant H3. Discuss implications for eWOM theory and MSME digitalization.	The authors acknowledge that the study has many weaknesses that need to be addressed, including the Discussion chapter. This section appears to be overly narrative, requiring clearer theoretical insights and comparative analysis. We sought to integrate the reasons behind the rejection of H3 (insignificant relationship between eWOM and brand love), which was a notable difference from previous studies. The authors added new information to	p. 17

		the third paragraph and created a new paragraph (fourth paragraph). Also, in the same chapter, we expand on the implications for eWOM theory and MSME digitalisation with reference to the results of testing all hypotheses (the latest revision is in paragraph 7).	p. 17
7.	The conclusion is well written but repeats discussion. Managerial and theoretical implications could be more specific. Replace generic sentences with actionable insights (e.g., "MSMEs should enhance sensory branding through experiential touchpoints rather than depend on online reviews").	Thank you for this constructive suggestion. The authors have made corrections to the sub-chapters on Managerial and Theoretical Implications to make them more specific. Please re-check these two sub-chapters in the Conclusion chapter.	p. 18
8.	In term of language and style, it is gramatically acceptable but wordy, with inconsistent use of tenses and redundancy ("empirical testing found..." repeated often). Professional language editing recommended.	The authors appreciate your attention to the limitations of this study. Regarding the style and language of the text, we realise that some of the grammar is convoluted. Therefore, we have endeavoured to revise it as much as possible so that the tense is written consistently and without excessive repetition. In addition, we edit the language through professional proofreading services. We guarantee that the current language quality complies with accepted academic standards.	All page
9.	Tables and figures are informative but inconsistently numbered; some references in-text lack years or mismatch citation styles.	Referring to the reviewers' instructions, several images (such as respondent demographic data) were deleted and combined into a table. Next, there is the addition of a new table regarding the initial test results and CMB and Fornell-Larcker, as well as figures regarding the HTMT test results, so the numbering of both the tables and figures has automatically changed. Therefore, we invite you to review the latest revisions. Finally, several sources in the text that are not listed in the References section do not include the year or contain incorrect year formatting, and the citation style does not	All page

		conform to the corrected citation style. We need to confirm that the corrections in this section have been made thoroughly and ensure that no references have been omitted.	
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Reviewer B

No.	Reviewer Comment	Author Respond	Page Number
1.	Present the demographic result in one table. No need to do a pie chart.	Once again, the authors thank you for all your reviews. Referring to the first reviewer's suggestion, the demographic results of the respondents are presented in Table 2.	pp. 9–10
2.	Measurement model: missing on the Fornell-Larcker result and HTMT result. Explain the result with citations.	In addition to AVE, other measurement models such as the Fornell-Larcker test and HTMT are applied in discriminant validity parameters as an evaluation of reflective measurement models in PLS. The concepts and criteria of both are explained in sub-Chapter 3.5 (specifically in paragraph 3). After that, the test results based on Fornell-Larcker (Table 8) and the HTMT ratio (Figure 3) are explained by citing relevant sources. Further details can be found in sub-Chapter 4, paragraphs 3 to 5.	p. 8 pp. 14–15
3.	Do a subsection on limitation of study.	The limitations of the study have already been mentioned in sub-section 6.3. However, we detail them again specifically to emphasise the weaknesses of the current study as an effort towards the sustainability and further development of the research.	p. 18
4.	On sample characteristics, explain the characteristics of the population units to be surveyed.	The basis for purposive sampling based on the characteristics of the population sample units to be surveyed is explained in sub-Section 3.3.	p. 7

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. Based on this premise, 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 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 Partial Least Squares (PLS) with SmartPLS software. The empirical findings confirm three main points: (1) eWOM and experiential marketing have a significant positive influence on brand trust; (2) eWOM has a positive but insignificant influence on brand love; and (3) both experiential marketing and brand trust 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 Capital City of Nusantara (IKN) will not only physically shift the administrative hub but also transform the city into a smart city (Junaidi et al., 2025; Kuleh 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 like 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 enhancing human resources to develop capable, high-quality, and competitive enterprises (Althalets et al., 2025).

MSME entrepreneurs should continue to develop their competencies to produce high-quality, 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 advance to a higher level. These MSMEs are receiving assistance with 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.

The Department of Industry, Trade, Cooperatives, and SMEs of East Kalimantan Province (2023) reported that the total number of MSMEs in East Kalimantan Province reached 460,147 units in 2022. Among the districts and cities in East Kalimantan, Samarinda had the largest number of MSMEs, contributing 130,524 units, followed by Balikpapan with 127,675 units, and Mahakam Ulu with the fewest MSMEs at 586 units. The data also indicate that, of the 460,147 MSMEs categorized by three business sectors—industry, trade, and services—the industrial sector accounted for the largest share with 226,281 units (49.17%), followed by the trade sector with 195,704 units (42.53%), and the service sector with 38,162 units (8.29%). Specifically, MSMEs within the industrial sector are classified into three clusters: culinary MSMEs, processing industry MSMEs, and craft MSMEs. Among these, culinary MSMEs are the most dominant, comprising 215,026 units (95.02%) of industrial MSMEs, while processing industry MSMEs account for 8,157 units (3.61%) and craft MSMEs for 3,098 units (1.37%).

One effective way to increase consumer confidence is to implement a product marketing strategy utilizing eWOM. Lim et al. (2022) and Mehyar et al. (2020) define eWOM as positive and/or negative statements made by potential customers. 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).

Explicitly, 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 separately. 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.

A study 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. This is supported by Erkan and Evans (2016), who argue that eWOM generates consumer trust by providing information perceived as more credible and authentic than traditional advertising. Moreover, experiential marketing fosters emotional experiences that enhance attachment and love for the brand (Schmitt, 1999; Brakus et al., 2009). For MSMEs in emerging areas such as IKN—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 MSMEs 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 influential aspects in purchasing decisions (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Besides, in many instances, the impact of eWOM on consumer choices is considered comparable to or even surpasses that of direct word-of-mouth (Reichelt et al., 2014; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Consequently, eWOM is a critical factor of 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. What's more, concerns about not reading reviews prior to buying, as well as increased confidence after 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 Ngo et al. (2024) and Zhang (2023), 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—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, 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. Finally, 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 (Garg et al., 2022; Wiedmann et al., 2021).

2.1.3 Brand Trust

Brand trust refers to consumers' belief that a brand is reliable, capable of fulfilling its promised values, and attentive to the interests and safety of its consumers. 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. These elements are crucial because consumers tend to trust brands with a positive and reliable track record (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014). Second,

company characteristics encompass reputation, integrity, and consumer perceptions of the company's motives. Consumers are more likely to trust companies perceived as honest, ethical, and prioritizing their interests (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. Then, trust in a brand is shaped by elements such as reliability, honesty, trustworthiness, and the sense of security the brand provides to its consumers (Ghondagsaz & Engesser, 2022; Putra et al., 2023; Rather et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022). 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 is a concept derived from interpersonal love theory, applied to the relationship between consumers and brands. Love for a brand develops through consumers' positive experiences with a product, resulting in deep emotional and affective judgments toward that 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) strong affective 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; Bıçakcıoğlu et al., 2023).

2.2 The Basis for Hypothesis Formation

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 that brand (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Meanwhile, trust arising 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. A study by Erkan and Evans (2016) finds that eWOM significantly influences purchase intention through the mediation of brand trust, especially in digital scales and on social media platforms, where user interactions create a social effect that enhances brand credibility. Accordingly, Hypothesis one is formulated as follows:

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 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. Specifically, research on local fashion products in Indonesia highlights that experiential marketing enhances consumer trust in the brand, which in turn mediates repurchase intention (Khoirunnisa & Astini, 2021). Hypothesis two is stated as follows:

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), 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. Additionally, Paruthi et al. (2023) demonstrate that consumer community identification and brand relationship quality enhance online consumer engagement, which subsequently triggers brand love. In turn, brand love encourages positive eWOM. For example, research on the Indonesian halal skincare market indicates that eWOM significantly influences brand attitude and brand love, which then drive consumer purchase intention (Istiqomah & Setyawan, 2025). Based on these findings, the following three hypotheses were developed:

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 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 that brand. Furthermore,

brand experiences mediated by perceptions of authenticity positively influence brand love. In the case of Le Minerale products, Prakosa and Kuswati (2025) report that brand love serves as a strong mediator in the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. Simultaneously, brand love can also drive strong experiences that help maintain loyalty. In Korea, positive brand experiences directly shape brand love, which subsequently strengthens brand loyalty toward smartphone products (Bae & Kim, 2023). 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. The fourth hypothesis is described below:

Brand trust—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 believe that a brand is transparent, delivers on its promises, and consistently promotes quality experiences, that trust strengthens the emotional and affective factors at the core of the consumer-brand relationship, which underpins brand love. For example, Na et al. (2023) describe that brand trust positively influences brand love and mediates the relationship between brand loyalty and brand experience for smartphone products in China. Similarly, in Korea, brand trust moderates the effect of brand experience on brand love, with brand love subsequently mediating the impact of brand experience on loyalty (Bae & Kim, 2023). In Indonesia, brand trust significantly influences brand love; however, its effects on other variables such as WOM or commitment may not be consistent among Wardah Cosmetics consumers (Suharsono, 2024).

By implementing marketing strategies through both eWOM and experiential marketing, brand trust and brand love can be fostered. Brand trust is defined as the confidence consumers feel when using a brand, based on the perception that the brand is reliable and genuinely cares about their interests and welfare (Monfort et al., 2025). Meanwhile, 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; Aro & Tähtinen, 2025; Pourazad et al., 2024). Sudaryanto et al. (2025) emphasize that eWOM is positively correlated with brand trust. However, this finding contrasts with the papers by Le et al. (2024) and Ngo et al. (2024), which report that while eWOM positively impacts brand trust, experiential marketing has a negative effect.

Substantively, the relevance among eWOM, experiential marketing, and brand trust in relation to brand love have been explored in several manuscripts. For example, 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 or experiential marketing), personal experiences have been verified as a direct component influencing brand love. In the context of smartphones in Korea, brand trust moderates the relationship between brand experience and brand love, enhancing the mediating effect of brand love on the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty (Bae & Kim, 2023). At the Starbucks level, Li and Park (2025) found that brand satisfaction and brand trust positively interact with brand love and brand loyalty. Nonetheless, brand love positively encourages WOM. In an online shopping case study in India, brand love and brand trust were shown to increase repurchase intention and loyalty performance (David & Ali, 2025). Also, Maduretno and Junaedi (2022) identified that brand experience enhances both brand love and brand trust in coffee shops in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, as its effects also extend to consumer loyalty. Accordingly, all hypotheses are formulated and proposed:

- 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. Broadly speaking, the model path analyzed represents direct relationships.

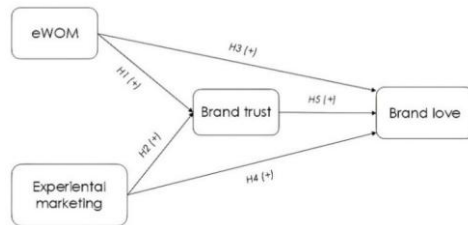


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

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—when positive reviews from other consumers are disseminated online, they build perceptions of brand reliability and transparency, thereby strengthening brand trust, as evidenced by Wilia 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 5 indicators, eWOM has 3 indicators, and brand trust is supported by 4 indicators.

Table 1: Details of the variables studied

Variables and definitions	Indicators	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), Mehyar 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 dan 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.	Likert (1–5)	Ghondaghsaz dan 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.	Y1.4: Consumer confidence in product safety. 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.	Likert (1–5)	Magano et al. (2024) dan Rodrigues et al. (2015)

3.2 Sources and Techniques of Data Collection

This study was conducted using primary data obtained directly from the original source through the distribution of questionnaires to respondents. 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 by an online questionnaire (Google Forms), which was distributed to respondents via a link. Respondents completed the questionnaire based on statements corresponding to the indicators for 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.

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 (considered of productive age 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 by multiplying 5 to 10 times the number of indicators (statement items) in the questionnaire. Based on this instrument, the optimal and ideal sample size 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 two months (August 2025–September 2025).

Commented [A1]: On sample characteristics, explain the characteristics of the population units to be surveyed.

Commented [uu2R1]: Thank you. The characteristics of the population units to be surveyed are described in detail in these subchapters.

3.4 Research Instruments

Prior to the PLS analysis stage, questionnaire data validation was conducted 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, with the criterion that any question (i.e., each indicator) exhibiting a correlation below 0.3 should be deleted or revised.

Furthermore, ethical approval ensures that this study adheres to the ethical principles governing research involving human participants. The attached 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 is applied to minimize errors arising from collecting all data from a single source (the same respondents). The first step, conducted prior to data collection, involves procedural remedies such as maintaining anonymity and confidentiality to reduce social desirability bias, temporally separating the measurement of exogenous and endogenous variables, and randomizing the order of items to prevent response patterns. The second step involves statistical testing 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.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a SEM technique called partial least squares (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) conducted a descriptive statistical analysis based on average scores (indexes), which were grouped into score ranges using the three-box method calculation:

- Upper limit of score range: $(\% \text{ frequency} \times 5) \div 5 = (100 \times 5) \div 5 = 100$
- 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., 2019; 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 the average variance extracted ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$) 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 (Oktawiranti et al., 2025; Surapati et al., 2025). The decision-making framework for hypothesis testing in explaining causality between variables is structured as follows:

- 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.
- 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 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 and 79 (46%) were female. The majority of respondents were aged 26–35 years, totaling 91 individuals (54%). Also, 44 respondents (25%) were over 36 years old, 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.

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 province, 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 PPU, and 7 respondents (4%) from Kutai Timur.

Table 2: Respondent demographics

Characteristics	Items	F	%
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
	PPU	10	6
Product consumption level	Culinary	58	34
	Processing industry	37	22
	Crafts	75	44

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 89.38, followed by indicator X1.1 at 79.64, 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 88.56, 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 94.92, followed by X2.3 at 89.38, X2.1 at 87.24, X2.5 at 86.98, and X2.2 at 84.3.

