ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH ADVERTISING VERSUS BRAND STRENGTH: EFFECTS ON CONSUMERS' PURCHASING DECISION

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The research compared the effect of electronic word-of-mouth advertising (e-WOM) and brand strength in consumers' decision to purchase an experience product and service.

Theoretical framework: There is no clarity of the most significant influencer of the purchase decision: (1) being a strong brand induced by the company's efforts or (2) other consumers praise it, or (3) this praise intensifies the influence of brands previously strong. The research aimed at the possible generalization of these effects to experience product and service.

Method: In two between-group experiments, consumers presented their strong or weak brand purchasing decisions with the positive, negative, or neutral presence of e-WOM for a product (smartphone) and a service (hosting reservation), both of experience. The authors used logistic regressions containing the purchase decision as the dependent variable.

Findings: The results show the positive direct and moderating effects of e-WOM on the relationship between brand strength and purchase decision, with little difference between product and service. Positive e-WOM is more remarkable for the weak brand than for the strong brand (bracing effect). Negative e-WOM is greater for the strong brand than for the weak brand (weakening effect). Finally, negative e-WOM reduces the purchase decision probability for both brand strengths (aversive effect).

Research implications: The study reveals patterns of e-WOM effects (bracing, weakening, aversive, and supplementary) on the influence of brand strength on purchase decisions.

Originality: This paper brings the implications of e-WOM effects for brand management, revealing its patterns for better control.

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PROPAGANDA BOCA A BOCA ELETRÔNICA VERSUS FORÇA DA MARCA: EFEITOS NA DECISÃO DE COMPRA DOS CONSUMIDORES

RESUMO

Objetivo: A pesquisa comparou o efeito da propaganda boca a boca eletrônica (PBaB-E) e da força da marca na decisão de compra dos consumidores de produto e serviço de experiência.

Método: Em dois experimentos entre grupos, os consumidores apresentaram suas decisões de compra de marcas fortes ou fracas com presença positiva, negativa ou neutra da PBaB-E de um produto (smartphone) e de um serviço (reserva de hospedagem), ambos de experiência. Regressões logísticas foram empregadas, tendo a decisão de compra como variável dependente.

Originalidade/Relevância: Não há clareza do maior influenciador da decisão de compra: (1) ser uma marca forte induzida pelos esforços da empresa ou (2) outros consumidores tecerem elogios a ela, ou (3) esse elogio intensificar a influência das marcas previamente fortes. A pesquisa visou a possível generalização desses efeitos para produto e serviço de experiência.

Resultados: Os resultados comprovam os efeitos positivos diretos e moderadores da PBaB-E sobre a relação entre a força da marca e a decisão de compra, com pouca diferença entre produto e serviço. A PBaB-E positiva é maior para a marca fraca do que para marca forte (efeito fortificante). A PBaB-E negativa é maior para a marca forte do que para marca fraca (efeito enfraquecedor). Por fim, a PBaB-E negativa reduz a probabilidade de decisão de compra para ambas as forças da marca (efeito aversivo).

Contribuições teóricas/metodológicas: O estudo revela padrões de efeito da PBaB-E (fortificante, enfraquecedor, aversivo e suplementar) na influência da força da marca sobre as decisões de compra.

Palavras-Chave: boca a boca, força da marca, consumidor, marketing, comportamento, experimento.

INTRODUCTION

Sharing consumers' opinions about brands on e-commerce websites has influenced their purchasing behaviors (Babic et al., 2016; Baker & Donthu, 2018; Bilim & Basoda, 2014; Xu, 2014; Zablocki et al., 2019) and the sales performance of companies (Nisar et al., 2020). Consumers begin to collect information provided by other customers and, at the same time, offer their advice regarding brands online. These opinions have been called consumer buzz, a generic and onomatopoeic term that refers to electronic word-of-mouth advertising (e-WOM) generated and transmitted by users on the internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2014; Luo & Zhang, 2013; Thao & Shurong, 2020). Researchers have associated positive buzz with consumer praise for the brand and negative buzz with depreciation (Nadarajan et al., 2017).