Table 3: Summary of descriptive statistics regarding respondents' statements

Variables	Indicators (codes)	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	79.64	High
	Valence of opinion (X1.2)	2	2	1	1	4	3.9	35	34.3	60	58.8	89.38	High
	Content (X1.3)	2	2	8	7.8	30	29.4	44	43.3	18	17.6	73.4	High
	Average											80.8	High

Experiential marketing	Sense (X2.1)	0	0	2	2	8	7.8	43	42.2	49	48	87.24	High
	Feel (X2.2)	0	0	1	1	16	15.7	45	44.1	40	39.2	84.3	High
	Think (X2.3)	1	1	2	2	4	3.9	36	35.3	59	57.8	89.38	High
	Act (X2.4)	0	0	0	0	3	2.9	20	19.6	79	77.5	94.92	High
	Relate (X2.5)	0	0	1	1	12	11.7	39	38.2	50	49	86.98	High
					Average							88.56	High
Brand trust	Trustworthiness (Y1.1)	1	1	1	1	20	19.6	47	46.1	33	32.4	81.64	
	Reliable (Y1.2)	4	3.9	2	2	7	6.9	13	12.7	76	74.5	90.38	High
	Honesty (Y1.3)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	34	33.3	64	62.7	91.48	High
	Safety (Y1.4)	0	0	0	0	5	4.9	61	59.8	36	35.3	86.08	High
						Average							87.39
Brand love	The appeal of a product (Y2.1)	0	0	1	1	23	22.5	46	45.1	32	31.4	81.38	High
	Interest in the product (Y2.2)	0	0	2	2	16	15.7	37	36.3	47	46.1	85.36	High
	Positive evaluation of the product (Y2.3)	1	1	0	0	3	2.9	41	40.2	57	55.9	90	High
	Positive feelings toward the product (Y2.4)	0	0	0	0	11	10.8	45	44.1	46	45.1	86.86	High
	Love for the product (Y2.5)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	32	31.4	66	64.7	91.96	High
						Average							87.11

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 87.39, classified as high. For comparison, indicator Y1.3 had the highest index at 91.48, followed by Y1.2 at 90.38, Y1.4 at 86.08 in third place, and finally Y1.1 with an index of 81.64. 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 87.11, also classified as high. Specifically, the index scores for each indicator were: Y2.5 at 91.96 (first place), Y2.3 at 90 (second place), Y2.4 at 86.86 (third place), Y2.2 at 85.36 (fourth place), and Y2.1 at 81.38 (fifth place). Overall, although all variables have high average index scores, experiential marketing ranks highest, followed by brand trust, brand love, and finally eWOM.

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; those below this threshold are not. 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. In comparison, eWOM, consisting of 3 indicators, had r -values ranging from 0.376 to 0.521; experiential marketing, with 5 indicators, had r -values between 0.394 and 0.694; brand trust, with 4 indicators, showed r -values from 0.314 to 0.502; and brand love, with 5 indicators, had r -values ranging from 0.372 to 0.587.

Table 4: Summary of preliminary test results and CMB

Indicators	r-value	Total variance explained		
		Eigenvalue	% of variance	Cumulative %
X1.1	0.521	6.12	36	36
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	0.3	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	0.2	1.38	100

Second, the 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 CR and 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 initial model's factor loading results, shown in Figure 2, prove that no indicators were removed from the structural model, as all were valid following convergent validity testing. Empirically, all indicators across both variables satisfy the minimum AVE requirement (> 0.5).

Table 5: Outer loadings results

Indicators	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			0.65	
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

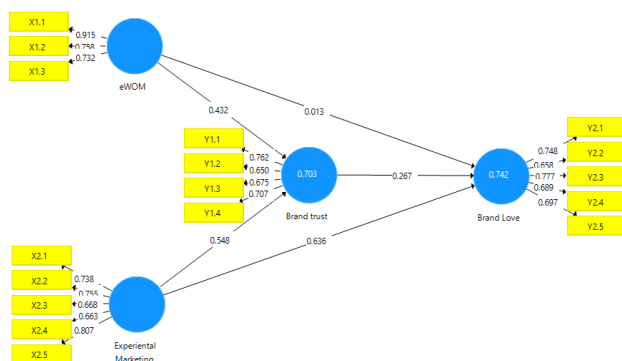


Figure 2: Analysed structural model

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. These findings indicate that each latent variable exhibits good discriminant validity, although some latent variables have measures that are highly correlated with other constructs. 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

Indicators	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	0.37
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	0.65	0.766
Y1.3	0.36	0.535	0.675	0.538
Y1.4	0.279	0.65	0.707	0.63
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	0.58	0.616	0.697

Table 7: AVE value of each variable

Variables	AVE	AVE (minimum)	Interpretation
eWOM	0.649	≥ 0.5	Fulfilling assumptions
Experiential marketing	0.53	≥ 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 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 et al., & 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.

Table 8: Results of the Fornell-Larcker criteria

Variables	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

The bold diagonal values represent the $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ for each construct, while the values outside the diagonal indicate the correlations between constructs. 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 a $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ of 0.748; 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 (see Table 8).

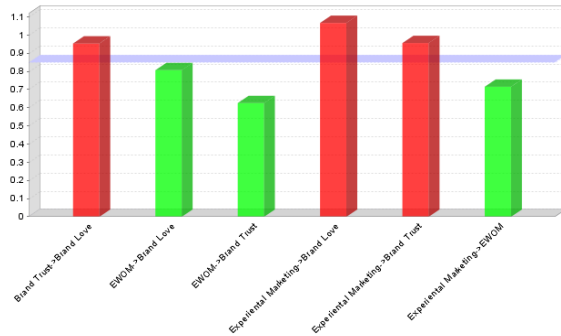


Figure 3: HTMT ratio

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).

Table 9: Reliability test results

Variables	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

Third, CR and CA values are used to assess the reliability between the indicators of the constructs they represent. 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.

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—eWOM and experiential marketing—are analyzed for their influence on two endogenous variables: brand trust and brand love.

Table 10: Determination test results

Variables	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 0.703, indicating that 70.3% of the variance in brand trust is explained by eWOM and experiential marketing, while the remaining 29.7% (0.297) represents residual factors outside the model. In the brand love formation model, the R^2 value is 0.742, meaning that 74.2% of the variance in brand love is explained by eWOM, experiential marketing, and brand trust, with 25.8% (0.258) 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. The following are the Q^2 values for the structural model:

$$Q^2 = 1 - (1 - R^2 \text{ Model 1}) (1 - R^2 \text{ Model 2})$$

Commented [A3]: Measurement model: missing on the Fornell Larcker result and HTMT result. Explain the result with citations.

Commented [uu4R3]: We included two tests (Fornell Larcker and HTMT results) in the discriminant validity measurement model. The addition also includes its interpretation accompanied by relevant literature sources.

$$Q^2 = 1 - (1 - 0.703) (1 - 0.742)$$

$$Q^2 = 1 - (0.297) (0.258)$$

$$Q^2 = 1 - 0.077$$

$$Q^2 = 0.923$$

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. 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).

Table 11: Details of hypothesis testing results

Lingkages	<i>t</i> -statistics	<i>p</i> -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

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 around the IKN 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 promotions (e.g., WOM), consumers tend to trust product promotions conducted online more, making the combination of the two—namely eWOM—an important tool to reduce uncertainty in news, information, and advertising. These findings align with several publications demonstrating that eWOM significantly influences brand trust, especially among young consumers and within digital contexts. 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 all 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. In their scientific work, Xu et al. (2022) found that experiential marketing dimensions such as think, feel, relate, and sense influence brand trust among integrated resort tourists in Korea; the stronger the sensory, social, intellectual, and emotional experiences provided by a resort, the higher the level of brand trust. In Indonesia, specifically in the context of restaurant food products, 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). This body of research demonstrates that experiential marketing not only fosters positive customer perceptions but also directly helps build brand trust as a fundamental link between brands and consumers.

Third, our found that the role of eWOM can increase brand love; however, its influence is not strong enough to be considered significant (H3 rejected). These results imply that the presence or absence of eWOM for MSME products in the IKN region does not significantly affect overall brand trust. The controversy surrounding eWOM's lack of significant influence appears to stem from the ineffective use of social media in promoting products, which

fails to generate brand love among consumers. This also indicates that the intensity, valence of opinion, and content have not fully captured consumers' attention to make MSME products beloved brands. Some existing papers report that eWOM positively affects brand love or related variables in a significant way. 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—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—essential components of brand love (Alshreef et al., 2023). In turn, even when eWOM occurs, without the emotional depth of reviews (e.g., pride in belonging to the brand community, personal connections to the brand, and compelling user stories), its influence on brand love can be weak or insignificant. This underscores the urgency of the affective dimension in consumer–brand relationships.

Unfortunately, the insignificant effect of eWOM on brand love has important theoretical implications. 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). Therefore, although previous research has found that eWOM significantly increases brand resonance—including aspects of brand loyalty and attachment—and positively affects brand love, this case study found that eWOM did not have a significant direct effect on brand love. 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 object. Other findings suggest that under certain conditions, MSME products in IKN with specific demographics, low involvement, or eWOM platforms exhibit less emotional richness—indicating that eWOM alone is insufficient to generate the emotional attachment necessary for brand love, contrary to many previous studies.

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 five dimensions of experiential marketing—sense, feel, think, act, and relate—are crucial for stimulating consumer love for a product brand. 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, within the context of coffee shops and halal-labeled food products, 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). Consistent with existing findings, consumers exhibit a high level of trust in MSME products, which strengthens their affection for the brand. 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, on an Indonesian scale, research by Siahaan et al. (2023) reports that brand trust significantly influences brand love through a positive pathway.

The implications of these findings make a vital contribution to the development of theories related to eWOM, experiential marketing, and digitalization for MSMEs. 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—through deep experiences and direct interactions—is more effective in forming emotional bonds with brands than mere information exchange between consumers (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, 2023). 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 digitization of MSMEs, relying solely on an online marketing strategy focused on eWOM is insufficient to ensure brand love. Hence, MSMEs must integrate experiential marketing through events, user experiences, relevant digital content, and direct interactions to cultivate deeper emotional connections with consumers. Also, maintaining brand trust through transparency, consistency, and high-quality products and services is essential. The study's findings enrich the theoretical framework 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 SMEs in the digital era.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Main Findings

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, two key conclusions were drawn: (1) both eWOM and experiential marketing have a significant positive impact on brand trust; and (2) although eWOM, experiential marketing, and brand trust are all positively related to brand love, only eWOM has an insignificant effect, whereas experiential marketing and brand trust significantly contribute to building brand love.

6.2 Managerial Implications

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 also enhance sensory branding through touchpoints rather than relying solely on online reviews, whose impact is immediate and tangible.

6.3 Theoretical Implications

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. However, 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, as the current findings apply exclusively to a specific context—MSMEs in the IKN. 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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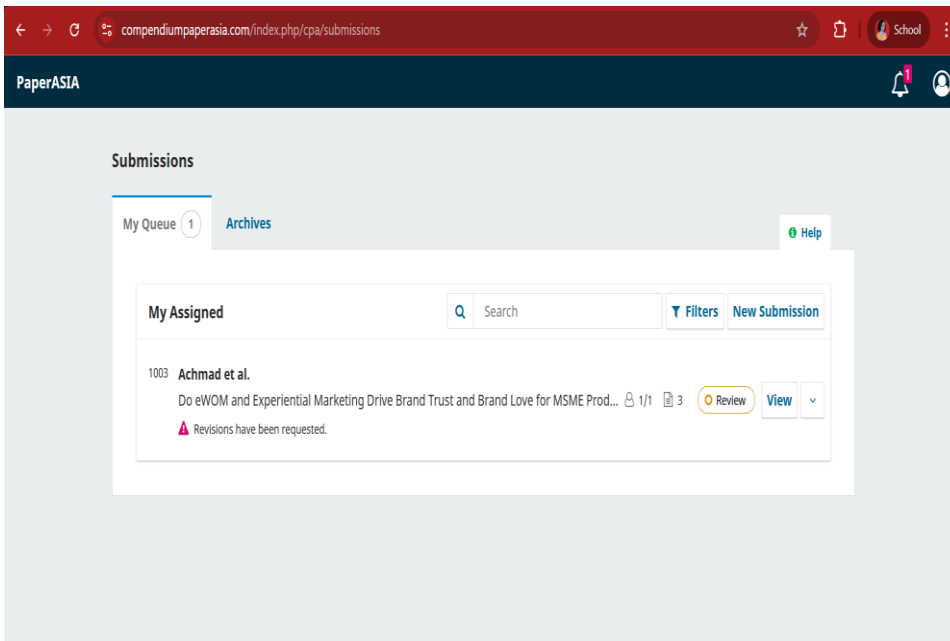
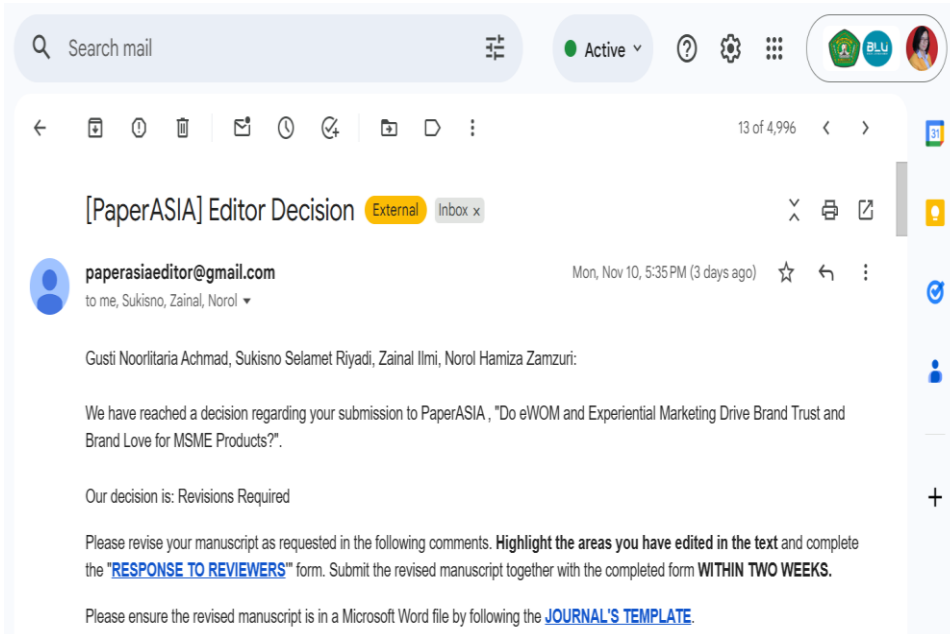
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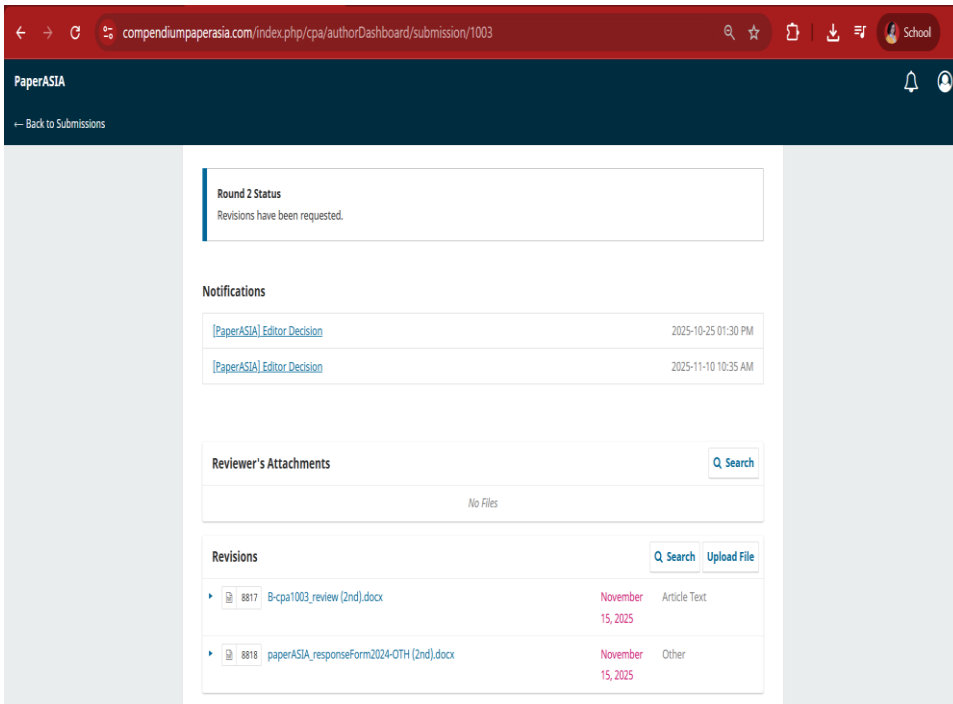
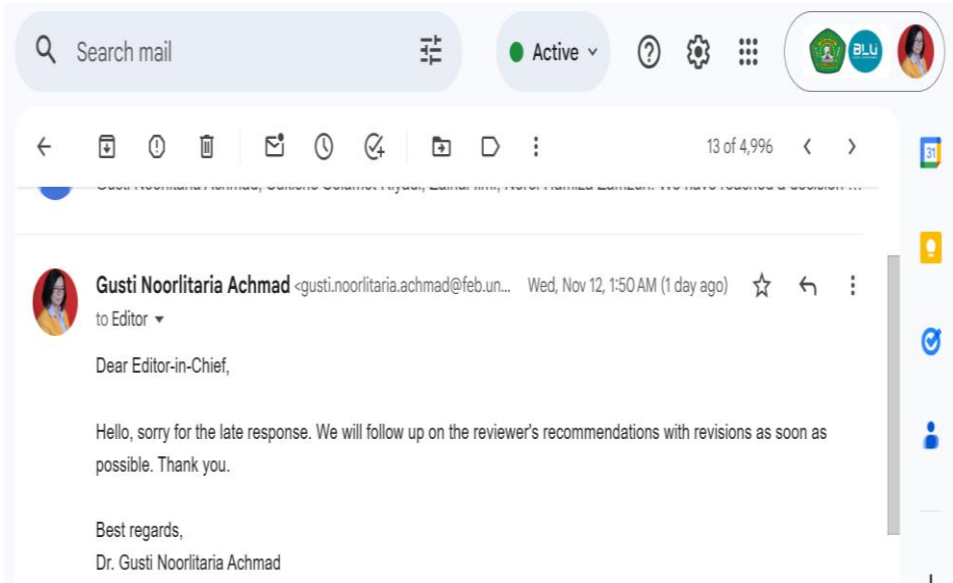
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Alur 5- Komentar lanjutan (revisi tahap pertama): 10 November 2025