Research on the effect of e-WOM on the decision to purchase brands has been controversial. On the one hand, researchers have questioned its effectiveness, as the decision may come from another previous source, such as marketing strategies that culminate in a strong brand (Almeida et al., 2020; Gilbert & Hewlett, 2003; Porto & Oliveira-Castro, 2013; Porto & Oliveira-Castro, 2015). Thus, marketing efforts would make the consumer buy the strong brand, regardless of whether someone commented something positive about it. On the other hand, e-WOM can intensify the effect of brand strength on purchasing decisions. Strong brands have

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greater marketing effectiveness due to branding techniques and are potentially more protected from negative information than weak brands (Severi et al., 2014). Thus, consumers praise them with greater frequency and intensity, doing the positive e-WOM act together with the brand strength, composing a stimulating social setting that influences a potential consumer's decision (Foxall, 2015).

Additionally, some research indicates that negative comments made by consumers influence the purchase decision more than positive comments (Casaló et al., 2015; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Others suggest that positive comments have a more significant impact than negative ones (East et al., 2008; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Sun et al., 2021) or that the effect of positive comments is tiny or almost null (Duan et al., 2008). Therefore, comparing the valence of e-WOM are helpful to reveal the effect differences between a strong or a weak brand in the consumer's decision (Ho-Dac et al., 2013).

However, there is a consensus that e-WOM is more effective for experience services and products (consumers only certify the quality when they use or experience them) than search products and services (You et al., 2015). For experience-generating products, the level of agreement among consumers who issue e-WOM is the most significant influencer of the decision (Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013). Still, there may be a difference between pure experience generators (e.g., tourism-related service), when the object of the product or service is the experience itself, and experience generators that are difficult to obtain reliable information without touching it previously (e.g., smartphone). Thus, this research aims to compare the effect of electronic word-of-mouth advertising and brand strength in the decision of consumers to purchase an experience product and service.

The authors present the paper in parts. The first one is the introduction already presented and followed by the theoretical aspects of e-WOM, brand strength and its relationship with e-WOM, and the hypotheses with the research model. Next, Experiments 1 and 2 are detailed (method, result, and discussion). Finally, we presented the general discussion and final remarks.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Characterization of word-of-mouth advertising

Generally, traditional word-of-mouth advertising is oral, informal, and person-to-person about a brand, product, service, or organization (Higie et al., 1987). The electronic version shares aspects of the original and refers to any positive (praise) or negative (depreciation)

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statement made by a consumer to another potential consumer, experienced or inexperienced, about a product or company via the internet (Maslowska et al., 2017).

Online communication allows consumers to access many other people's opinions (He & Bond, 2015), playing an essential role in consumers' attribution of brand value (Sun et al., 2021). The consumer issues the e-WOM after some experience with the product or service (You et al., 2015) through comments, tweets, co-production of content such as images and videos, among others (Babic et al. 2016). The e-WOM can also occur on social networks (Eisingerich et al., 2015).

Research on e-WOM has measured this phenomenon in different ways (Babic et al., 2016; Chatterjee, 2001), the most common being the volume and valence of comments. The former is the total amount of e-WOM for a particular brand or person. The latter, also called e-WOM favorability or polarity, represents an assessment of the content or direction of the comment - positive, negative, or neutral.

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) list the primary motivations for consumers to engage in a positive e-WOM. Among them are a concern for other consumers, help for the company, easiness to praise, and an expression of emotions and positive feelings with the brand. Additionally, Balagi et al. (2016) show that the primary motivations for engaging in negative e-WOM are the feeling of injustice, a bad reputation of the organization, the extent to which the consumer attributes the failure of the product or service to the company, the intensity of use of social networks, among others.

Some authors point consequences of e-WOM, such as the message's credibility and the consumer's faster decision-making. These consequences happen when consumers are exposed to too much information or too many options to choose from (Xie et al., 2011) and exposed products where they have little experience (You et al., 2015). Furthermore, Trusov et al. (2009) reveal that e-WOM can have a more significant effect than formal advertisements made by companies in the purchase decision due to its credibility and social persuasion. Consumers can use assessments made by third parties because, generally speaking, they do not profit from the sale of products and services. Therefore, the opinion of third parties can be more reliable.

The e-WOM studies show that negative comments have a more significant effect on consumer decisions regarding brands than positive comments (Casaló et al., 2015; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2014). On the other hand, this result is not unanimous – positive comments can have a more significant effect on the purchase decision than negative

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ones (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). These controversial findings may be made more explicit in the following topic dealing with this subject.

Brand strength and word-of-mouth as interpreted by the behavioral theory

Marketing managers elaborate on numerous activities that reflect on the product or service brand. These activities related to brand building and development to have more outstanding durability in the market have been called branding (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Their main consequences are the consumers' behavioral reactions to the brand, such as perceptions about it, purchase, use, and disposal (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003). Brand strength is an evaluative or behavioral response to a brand (Grohs et al., 2015) whose content is the consumers' degree of knowledge or experience (Keller, 1993). In general terms, brand strength is part of the consumer-based brand equity metrics (Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2010).

From a behavioral perspective, Oliveira-Castro et al. (2008) designed a measure of brand strength by joining the metrics of familiarity (awareness) and perceived quality (MKQ). Together, they represent the level of programmed informational reinforcement of the brands made by managers. Manufacturers, retailers, and brand managers make every effort to modify and shape the reinforcing and aversive properties of the attributes of their products and services to make them more attractive to the consumer. These efforts may or may not work, which is why they are programmed reinforcement (or punishments) events rather than actual events.

Oliveira-Castro et al. (2008) claim that these two measures (MKQ) are the most frequent in empirical studies of consumer-based brand equity and may provide a good indication of programmed informational reinforcement level. Porto (2018), when measuring consumer-based brand equity with six metrics, also concludes that the level of brand awareness and perceived quality summarize the brand equity.

As a result, research on brand strength acquired a new direction adjusted to a pragmatic and functional theory (Foxall, 2015). The brand strength is the magnitude of the informational reinforcements programmed by managers to consumers (Oliveira-Castro et al., 2016; Porto & Oliveira-Castro, 2015). They are programmed social consequences following brand-related behavior (e.g., purchase/use) that influences subsequent responses (Foxall et al., 2021). Among these social consequences are prestige, status, recognition, achievement, etc.

When designing branding activities, a marketer increases the brand strength by programming the generation of praise for it by the social environment to generate new operant

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responses. One of the attributions of marketing is to create conditions so that specific events related to the brand can generate beneficial consequences for the consumer (or reduce harm) to a sufficient extent to compensate for the efforts (Foxall, 1992).

In this sense, the e-WOM applied to products and services brands has a double role. On the one hand, it acts as an informational/social consequence by making consumers who have acquired a brand be reinforced (praised) or punished (depreciated). On the other hand, e-WOM is an antecedent that sets an encouraging or aversive informational environment in subsequent consumer's purchase occasion (Foxall, 2015). When encouraging, praise for brands signals the purchase decision-makers to receive good feedback on their performance. When aversive, depreciation signals that the potential buyer may receive negative feedback on his/her performance when acquiring it (Nadarajan et al., 2017). In this dual role, e-WOM makes up the consumer's social settings in the online ambiance (e.g., stores, fairs, or virtual markets). Their encouraging or aversive properties can influence decisions.

Hypotheses and research model

Researchers have been analyzing the direct effect of brand strength, understood as programmed informational reinforcement level by managers, on the choices of product and service brands (Oliveira-Castro et al., 2016; Porto & Oliveira-Castro, 2015; Porto, 2018) and sales (Porto & Lima, 2015; Porto & Melo, 2016). Even studies with different theoretical approaches show a direct relationship between brand strength and purchase intention (Wu et al., 2020). Therefore:

H1: The brand strength of products and services increases the likelihood of a purchase decision.

In turn, some authors systematically show the direct effect of e-WOM valence on purchase decisions (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2014; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; You et al., 2015; Zablocki et al., 2019). East et al. (2008) revealed that positive comments increase the purchase probability more than negative comments with several categories of products and services. Therefore:

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H2: The positive (negative) valence of electronic word-of-mouth advertising increases (decreases) the probability of the decision to purchase a product and service brand.

However, researchers show that the influences of e-WOM on choice depend on brand strength and size (Ho-Dac et al., 2013; Uncles et al., 2010). The valence of e-WOM can enhance or mitigate the influence of brand strength on purchase decisions. An increase in e-WOM can be an almost moderating variable of this relationship (Ho-Dac et al., 2013). Almost moderate variables are both directed and interacted related with a second variable in predicting the dependent variable (Sharma, Durand, & Gur-Arie, 1981).