Alur 6- Tindak lanjut perbaikan tahap pertama: 12 November



4) Tanggapan peninjau dan komentar penulis (tahap pertama)



Article ID : 1003
 Article Title : Do eWOM and Experiential Marketing Drive Brand Trust and Brand Love for MSME Products?

No	Editor's comments: (General comments for all manuscripts. Please crosscheck your manuscript with the following details)	Please tick here (/)
1	Manuscript has been revised by following the Journal's template	✓
2	Full name and e-mail address of all authors have been provided	✓
3	The abstract state briefly the purpose of the research, problem statement, the principal results and major conclusions in one paragraph	✓
4	Manuscript have been proofread and free from any grammatical errors	✓
7	Clear, readable, and high-resolution of all figures have been provided	✓
10	Please use APA style for the reference list Also, please write together with DOI with hyperlink for each reference, if any.	✓

Reviewers

No.	Reviewer Comment	Author Respond	Page Number
1.	<p>ABSTRACT "crucial role <i>ininfluencing</i>" → Typo: duplicate "in".</p> <p>Consider adding one numerical result (e.g., strongest β value) to improve informativeness.</p> <p>The abstract is slightly long; consider removing repeated phrases like "<i>Based on this premise</i>".</p>	<p>The typo in '<i>ininfluencing</i>' has been corrected to '<i>influencing</i>'. Please re-check the third paragraph in the introduction.</p> <p>Thank you, the authors have taken your suggestion into consideration to include additional statistical figures (β and p) in each empirical test result. Full details can be found in the abstract.</p> <p>Thank you. It appears that the abstract is too long and needs to be shortened. To that end, we have removed phrases such as '<i>Based on this premise</i>'.</p>	<p>p. 2</p> <p>p. 1</p> <p>p. 1</p>
2.	<p>INTRODUCTION Paragraph 1–3: Very long descriptive sections about IKN and MSMEs. Consider condensing; some statistics can be moved to a brief summary.</p>	<p>The descriptions in paragraphs 1 to 3 of the introduction are very long, particularly those discussing the conditions and prospects of MSMEs in the study area. The authors have summarised them into one</p>	<p>pp. 1–2 and p. 16</p>

	<p><i>"in enhancing human resources to develop capable..."</i> sentence reads awkwardly; revise for clarity.</p> <p><i>"develop capable, high-quality, and competitive enterprises"</i> minor grammatical tightening needed.</p> <p>Para beginning <i>"One effective way to increase consumer confidence..."</i> is clear, but connectors like <i>"What's more"</i> are informal; replace with academic transitions.</p> <p>Sentence <i>"Explicitly, although previous studies..."</i> is lengthy and difficult to follow; consider splitting into two sentences.</p> <p>Typo <i>"study linking"</i> should be <i>"linking"</i>. Near end of introduction: ensure academic tone (avoid phrases such as <i>"This is supported by..."</i> repeated multiple times).</p>	<p>paragraph. The remaining part of the explanation of statistical trends has been moved to the summary conclusion chapter.</p> <p>That sentence sounds awkward. We have made improvements to improve readability. Please check paragraph 1 of the introduction again.</p> <p>Yes, we also corrected the grammar because the sentence was one complete sentence.</p> <p>Conjunctions such as <i>'What's more'</i> have been removed and replaced with formal academic transitions. The latest revisions can be seen in the second paragraph of sub-section 2.1.1.</p> <p>The sentence is too long and difficult to understand, so to make it more relevant, we have removed the word <i>'explicitly'</i>. The latest corrections can be found in the introduction (third paragraph).</p> <p>The typo <i>'study linking'</i> has been revised to <i>'linking'</i>. To clarify the academic tone at the end of the introduction, repeatedly used phrases such as <i>'This is supported...'</i> have been removed. You can now see the changes in the latest versions of both.</p>	<p>p. 2</p> <p>p. 2</p> <p>p. 3</p> <p>p. 2</p> <p>p. 2</p>
3.	<p>LITERATURE REVIEW eWOM Section <i>"influential aspects in purchasing decisions"</i> → better as <i>"a critical determinant of purchasing decisions."</i> <i>"What's more"</i> appears again; replace with a more formal transition. APA formatting: <i>"Urdea dan Constantin"</i> → should be <i>"Urdea & Constantin"</i>.</p>	<p>Clear. The improvements can be seen in sub-section 2.1.1 (first paragraph). The conjunction <i>'What's more'</i> has been changed to the more formal academic transition <i>'Moreover'</i>. Inappropriate words in literature citations have been corrected, such as <i>'dan'</i> to <i>'and'</i>. This also applies to all references in this manuscript. The authors carefully made these minor improvements (see Table 1).</p>	<p>p. 3 and 6</p>

	<p>Experiential Marketing Section Paragraphs are conceptually strong, but some are overly long. Consider breaking into shorter units. Ensure all citations use correct APA 7 formatting (check <i>Brakus et al., 2009</i> consistency).</p> <p>Brand Trust Section "brand trust is influenced by three primary elements" — well stated, but the following paragraph is long; consider bullet points or shorter sentences. Typo: "and and Tran et al. (2022)" → remove duplicate "and".</p> <p>Brand Love Section Good theoretical coverage, but again, paragraphs are very dense. "strong affective response" appears twice — avoid repetition.</p> <p>Hypothesis Development Several paragraphs list many studies consecutively. Combine and synthesize instead of listing study after study. Ensure hypotheses use consistent capitalization: e.g., "Brand trust has a significant positive effect...".</p>	<p>These paragraphs are conceptually strong, but some of them are too long. Consider dividing them into several shorter sections. Ensure that all citations use the correct APA 7 format (check the consistency of <i>Brakus et al., 2009</i> in sub-section 2.1.2). Indeed, these paragraphs seem too long. The authors have divided them into shorter sections. We have then carefully checked all the literature cited using the correct APA 7 format (including <i>Brakus et al., 2009</i>). Everything appears to be consistent.</p> <p>To make the text easier to understand, we have summarised the statement 'three main elements that can influence brand trust' to make it more concise. Please re-check paragraph 3 in sub-section 2.1.3. Also, duplicate words (<i>and</i>) in citations such as '<i>Tran et al. (2022)</i>' have been removed. Please see the new corrections in Table 1.</p> <p>To avoid repetition, words such as '<i>strong affective response</i>' were deleted and replaced with '<i>powerful emotional response</i>'. Minor corrections were made in sub-section 2.1.4.</p> <p>Thank you for your keen observation. Several paragraphs synthesising similar studies have been combined to maintain focus on hypothesis development. In addition, we have capitalised the fifth hypothesis (H5) to align it with the other proposed hypotheses. These revisions are recorded in sub-section 2.2.</p>	<p>p. 3</p> <p>pp. 3–4 and p. 6</p> <p>p. 4</p> <p>pp. 4–5</p>
4.	<p>METHODOLOGY</p> <p>Variables Table "Urdea dan Constantin" again → change to "&". Ensure all references are consistently formatted within the table.</p> <p>Sampling Section</p>	<p>The references have been typed using the appropriate format (see Table 1).</p>	<p>pp. 6–7</p> <p>p. 7</p>

	<p><i>“the optimal and ideal sample size was 170, derived from 10 × 17” — “optimal” and “ideal” are redundant.</i></p> <p>Instrument Section <i>“The attached documents include...”</i> — remove mentioning attachments unless actually included. Overly detailed ethical approval procedures; may be shortened. <i>“CMB is applied...”</i> → consider passive phrasing: <i>“CMB was assessed...”</i> Sentence structure in the paragraph is long; consider simplifying.</p>	<p>Thank you for your comment. The terms ‘<i>optimal</i>’ and ‘<i>ideal</i>’ seem excessive. The correct word to replace both is ‘<i>applied</i>’. Please refer to sub-section 3.3.</p> <p>The sentence was indeed not ideal, so the word ‘<i>attachment</i>’ was removed. We also shortened the explanation in the ethical approval procedure section. Finally, the use of passive sentences such as ‘<i>CMB was applied...</i>’ was corrected to ‘<i>CMB was evaluated...</i>’. Overall, the overly long sentence structure in the second paragraph of sub-section 3.4 was simplified.</p>	<p>p. 7</p>
<p>5.</p>	<p>RESULTS</p> <p>Descriptive Statistics Check table formatting—some tables (especially Table 3) appear misaligned. Ensure consistent decimal formatting (e.g., 89.38 vs 94.92 vs 90 — trailing zeros should be consistent).</p> <p>Outer Model Check correct spelling: “<i>Experiental marketing</i>” appears multiple times—should be “<i>Experiential marketing</i>.” In Table 5, ensure consistent column spacing.</p> <p>Cross-loading Table Some loadings appear unusually high across multiple constructs (e.g., X2.5 loads 0.807 on brand love). Consider commenting on potential overlap in discussion.</p> <p>Inner Model/Hypothesis Testing Recheck APA formatting for Hair et al. references; ensure the work cited exists. The explanation of R² and Q² is correct but overly detailed; consider shortening.</p>	<p>Your comment is correct. The decimal format in Table 3 appears to be misaligned. The use of zeros in descriptive statistics has been corrected for consistency.</p> <p>Your attention to detail is impressive. There is a spelling error in ‘<i>experiental marketing</i>’; it should be ‘<i>experiential marketing</i>’. Furthermore, as per your instructions, the column spacing in Table 5 has been adjusted.</p> <p>Some cross-loading values on the indicators appear abnormal because they are relatively high for some constructs. To highlight these anomalies, the authors interpret them in greater depth. See sub-section 4.4 (second paragraph).</p> <p>Based on the APA format, we acknowledge that the citation from the reference ‘<i>Hair et al., & Alamer (2022)</i>’ is incorrect and that the correct citation is ‘<i>Hair & Alamer (2022)</i>’. This is in accordance with the</p>	<p>p. 10</p> <p>p. 11 and all pages in the manuscript concerning the revision of the spelling of ‘<i>experiential marketing</i>’.</p> <p>p. 12</p> <p>pp. 13–14</p>

	In Table 11, ensure consistent casing of variable names (e.g., “experiential” again).	available reference list (see sub-section 4.4, paragraph 3). Furthermore, the overly detailed description of the results regarding the R ² and Q ² values has been summarised. In Table 11, we have also ensured that capitalisation of variable names has been applied, including correcting the word ‘ <i>experiental</i> ’ to ‘ <i>experiential</i> ’ (i.e. H2 and H4).	
6.	<p>DISCUSSION</p> <p>Several paragraphs are excessively long and narrative. Consider breaking into sub-sections: (1) Interpretation of significant paths, (2) Interpretation of non-significant path, (3) Comparison to prior literature, and (4) Implications.</p> <p>Some sentences repeat ideas already presented earlier (especially regarding eWOM → brand love). Strengthen the explanation of why eWOM was insignificant — current explanation is overly lengthy.</p>	Several paragraphs in the discussion chapter are narrative and too long. As previously suggested by the reviewer, the discussion structure should emphasise four main points: (1) interpretation of findings, (2) phenomena in the field, (3) comparison with previous similar literature, and (4) implications of the results. For this reason, we have followed the reviewer's instructions. However, the sentences in the discussion chapter seem to repeat ideas that have already been presented earlier. They are summarised with reference to the four crucial points above, especially the testing of insignificant hypothesis paths (H3), which requires critical explanation. In other words, each discussion of the hypothesis test results is presented in five sub-sections in a more focused and concise manner.	pp. 14–16
7.	<p>CONCLUSION</p> <p>Good summary, but the first paragraph still repeats findings already stated in the abstract and results.</p> <p>Managerial implications are strong, but some sentences are overly wordy.</p> <p>Example: “<i>They should also enhance sensory branding... whose impact is immediate and tangible.</i>” → This can be shortened.</p> <p>Check punctuation in limitation section: stray comma before “<i>It is advisable...</i>”.</p>	The first paragraph of the summary chapter has been revised so as not to repeat the explanations in the abstract and results, but rather to be presented in a different format (latest correction in sub-chapter 6.1). Authors have added managerial implications referring to the reviewer's previous suggestion regarding the strengthening of sensory branding. Nevertheless, the sentence has been shortened as per your instructions (please refer back to sub-chapter 6.2). Also, we checked	pp. 16–17

		the punctuation in sub-section 6.3, where an unnecessary comma in the sentence before ' <i>It is advisable...</i> ' was removed.	
8.	<p>REFERENCES</p> <p>Several references use inconsistent styles: (1) Mix of "<i>Retrieved from</i>" (not needed in APA unless no DOI and URL required), (2) Inconsistent capitalization of article titles, and (3) Missing DOIs for some articles that typically have DOIs</p> <p>Ensure all in-text citations appear in the reference list and vice versa.</p>	<p>Dear authors, we appreciate your constructive recommendations. Some references use inconsistent styles, which should follow the APA style. In accordance with the accepted writing guidelines, we only use the phrase '<i>Retrieved from</i>' for publications that do not have a DOI or URL, while some articles that are not supported by a DOI number do not use this phrase. The titles of some articles have been corrected with regard to capitalisation (in accordance with the original form).</p> <p>Each citation is adjusted to the title of the article or literature with a database display in accordance with the citation format provided by the original publisher. We have also corrected the year of publication of Kalyoncuoğlu's, which should be 2017, not 2023. In a similar case, the missing DOI number for the journal article was found (https://doi.org/10.21325/jotags.2017.156). We have double-checked and ensured that all citations in the text are listed in the reference list and vice versa.</p>	pp. 17–21
9.	<p>SPECIFIC ITEMS</p> <p><i>Urdea dan Constantin</i> → should be <i>Urdea & Constantin</i>.</p> <p>Some 2025 references seem speculative; verify accuracy.</p> <p>Prevent duplicate or incorrect author entries (e.g., <i>Bıçakcı</i> appears truncated in the provided snippet).</p>	<p>For the record, the reference from "<i>Urdea dan Constantin</i>" has been revised to "<i>Urdea & Constantin</i>" (re-highlight the third paragraph in the introduction). However, for the context of the citation in the same reference, we wrote "became <i>Urdea and Constantin</i>" in Table 1.</p> <p>Several references published in the 2025 edition that appeared to be speculative. After verification, two literature sources (<i>Kuleh et al., 2025</i>; <i>Oktawiranti et al., 2025</i>) were removed from the manuscript because they were not sufficiently</p>	<p>p. 2 and 6</p> <p>pp. 17–19</p>

	<p>accurate in relation to the context discussed.</p> <p>As part of the final revisions, the manuscript by <i>Bıçakcıoğlu et al. (2023)</i> was not found in the official source of publication. Not only was the author's name entered incorrectly and the writing truncated, but the literature was also removed. The authors made the best possible corrections, but please do not hesitate to notify us if any parts require further revision.</p>	
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5) Manukrip versi koreksi pertama

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 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 Partial Least Squares (PLS) with 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 Capital City of Nusantara (IKN) will not only physically shift the administrative hub but also transform 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 like 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, 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 advance to a higher level. These MSMEs are receiving assistance with 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 eWOM. Lim et al. (2022) and Mehyar et al. (2020) define eWOM as positive and/or negative statements made by potential customers. eWOM plays a crucial role 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 separately. 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.

A 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 (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999). 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—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 MSMEs 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 considered comparable to or even surpasses that of direct word-of-mouth (Reichelt et al., 2014; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Consequently, eWOM is a critical factor of 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 not reading reviews prior to buying, as well as increased confidence after 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 Ngo et al. (2024) and Zhang (2023), 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 (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999). 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—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, 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 (Garg et al., 2022; Wiedmann et al., 2021).

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 cares about 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; Putra et al., 2023; Rather et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022). 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; Aro & Tähinen, 2025; Pourazad et al., 2024). Love for a brand develops through consumers' positive experiences with a product, resulting in deep emotional and affective judgments toward that 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 that brand (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Ismagilova et al., 2020; Le et al., 2024; Ngo et al., 2024; Sudaryanto et al., 2025). Meanwhile, trust arising 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), Istiqomah and Setyawan (2025), and Paruthi et al. (2023), 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 that 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—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 believe that a brand is transparent, delivers on its promises, and consistently promotes quality experiences, that trust strengthens the emotional and affective factors at the core of the consumer-brand relationship, which underpins brand love. For example, Li and Park (2025), Na et al. (2023) and Suharsono (2024) 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:

- 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. Broadly speaking, the model path analyzed represents direct relationships.

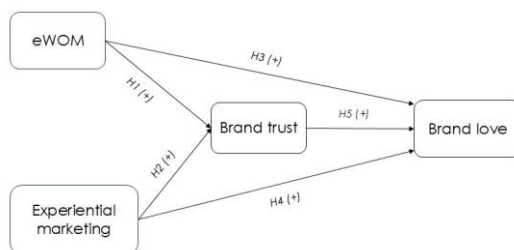


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

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—when positive reviews from other consumers are disseminated online, they build perceptions of brand reliability and transparency, thereby strengthening brand trust, as evidenced by Wilia 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 5 indicators, eWOM has 3 indicators, and brand trust is supported by 4 indicators.

Table 1: Details of the variables studied

Variables and definitions	Indicators	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 and 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)

3.2 Sources and Techniques of Data Collection

This study was conducted using primary data obtained directly from the original source through the distribution of questionnaires to respondents. 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 by an online questionnaire (Google Forms), which was distributed to respondents via a link. Respondents completed the questionnaire based on statements corresponding to the indicators for 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.

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 (considered of productive age 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 by multiplying 5 to 10 times the number of indicators (statement items) in

the questionnaire. Based on this instrument, 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 two months (August 2025–September 2025).

3.4 Research Instruments

Prior to the PLS analysis stage, questionnaire data validation was conducted 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, with the criterion that any question (i.e., each indicator) exhibiting a correlation below 0.3 should be deleted or revised.

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.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a SEM technique called partial least squares (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) conducted a descriptive statistical analysis based on average scores (indexes), which were grouped into score ranges using the three-box method calculation:

- Upper limit of score range: $(\% \text{ frequency} \times 5) \div 5 = (100 \times 5) \div 5 = 100$
- 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., 2019; 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 the average variance extracted ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$) 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:

- 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.
- 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 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 and 79 (46%) were female. The majority of respondents were aged 26–35 years, totaling 91 individuals (54%). Also, 44 respondents (25%) were over 36 years old, 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.

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 PPU, and 7 respondents (4%) from Kutai Timur.

Table 2: Respondent demographics

Characteristics	Items	F	%
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
	PPU	10	6
Product consumption level	Culinary	58	34
	Processing industry	37	22
	Crafts	75	44

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.

Table 3: Summary of descriptive statistics regarding respondents' statements

Variables	Indicators (codes)	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										80.8	High
Experiential marketing	Sense (X2.1)	0	0	2	2	8	7.8	43	42.2	49	48	87.2	High
	Feel (X2.2)	0	0	1	1	16	15.7	45	44.1	40	39.2	84.3	High
	Think (X2.3)	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										88.6	High
Brand trust	Trustworthiness (Y1.1)	1	1	1	1	20	19.6	47	46.1	33	32.4	81.6	High
	Reliable (Y1.2)	4	3.9	2	2	7	6.9	13	12.7	76	74.5	90.4	High
	Honesty (Y1.3)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	34	33.3	64	62.7	91.5	High
	Safety (Y1.4)	0	0	0	0	5	4.9	61	59.8	36	35.3	86.1	High
		Average										87.4	High
Brand love	The appeal of a product (Y2.1)	0	0	1	1	23	22.5	46	45.1	32	31.4	81.4	High
	Interest in the product (Y2.2)	0	0	2	2	16	15.7	37	36.3	47	46.1	85.4	High
	Positive evaluation of the product (Y2.3)	1	1	0	0	3	2.9	41	40.2	57	55.9	90.0	High
	Positive feelings toward the product (Y2.4)	0	0	0	0	11	10.8	45	44.1	46	45.1	86.9	High
	Love for the product (Y2.5)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	32	31.4	66	64.7	92	High
		Average										87.1	High

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.

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; those below this threshold are not. 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. In comparison, eWOM, consisting of 3 indicators, had r -values ranging from 0.376 to 0.521; experiential marketing, with 5 indicators, had r -values between 0.394 and 0.694; brand trust, with 4 indicators, showed r -values from 0.314 to 0.502; and brand love, with 5 indicators, had r -values ranging from 0.372 to 0.587.

Table 4: Summary of preliminary test results and CMB

Indicators	r-value	Total variance explained		
		Eigenvalue	% of variance	Cumulative %
X1.1	0.521	6.12	36	36
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

Second, the 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 CR and 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 initial model's factor loading results, shown in Figure 2, prove that no indicators were removed from the structural model, as all were valid following convergent validity testing. Empirically, all indicators across both variables satisfy the minimum AVE requirement (> 0.5).

Table 5: Outer loadings results

Indicators	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

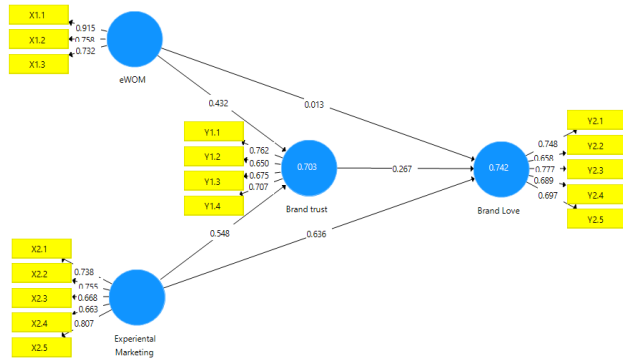


Figure 2: Analysed structural model

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. 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

Indicators	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

Variables	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 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{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.

Table 8: Results of the Fornell-Larcker criteria

Variables	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

The bold diagonal values represent the \sqrt{AVE} for each construct, while the values outside the diagonal indicate the correlations between constructs. The results of the Fornell-Larcker test show that each construct's diagonal \sqrt{AVE} value is greater than its correlations with other constructs in the same row or column. Referring to Table 8, the \sqrt{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 a \sqrt{AVE} of 0.748; this value is higher than its correlation with experiential marketing (0.728). In other words, the \sqrt{AVE} for eWOM is greater than its correlations with other constructs (see Table 8).

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).

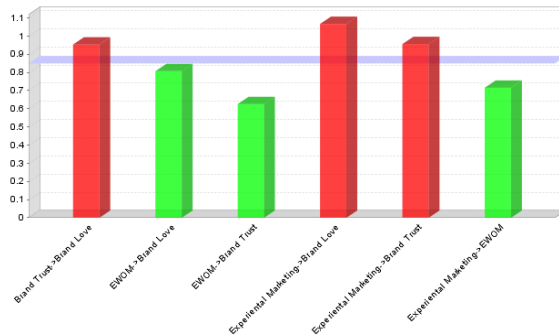


Figure 3: HTMT ratio

Table 9: Reliability test results

Variables	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

Third, CR and CA values are used to assess the reliability between the indicators of the constructs they represent. 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.

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—eWOM and experiential marketing—are analyzed for their influence on two endogenous variables: brand trust and brand love.

Table 10: Determination test results

Variables	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. 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).

Table 11: Details of hypothesis testing results

Linggages	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

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 around the IKN 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 promotions (e.g., WOM), consumers tend to trust product promotions conducted online more, making the combination of the two—namely eWOM—an important tool to reduce uncertainty in 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 all 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. In their scientific work, 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, our found that the role of eWOM can increase brand love; however, its influence is not strong enough to be considered significant (H3 rejected). The controversy surrounding eWOM's lack of significant influence appears to stem from the ineffective use of social media in promoting products, which fails to generate 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—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—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 object.

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, on an Indonesian scale, research by Siahaan et al. (2023) reports 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—through deep experiences and direct interactions—is more effective in forming emotional bonds with brands than mere information exchange between consumers (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 digitization of MSMEs, relying solely on an online marketing strategy focused on eWOM is insufficient to ensure brand love.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Main Findings

The Department of Industry, Trade, Cooperatives, and SMEs of East Kalimantan Province (2023) reported that the total number of MSMEs in East Kalimantan Province reached 460,147 units in 2022. The data also indicate that, of the 460,147 MSMEs categorized by three business sectors—industry, trade, and services—the industrial sector accounted for the largest share with 226,281 units (49.17%), followed by the trade sector with 195,704 units (42.53%), and the service sector with 38,162 units (8.29%). 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 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 SMEs in the digital era.

6.2 Managerial Implications

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.

6.3 Theoretical Implications

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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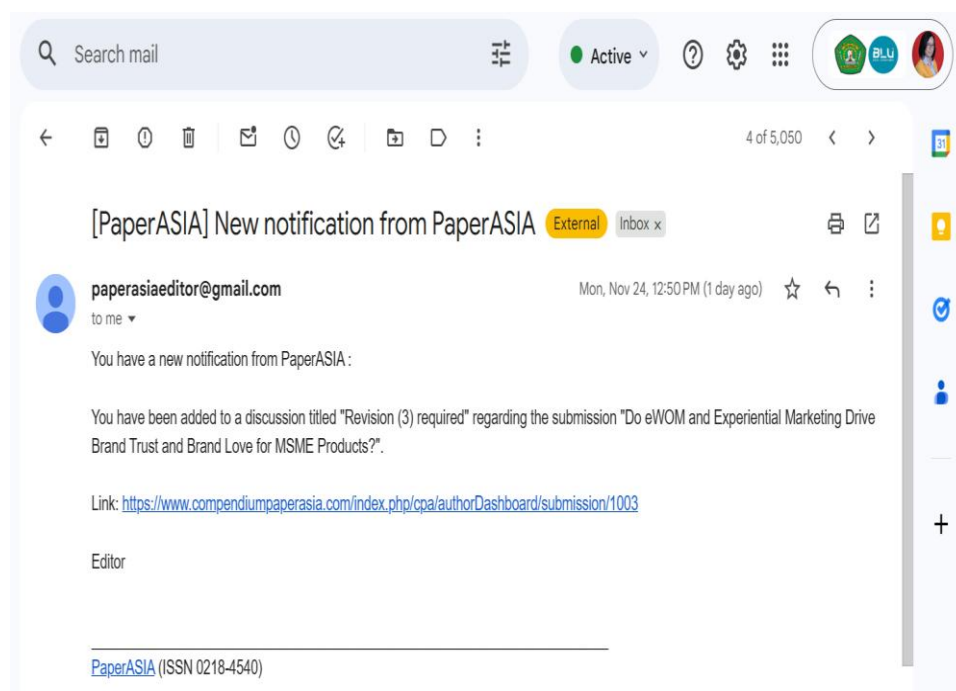
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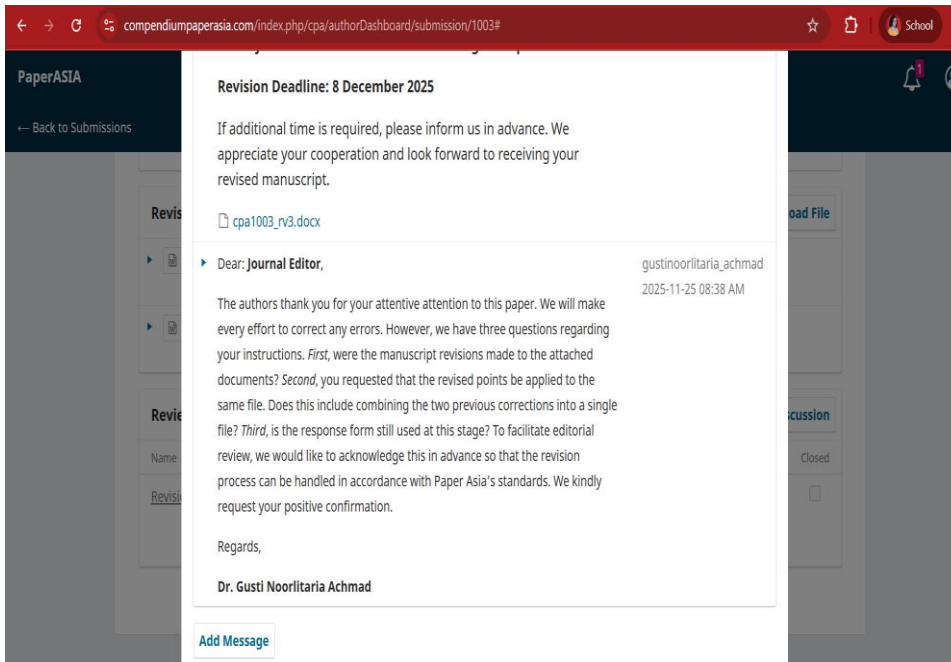
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6) Manuskrip versi koreksi kedua

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

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- The manuscript contains frequent use of em dashes. Limiting their number and varying the punctuation would help create smoother, more natural sentence structures.

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quantitative approach was employed, involving a sample of 170 respondents who are consumers of MSME products. Data analysis was performed using partial least squares (PLS) with 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) will not only physically shift the administrative hub but also transform 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 advance to a higher level. 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 eWOM. Lim et al. (2022) and Mehryar et al. (2020) 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 (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999). 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—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 MSMEs 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 (Reichelt et al., 2014; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). 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 Ngo et al. (2024) and Zhang (2023), 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 (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999). 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—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 (Garg et al., 2022; Wiedmann et al., 2021).

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; Putra et al., 2023; Rather et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022). 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; Aro & Tähtinen, 2025; Pourazad et al., 2024). 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 have 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), Istiqomah and Setyawan (2025), and Paruthi et al. (2023), 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—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, Li and Park (2025), Na et al. (2023) and Suharsono (2024) 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.

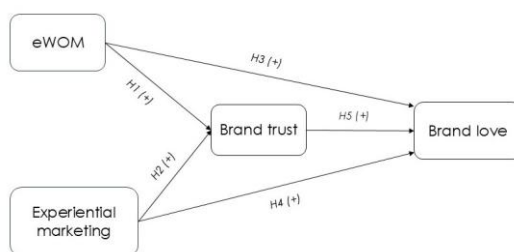


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

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—when positive reviews from other consumers are disseminated online, they build perceptions of brand reliability and transparency, thereby strengthening brand trust, as evidenced by Wilia 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.

Table 1: Details of the variables studied

Variables and definitions	Indicators	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)	Ghondagsaz 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)

3.2 Sources and Techniques of Data Collection

This study was conducted using primary data obtained directly 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.

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 micro, small, and medium enterprises (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.

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:

- Upper limit of score range: $(\% \text{ frequency} \times 5) \div 5 = (100 \times 5) \div 5 = 100$
- 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., 2019; 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

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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:

- 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.
- 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 micro, small, and medium enterprises (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 and 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.

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.

Table 2: Respondent demographics

Characteristics	Items	F	%
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
	PPU	10	6
Product consumption level	Culinary	58	34
	Processing industry	37	22
	Crafts	75	44

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 electronic word-of-mouth (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.

Table 3: Summary of descriptive statistics regarding respondents' statements

Variables	Indicators (codes)	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											80.8	High
Experiential marketing	Sense (X2.1)	0	0	2	2	8	7.8	43	42.2	49	48	87.2	High
	Feel (X2.2)	0	0	1	1	16	15.7	45	44.1	40	39.2	84.3	High
	Think (X2.3)	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											88.6	High	
Brand trust	Trustworthiness (Y1.1)	1	1	1	1	20	19.6	47	46.1	33	32.4	81.6	High
	Reliable (Y1.2)	4	3.9	2	2	7	6.9	13	12.7	76	74.5	90.4	High
	Honesty (Y1.3)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	34	33.3	64	62.7	91.5	High
	Safety (Y1.4)	0	0	0	0	5	4.9	61	59.8	36	35.3	86.1	High
Average											87.4	High	
Brand love	The appeal of a product (Y2.1)	0	0	1	1	23	22.5	46	45.1	32	31.4	81.4	High
	Interest in the product (Y2.2)	0	0	2	2	16	15.7	37	36.3	47	46.1	85.4	High
	Positive evaluation of the product (Y2.3)	1	1	0	0	3	2.9	41	40.2	57	55.9	90.0	High
	Positive feelings toward the product (Y2.4)	0	0	0	0	11	10.8	45	44.1	46	45.1	86.9	High
	Love for the product (Y2.5)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	32	31.4	66	64.7	92	High

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.

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 construct, 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 exhibited 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

Indicators	r-value	Total variance explained		
		Eigenvalue	% of variance	Cumulative %
X1.1	0.521	6.12	36	36
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

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 average variance extracted (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 initial model's factor loading results, shown in **Figure 2**, prove that no indicators were removed from the structural model, as all were valid following convergent validity testing. Empirically, all indicators across both variables satisfy the minimum AVE requirement (> 0.5).

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Table 5: Outer loadings results

Indicators	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

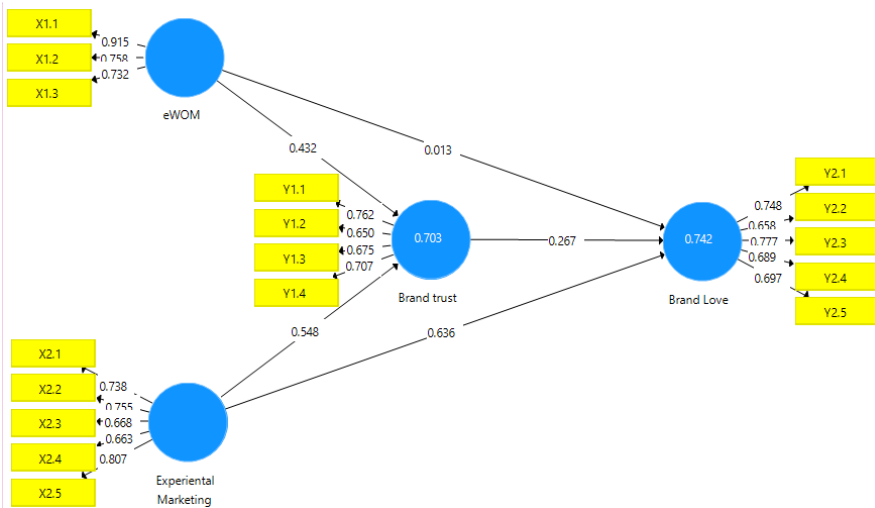


Figure 2: Analyzed structural model

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. 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

Indicators	eWOM	Experiential marketing	Brand trust	Brand love
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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

Variables	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.

Table 8: Results of the Fornell-Larcker criteria

Variables	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

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 a $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ of 0.748; 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.

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).

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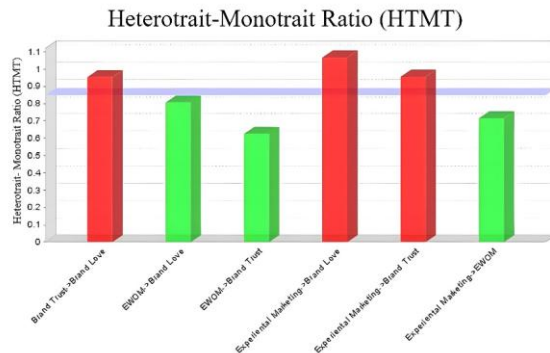


Figure 3: HTMT ratio

Table 9: Reliability test results

Variables	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

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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.

4.5 Evaluation of Inner Models

Two key points are essential when evaluating the inner model in partial least squares (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—eWOM and experiential marketing—are analyzed for their influence on two endogenous variables: brand trust and brand love.

Table 10: Determination test results

Variables	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. 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).

Table 11: Details of hypothesis testing results

Linggages	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

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 electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) significantly increases brand trust (H1 accepted). eWOM promoted by micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) players around the *Ibu Kota Nusantara* or Capital City of Nusantara (IKN) 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—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—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 object.

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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 Prastivi 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, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and experiential marketing—using a case study of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) products in the *Ibu Kota Nusantara* or Capital City of Nusantara (IKN) region. Employing the partial least squares (PLS) method, this study 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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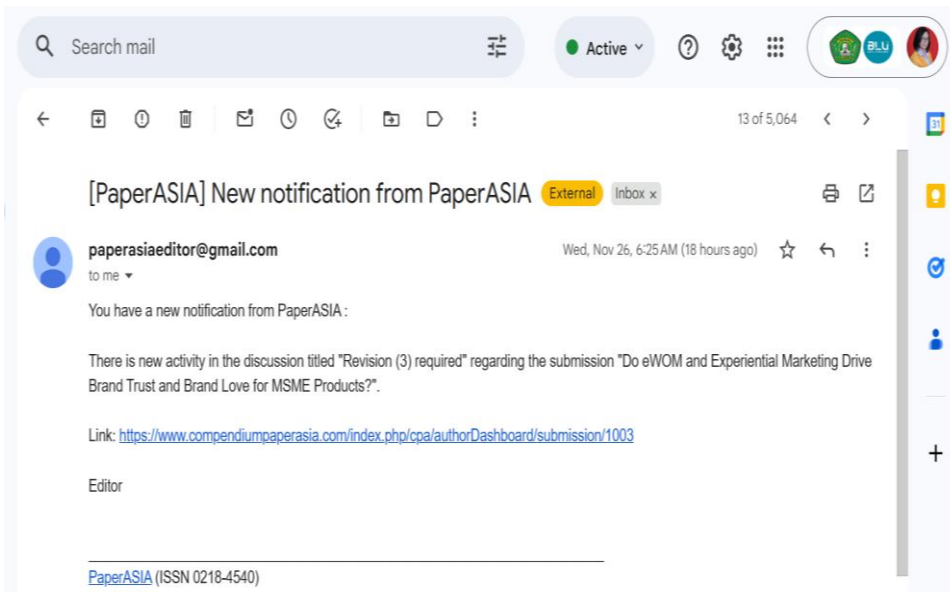
Commented [uu26R25]: Dear, once again, the authors would like to thank you for your critical feedback and keen eye in identifying the shortcomings of this manuscript. Basically, we tried to follow the structure of some of the articles published in the Paper Asia journal. However, the conclusion chapter has been revised and you can check the changes in that chapter. Currently, the conclusion chapter is more concise and presented without subsections. We summarized it by focusing only on the main findings, implications, and limitations in three paragraphs in one chapter.

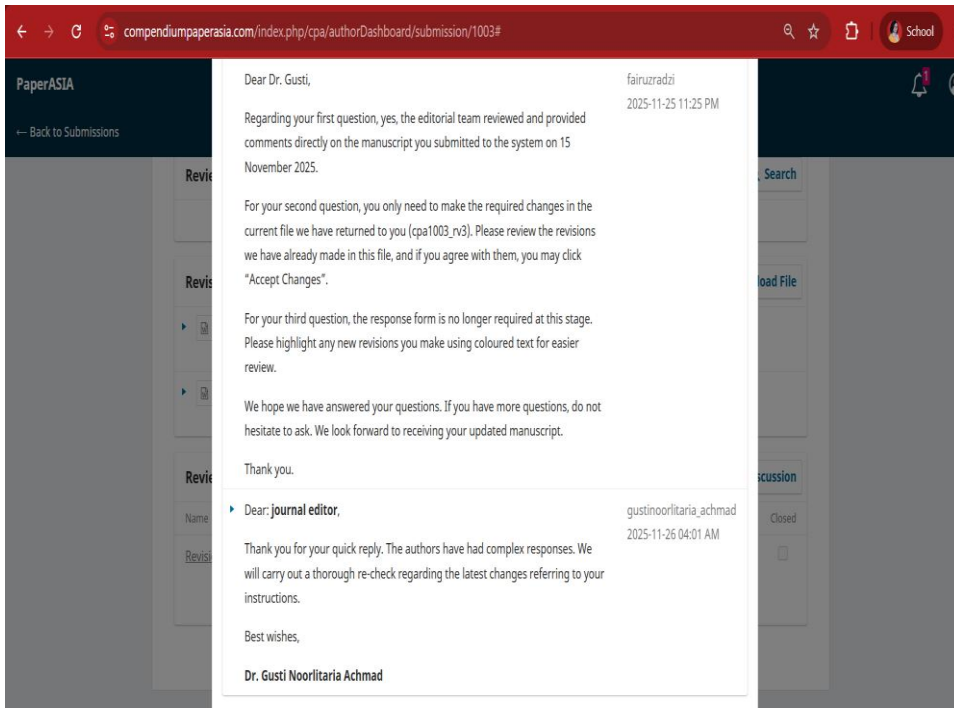
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7) Manukrip versi koreksi ketiga

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 partial least squares (PLS) with 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) will not only physically shift the administrative hub but also transform 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 advance to a higher level. 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 eWOM. Lim et al. (2022) and Mehyar et al. (2020) 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 (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999). 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—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 MSMEs 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 (Reichelt et al., 2014; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). 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 Ngo et al. (2024) and Zhang (2023), 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 (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999). 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 (Garg et al., 2022; Wiedmann et al., 2021).

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; Putra et al., 2023; Rather et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022). 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; Aro & Tähtinen, 2025; Pourazad et al., 2024). 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 have 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), Istiqomah and Setyawan (2025), and Paruthi et al. (2023), 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—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, Li and Park (2025), Na et al. (2023) and Suharsono (2024) 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:

H6: eWOM has a significant positive effect on brand trust.

H7: Experiential marketing has a significant positive effect on brand trust.

H8: eWOM has a significant positive effect on brand love.

H9: Experiential marketing has a significant positive effect on brand love.

H10: 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.

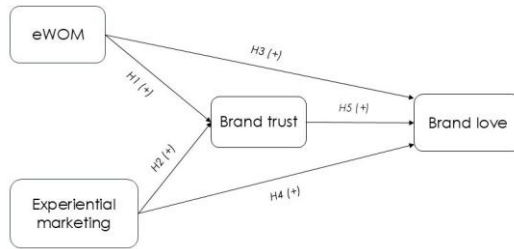


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

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—when positive reviews from other consumers are disseminated online, they build perceptions of brand reliability and transparency, thereby strengthening brand trust, as evidenced by Wilia 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.

Table 1: Details of the variables studied

Variables and definitions	Indicators	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), Mehayar 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	Y1.1: Consumers' perception of product trustworthiness. Y1.2: Consumer confidence and perceptions of product reliability.	Likert (1–5)	Ghondagsaz and Engesser (2022), Putra et al. (2023),

that the brand can be consistently relied upon.	Y1.3: Consumers' perception of a product's trustworthiness as an honest brand. Y1.4: Consumer confidence in product safety.		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)

3.2 Sources and Techniques of Data Collection

This study was conducted using primary data obtained directly 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.

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 micro, small, and medium enterprises (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.

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If you cannot provide this information, please revise the paragraph accordingly and avoid stating or implying that ethical approval was granted.

Commented [uu28R27]: Dear, as you are aware, this study has received ethical approval, and all necessary information must be included. We adhere to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines—in this case, the Declaration of Helsinki—and have obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee, referencing the research grant contract number.

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:

- Upper limit of score range: $(\% \text{ frequency} \times 5) \div 5 = (100 \times 5) \div 5 = 100$
- 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., 2019; 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:

- 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.
- 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 micro, small, and medium enterprises (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 and 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.

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.

Table 2: Respondent demographics

Characteristics	Items	F	%
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
	PPU	10	6
Product consumption level	Culinary	58	34
	Processing industry	37	22
	Crafts	75	44

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 electronic word-of-mouth (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.

Table 3: Summary of descriptive statistics regarding respondents' statements

Variables	Indicators (codes)	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	80.8	High
Experiential marketing	Sense (X2.1)	0	0	2	2	8	7.8	43	42.2	49	48	87.2	High
	Feel (X2.2)	0	0	1	1	16	15.7	45	44.1	40	39.2	84.3	High
	Think (X2.3)	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	88.6	High
Brand trust	Trustworthiness (Y1.1)	1	1	1	1	20	19.6	47	46.1	33	32.4	81.6	
	Reliable (Y1.2)	4	3.9	2	2	7	6.9	13	12.7	76	74.5	90.4	High
	Honesty (Y1.3)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	34	33.3	64	62.7	91.5	High
	Safety (Y1.4)	0	0	0	0	5	4.9	61	59.8	36	35.3	86.1	High
											Average	87.4	High
Brand love	The appeal of a product (Y2.1)	0	0	1	1	23	22.5	46	45.1	32	31.4	81.4	High
	Interest in the product (Y2.2)	0	0	2	2	16	15.7	37	36.3	47	46.1	85.4	High
	Positive evaluation of the product (Y2.3)	1	1	0	0	3	2.9	41	40.2	57	55.9	90.0	High
	Positive feelings toward the product (Y2.4)	0	0	0	0	11	10.8	45	44.1	46	45.1	86.9	High
	Love for the product (Y2.5)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	32	31.4	66	64.7	92	High
											Average	87.1	High

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.

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 construct, 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 exhibited 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

Indicators	r-value	Total variance explained		
		Eigenvalue	% of variance	Cumulative %
X1.1	0.521	6.12	36	36
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

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 average variance extracted (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 initial model's factor loading results, shown in **Figure 2**, prove that no indicators were removed from the structural model, as all were valid following convergent validity testing. Empirically, all indicators across both variables satisfy the minimum AVE requirement (> 0.5).

Table 5: Outer loadings results

Indicators	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. 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**).

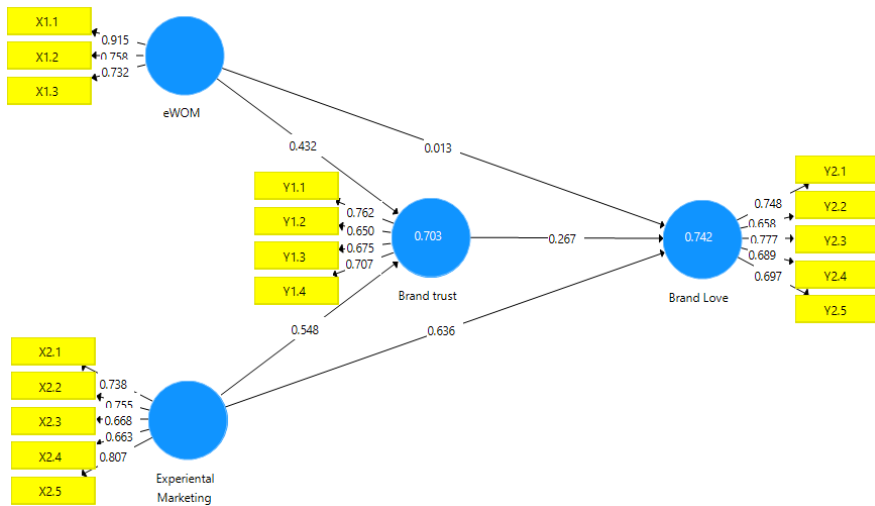


Figure 2: Analyzed structural model

Table 6: Cross-loadings results

Indicators	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

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.

Table 7: AVE value of each variable

Variables	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

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 a $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ of 0.748; this value is higher than its correlation

with experiential marketing (0.728). In other words, the \sqrt{AVE} for eWOM is greater than its correlations with other constructs.

Table 8: Results of the Fornell-Larcker criteria

Variables	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).

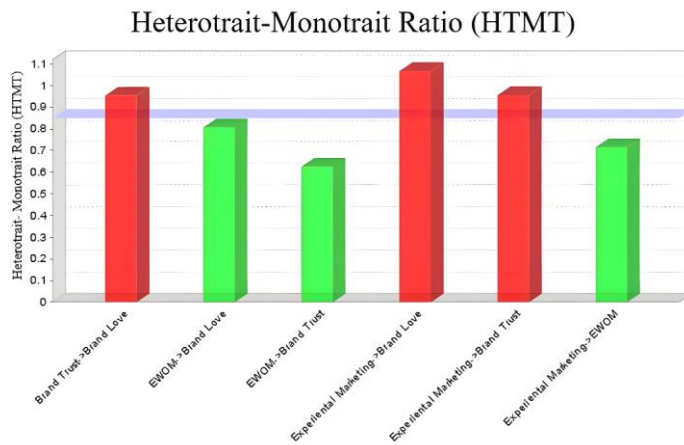


Figure 3: HTMT ratio

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

Variables	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 partial least squares (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

Variables	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).

Table 11: Details of hypothesis testing results

Linggages	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

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 electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) significantly increases brand trust (H1 accepted). eWOM promoted by micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) players around the Ibu Kota Nusantara or Capital City of Nusantara (IKN) 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.

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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 experiences 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—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—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 object.

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, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and experiential marketing—using a case study of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) products in the *Ibu Kota Nusantara* or Capital City of Nusantara (IKN) region. Employing the partial least squares (PLS) method, this study 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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Alur 11- Komentar lanjutan (revisi tahap keempat): 9 Desember 2025

The screenshot shows an email interface with a search bar at the top, navigation icons, and a notification from PaperASIA. The notification is titled "[PaperASIA] New notification from PaperASIA" and is marked as "External" and "Inbox x". It is from "paperasiaeditor@gmail.com" and dated "Tue, Dec 9, 2:44 PM (22 hours ago)". The main body of the email states: "You have a new notification from PaperASIA : You have been added to a discussion titled 'Revision (4) required' regarding the submission 'Do eWOM and Experiential Marketing Drive Brand Trust and Brand Love for MSME Products?'." A link is provided: "Link: <https://www.compendiumpaperasia.com/index.php/cpa/authorDashboard/submission/1003>". The email is signed "Editor" and includes the PaperASIA logo and ISSN number (0218-4540) at the bottom.

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Revision ID	File Name	Date	Type
8817	B-cpa1003_review (2nd).docx	November 15, 2025	Article Text
8818	paperASIA_responseForm2024-OTH (2nd).docx	November 15, 2025	Other
9232	1003-Article Text-7919-9070-18-20251124 (3rd).docx	November 30, 2025	Other
9673	1003-Article Text-8365-9567-18-20251209 (4th).docx	December 14, 2025	Other

- Review Discussions:** A section with an "Add discussion" button.

8) Manukrip versi koreksi keempat

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 partial least squares (PLS) with 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) will not only physically shift the administrative hub but also transform 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 advance to a higher level. 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 eWOM. Lim et al. (2022) and Mehyar et al. (2020) 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 (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999). 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—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 MSMEs 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 (Reichelt et al., 2014; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). 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 Ngo et al. (2024) and Zhang (2023), 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 (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999). 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 (Garg et al., 2022; Wiedmann et al., 2021).

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; Putra et al., 2023; Rather et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022). 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; Aro & Tähtinen, 2025; Pourazad et al., 2024). 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 have 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), Istiqomah and Setyawan (2025), and Paruthi et al. (2023), 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—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, Li and Park (2025), Na et al. (2023) and Suharsono (2024) 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:

- H11: eWOM has a significant positive effect on brand trust.
- H12: Experiential marketing has a significant positive effect on brand trust.
- H13: eWOM has a significant positive effect on brand love.
- H14: Experiential marketing has a significant positive effect on brand love.
- H15: 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.

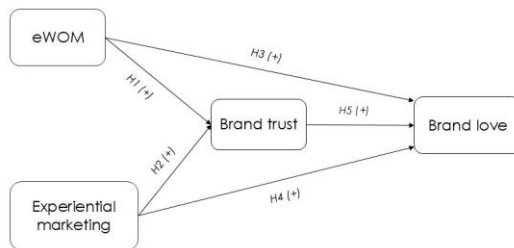


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

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—when positive reviews from other consumers are disseminated online, they build perceptions of brand reliability and transparency, thereby strengthening brand trust, as evidenced by Wilia 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.

Table 1: Details of the variables studied

Variables and definitions	Indicators	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), Mehyar 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)	Ghondagsaz 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)

3.2 Sources and Techniques of Data Collection

This study was conducted using primary data obtained directly 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.

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 micro, small, and medium enterprises (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/JUN17/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:

- Upper limit of score range: $(\% \text{ frequency} \times 5) \div 5 = (100 \times 5) \div 5 = 100$
- 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., 2019; 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:

- 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.
- 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 micro, small, and medium enterprises (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 and 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.

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.

Table 2: Respondent demographics

Characteristics	Items	F	%
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

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 electronic word-of-mouth (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.

Table 3: Summary of descriptive statistics regarding respondents' statements

Variables	Indicators (codes)	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											80.8	High
Experiential marketing	Sense (X2.1)	0	0	2	2	8	7.8	43	42.2	49	48	87.2	High
	Feel (X2.2)	0	0	1	1	16	15.7	45	44.1	40	39.2	84.3	High
	Think (X2.3)	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											88.6	High	
Brand trust	Trustworthiness (Y1.1)	1	1	1	1	20	19.6	47	46.1	33	32.4	81.6	High
	Reliable (Y1.2)	4	3.9	2	2	7	6.9	13	12.7	76	74.5	90.4	High
	Honesty (Y1.3)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	34	33.3	64	62.7	91.5	High
	Safety (Y1.4)	0	0	0	0	5	4.9	61	59.8	36	35.3	86.1	High
Average											87.4	High	
Brand love	The appeal of a product (Y2.1)	0	0	1	1	23	22.5	46	45.1	32	31.4	81.4	High
	Interest in the product (Y2.2)	0	0	2	2	16	15.7	37	36.3	47	46.1	85.4	High
	Positive evaluation of the product (Y2.3)	1	1	0	0	3	2.9	41	40.2	57	55.9	90.0	High

Positive feelings toward the product (Y2.4)	0	0	0	0	11	10.8	45	44.1	46	45.1	86.9	High
Love for the product (Y2.5)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	32	31.4	66	64.7	92	High
	Average										87.1	High

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.

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 construct, 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 exhibited 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

Indicators	r-value	Total variance explained		
		Eigenvalue	% of variance	Cumulative %
X1.1	0.521	6.12	36	36
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

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 average variance extracted (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 initial model's factor loading results, shown in **Figure 2**,

prove that no indicators were removed from the structural model, as all were valid following convergent validity testing. Empirically, all indicators across both variables satisfy the minimum AVE requirement (> 0.5).

Table 5: Outer loadings results

Indicators	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

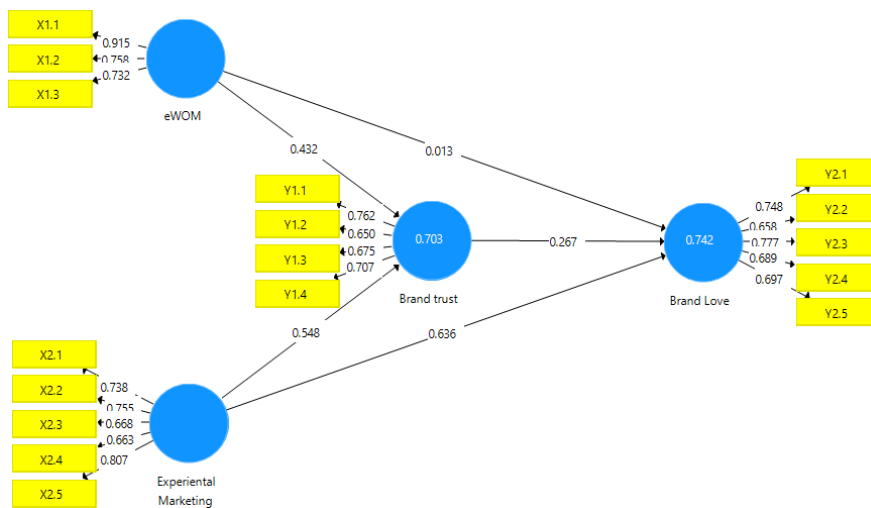


Figure 2: Analyzed structural model

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. 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

Indicators	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

Variables	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 a $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ of 0.748; 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

Variables	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).

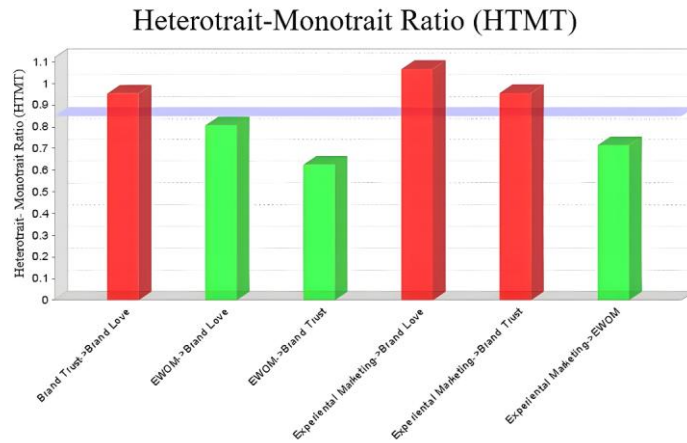


Figure 3: HTMT ratio

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

Variables	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 partial least squares (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

Variables	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).

Table 11: Details of hypothesis testing results

Linkages	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: 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 electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) significantly increases brand trust (H1 accepted). eWOM promoted by micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) players around the *Ibu Kota Nusantara* or Capital City of Nusantara (IKN) 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—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—essential components of brand love (Alshreef et al., 2023). Relational marketing and consumer-

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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 object.

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 Prastivi 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, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and experiential marketing—using a case study of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) products in the *Ibu Kota Nusantara* or Capital City of Nusantara (IKN) region. Employing the partial least squares (PLS) method, this study 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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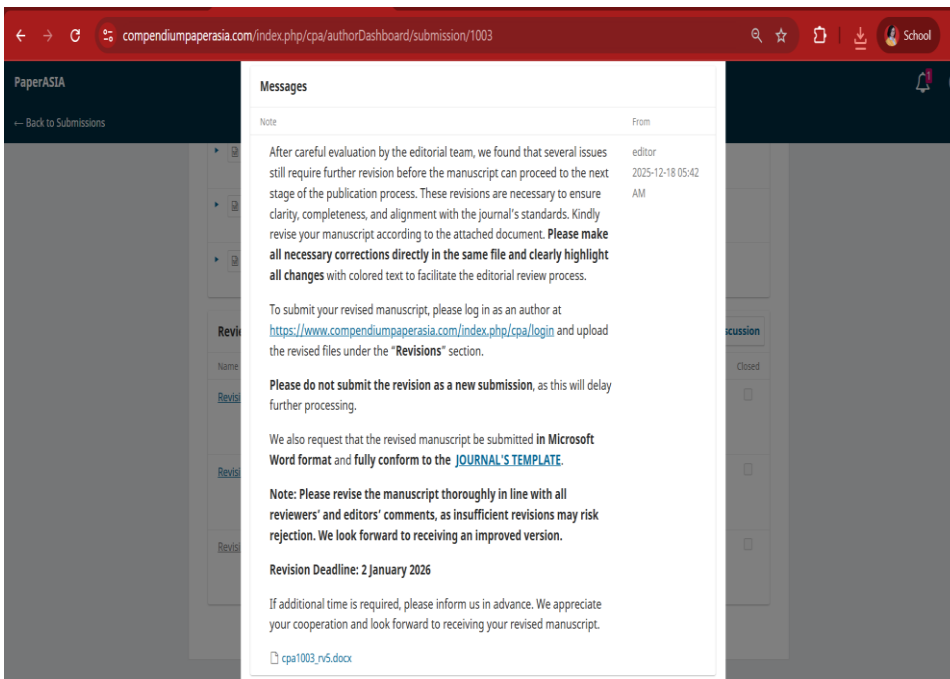
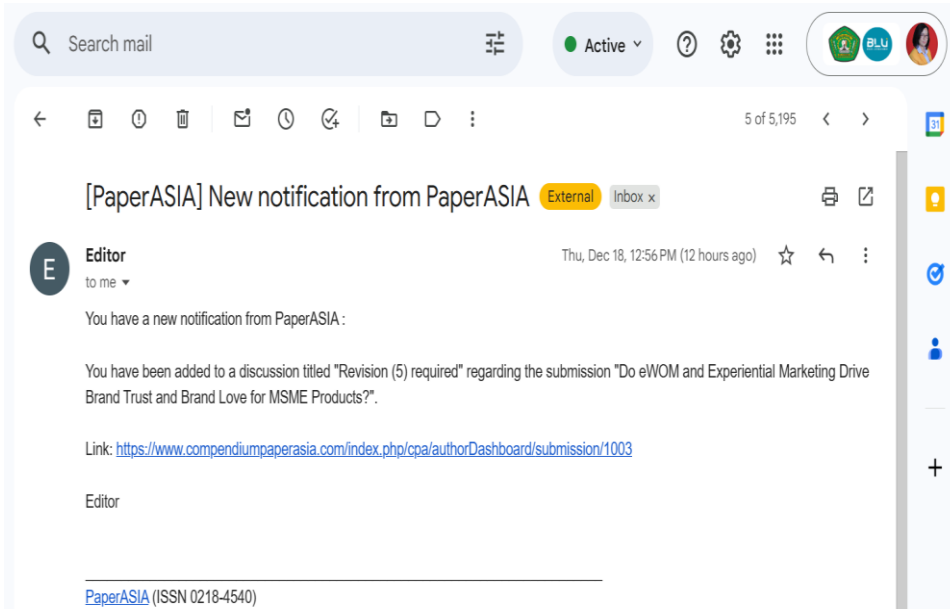
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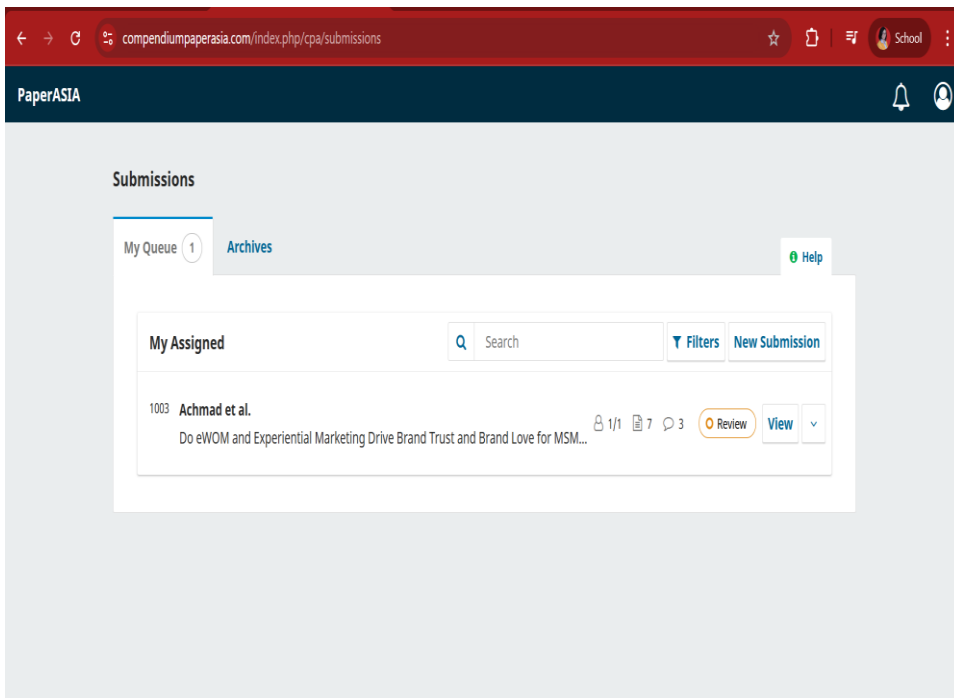
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Do eWOM and Experiential Marketing Drive Brand Trust and Brand Love for MSME Products?

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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 partial least squares (PLS) with 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) will not only physically shift the administrative hub but also transform 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 advance to a higher level. 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 eWOM. Lim et al. (2022) and Mehryar et al. (2020) 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 (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999). 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—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 MSMEs 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 (Reichelt et al., 2014; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). 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 Ngo et

al. (2024) and Zhang (2023), 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 (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999). 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 (Garg et al., 2022; Wiedmann et al., 2021).

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; Putra et al., 2023; Rather et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022). 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; Aro & Tähtinen, 2025; Pourazad et al., 2024). 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 have 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), Istiqomah and Setyawan (2025), and Paruthi et al. (2023), 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—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, Li and Park (2025), Na et al. (2023) and Suharsono (2024) 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:

- H16: eWOM has a significant positive effect on brand trust.
- H17: Experiential marketing has a significant positive effect on brand trust.
- H18: eWOM has a significant positive effect on brand love.
- H19: Experiential marketing has a significant positive effect on brand love.
- H20: 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.

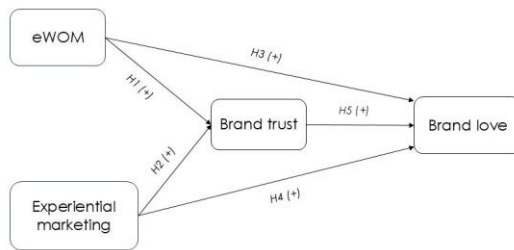


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

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—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.

Table 1: Details of the variables studied

Variables and definitions	Indicators	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), Mehyar 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	Y1.1: Consumers' perception of product trustworthiness.	Likert (1–5)	Ghondaghsaz and Engesser

brand, indicating the belief that the brand can be consistently relied upon.	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.	(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)

3.2 Sources and Techniques of Data Collection

This study was conducted using primary data obtained directly 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.

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 micro, small, and medium enterprises (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:

- Upper limit of score range: $(\% \text{ frequency} \times 5) \div 5 = (100 \times 5) \div 5 = 100$
- 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., 2019; 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:

- 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.
- 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 micro, small, and medium enterprises (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 and 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.

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.

Table 2: Respondent demographics

Characteristics	Items	F	%
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
	PPU	10	6
Product consumption level	Culinary	58	34
	Processing industry	37	22
	Crafts	75	44

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 electronic word-of-mouth (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.

Table 3: Summary of descriptive statistics regarding respondents' statements

Variables	Indicators (codes)	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											80.8	High	
Experiential marketing	Sense (X2.1)	0	0	2	2	8	7.8	43	42.2	49	48	87.2	High
	Feel (X2.2)	0	0	1	1	16	15.7	45	44.1	40	39.2	84.3	High
	Think (X2.3)	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											88.6	High	
Brand trust	Trustworthiness (Y1.1)	1	1	1	1	20	19.6	47	46.1	33	32.4	81.6	
	Reliable (Y1.2)	4	3.9	2	2	7	6.9	13	12.7	76	74.5	90.4	High
	Honesty (Y1.3)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	34	33.3	64	62.7	91.5	High
	Safety (Y1.4)	0	0	0	0	5	4.9	61	59.8	36	35.3	86.1	High
Average											87.4	High	
Brand love	The appeal of a product (Y2.1)	0	0	1	1	23	22.5	46	45.1	32	31.4	81.4	High
	Interest in the product (Y2.2)	0	0	2	2	16	15.7	37	36.3	47	46.1	85.4	High
	Positive evaluation of the product (Y2.3)	1	1	0	0	3	2.9	41	40.2	57	55.9	90.0	High
	Positive feelings toward the product (Y2.4)	0	0	0	0	11	10.8	45	44.1	46	45.1	86.9	High
	Love for the product (Y2.5)	0	0	1	1	3	2.9	32	31.4	66	64.7	92	High
	Average											87.1	High

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.

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 construct, 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 exhibited 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

Indicators	r-value	Total variance explained		
		Eigenvalue	% of variance	Cumulative %
X1.1	0.521	6.12	36	36
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

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 average variance extracted (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 initial model's factor loading results, shown in **Figure 2**, prove that no indicators were removed from the structural model, as all were valid following convergent validity testing. Empirically, all indicators across both variables satisfy the minimum AVE requirement (> 0.5).

Table 5: Outer loadings results

Indicators	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

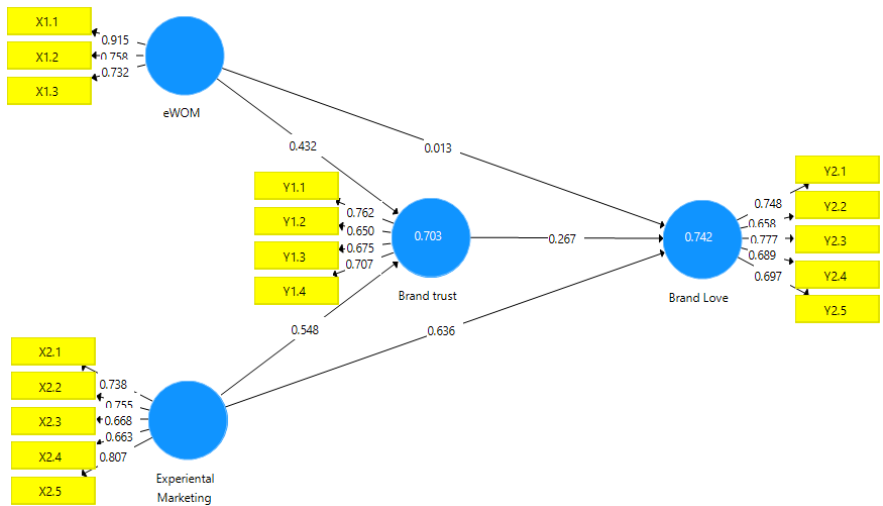


Figure 2: Analyzed structural model

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. 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

Indicators	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

Variables	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 a $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ of 0.748; 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

Variables	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).

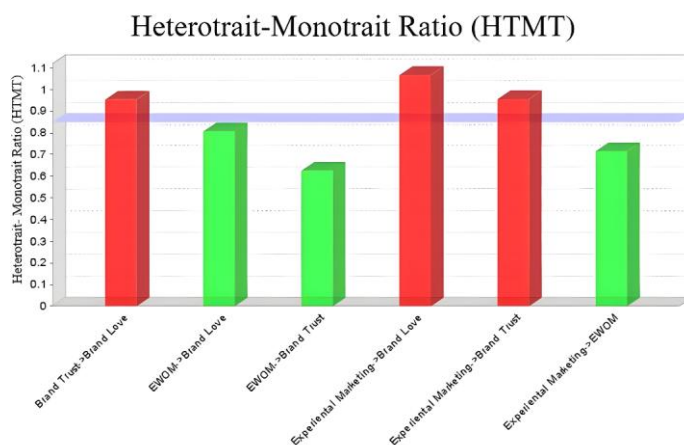


Figure 3: HTMT ratio

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

Variables	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 partial least squares (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

Variables	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).

Table 11: Details of hypothesis testing results

Linkages	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: 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

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In this section, the main findings are presented and justified by previous research. First, empirical testing revealed that the presence of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) significantly increases brand trust (H1 accepted). eWOM promoted by micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) players around the *Ibu Kota Nusantara* or Capital City of Nusantara (IKN) 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—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—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 object.

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 Prastivi 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, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and experiential marketing—using a case study of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) products in the *Ibu Kota Nusantara* or Capital City of Nusantara (IKN) region. Employing the partial least squares (PLS) method, this study 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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Alur 15- Pengumuman penerimaan dan pengecekan akhir: 3 Februari 2026

The image shows a screenshot of an email interface. At the top, there is a search bar and navigation icons. The email is from 'editorial@compendiumpaperasia.com' and is titled '[PaperASIA] Editor Decision'. The sender's name is 'editorial@compendiumpaperasia.com' and the recipient is 'me, Sukisno, Zainal, Norol'. The email is dated 'Feb 3, 2026, 11:09 AM (1 day ago)'. The main body of the email contains the following text:

Gusti Noorlitaria Achmad, Sukisno Selamat Riyadi, Zainal Ilmi, Norol Hamiza Zamzuri:

We have reached a decision regarding your submission to PaperASIA, "Do eWOM and Experiential Marketing Drive Brand Trust and Brand Love for MSME Products?".

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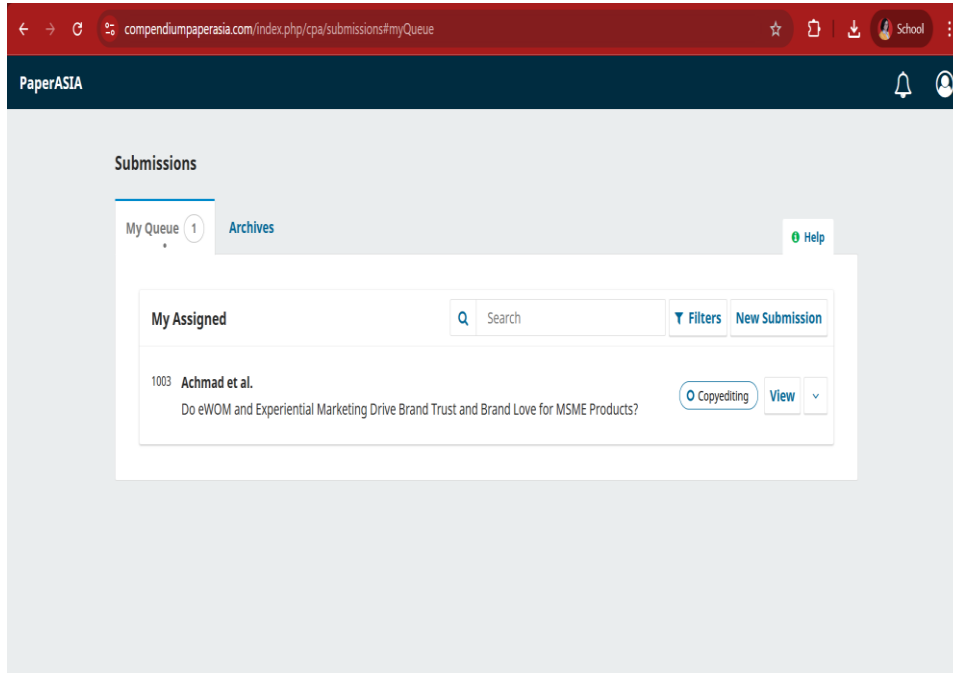
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Do eWOM and Experiential Marketing Drive Brand Trust and Brand Love for MSME Products?

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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 (Junaldi 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.

11) Surat penerimaan



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We are pleased to inform that your manuscript entitled "*Do eWOM and Experiential Marketing Drive Brand Trust and Brand Love for MSME Products?*" has been ACCEPTED for publication in **PaperASIA (ISSN 0218-4540)**. It is scheduled for publication in Volume 42, Issue 1b (January/February 2026).

Thank you once again for submitting your valuable manuscript to our journal.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Siti Alwani Mohamed".

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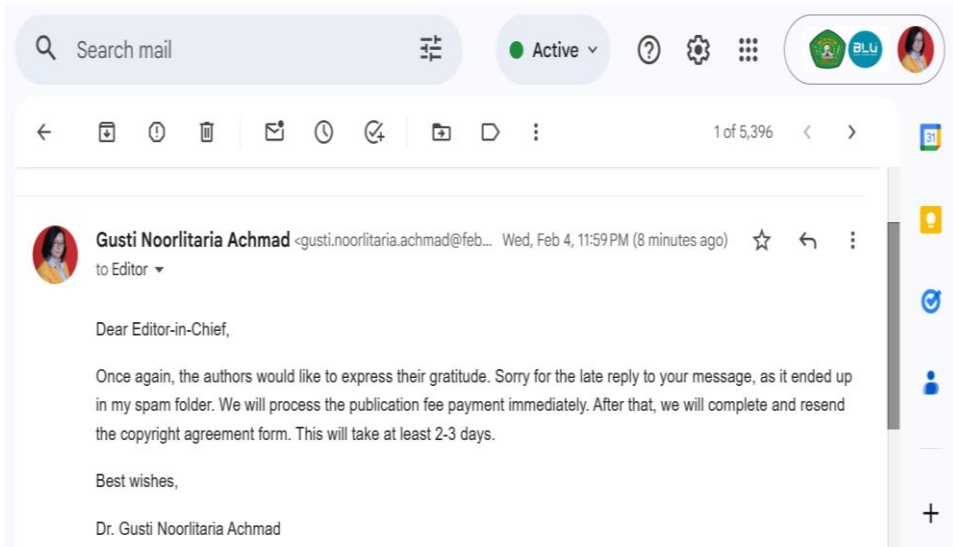
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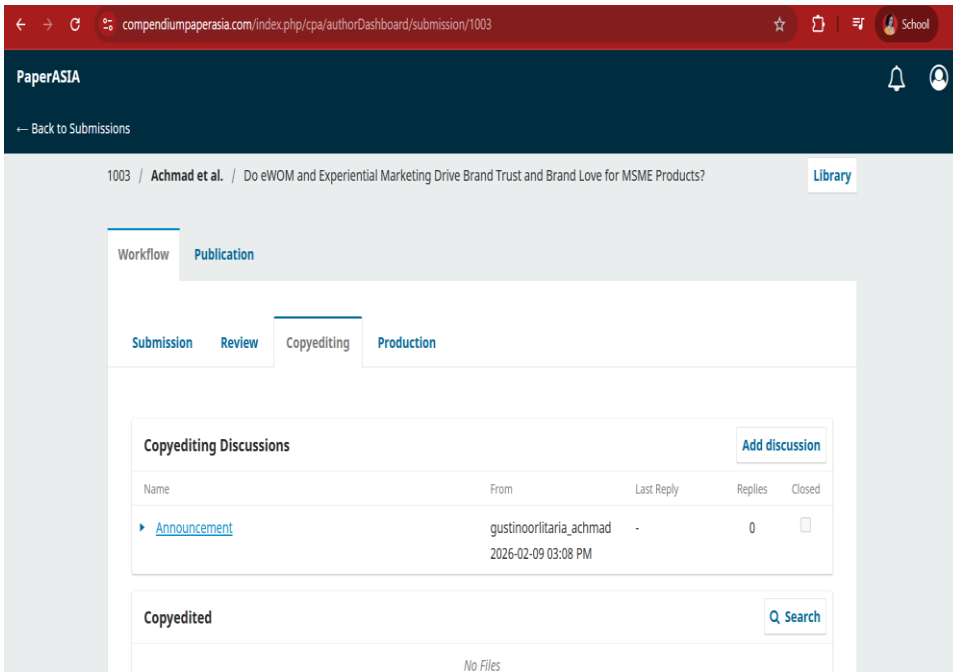
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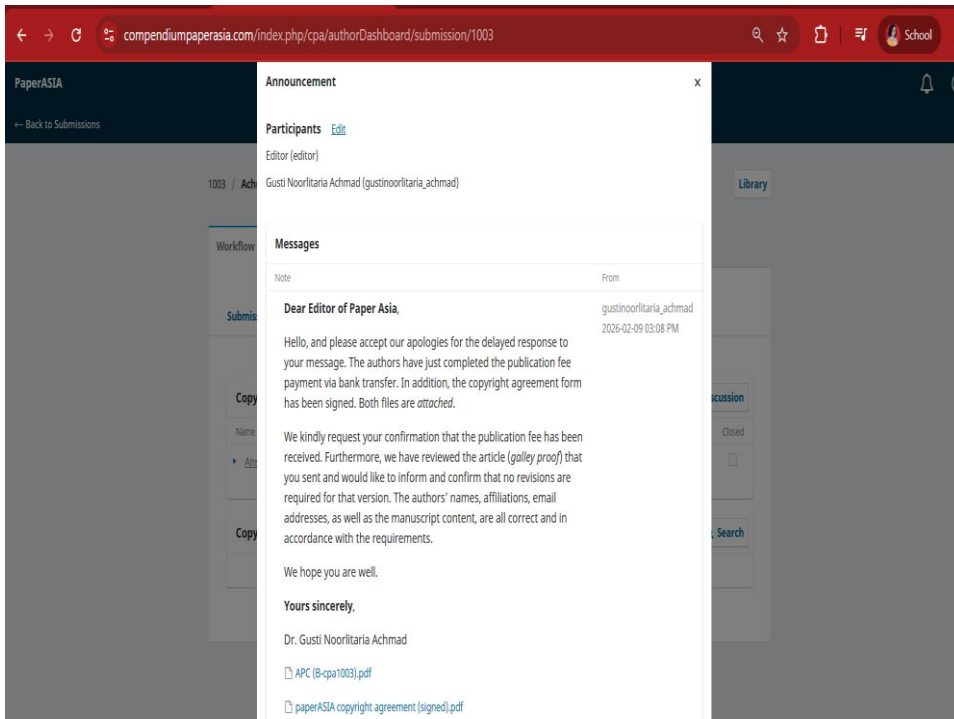
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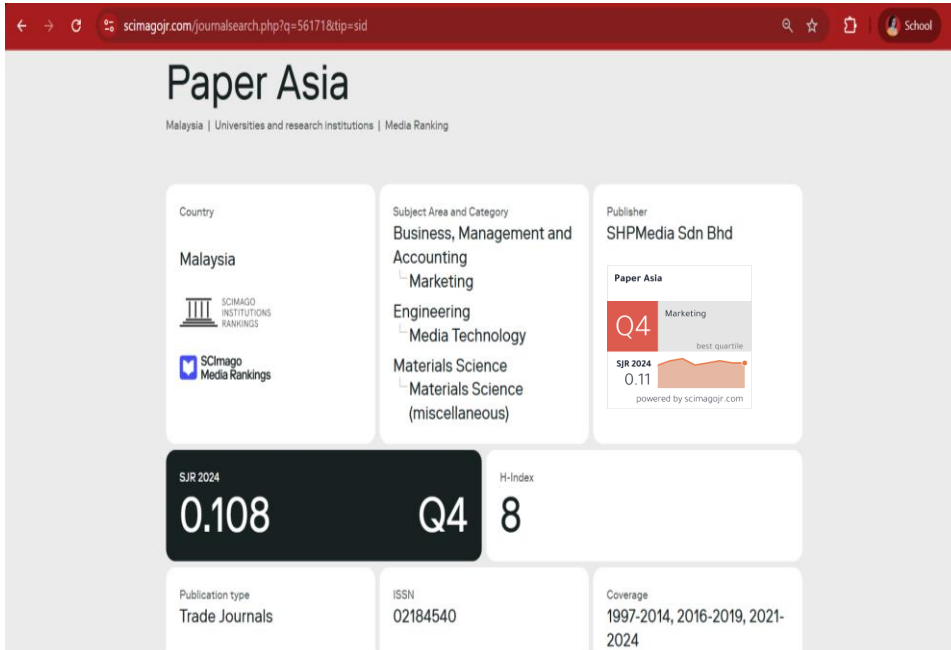
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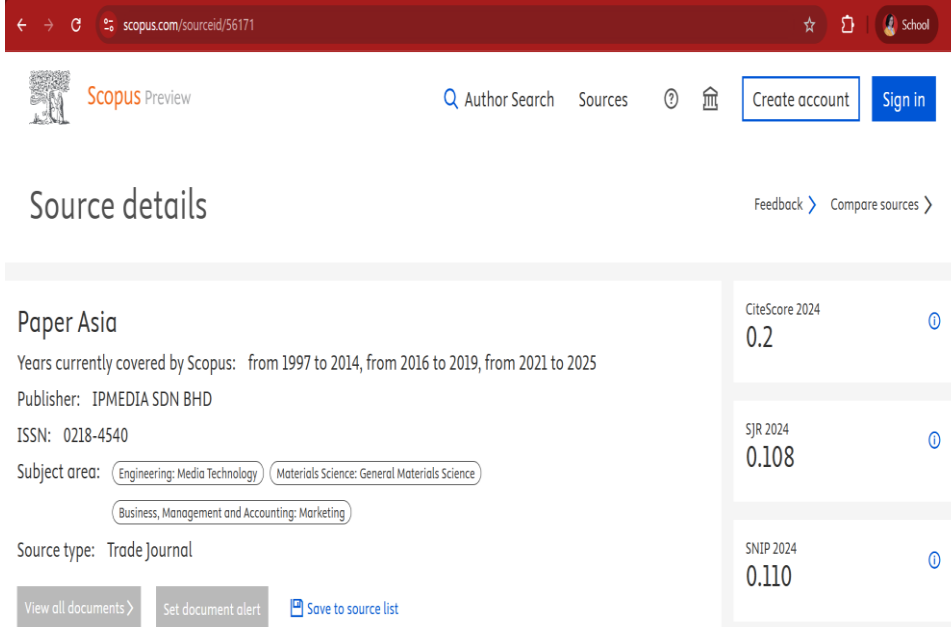


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