In a behavioral interpretation (Foxall, 2015; Nadarajan et al., 2017), the valence of e-WOM can act as a supplement discriminative stimulus in the e-commerce environment; that is, a strong brand can have a positive e-WOM and further increase the probability of purchase (supplementary effect). It can also act as an aversive stimulus, in which a weak brand, one that has not used branding techniques or has not been successful in implementing them, is the victim of a negative e-WOM. So, it reduces the chances of the consumer to decide on its purchase (aversive effect). In addition, a positive e-WOM can act as an informational stimulus. The weak brand with a positive e-WOM, becoming momentarily stronger, increases the probability of its purchase decision (bracing effect). On the other hand, an e-WOM can act as an informational weakener. A strong brand under a negative e-WOM reduces the chances of being chosen (weakening effect). In this way:

H3: The valence of e-WOM moderates the relationship between brand strength and decisions to purchase products and services.

H3a: A positive e-WOM made for strong brands increases the probability of deciding on their purchases (supplementary effect).

H3b: Positive e-WOM has more effect on purchasing decisions for weaker brands than for stronger ones (bracing effect).

H3c: A negative e-WOM made for weak brands reduces the probability of deciding on their purchases (aversive effect).

H3d: Negative e-WOM has more effect on purchasing decisions for stronger brands than for weaker ones (weakening effect).

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Therefore, this study proposed to test the relationships presented in the research model (Figure 1). The authors suggest that brand strength can influence purchase decisions according to the valence of e-WOM. Some authors point to the effect of the search for opinions, purchase frequency, sociodemographic variables, and the types of products as variables that interfere in purchase decisions derived from e-WOM (Babić et al., 2016; You et al., 2015). Therefore, the authors controlled all these variables. For this research, the purchase decision refers to the probability of buying or not a smartphone (Experiment 1) or the likelihood of making reservations at a hotel (Experiment 2).

Figure 1

Research Model
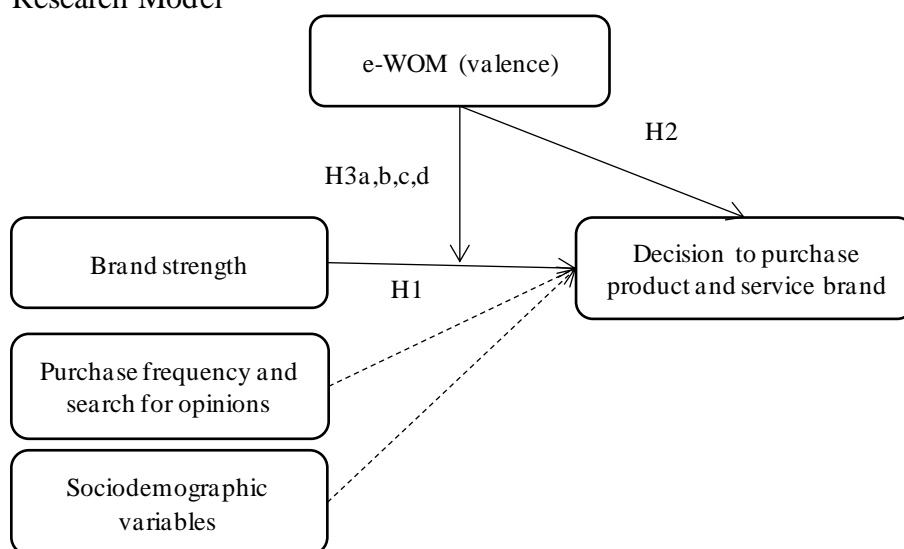
Source: the authors

EXPERIMENT 1 - METHOD

Experiment 1 aimed to compare the effect of e-WOM and brand strength on consumers' purchase decisions for an experience product brand. The investigated product – smartphone – is experience classified as it is difficult to obtain reliable information without touching it or using it previously (Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013). The factorial design (2x3) between-subjects had the purchase decision for the brand as a dependent variable. The manipulated variables were the exposure of a strong or weak product brand and consumers' e-WOM valence (negative, neutral, or positive). The authors defined the brand strength in a phase before the experiment. Table 1 shows the experimental design.

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Table 1

Design of Experiment 1

E-WOM valence	Experience product	
	Weak brand	Strong brand
Negative comments	Decision to purchase	Decision to purchase
Positive comments	Decision to purchase	Decision to purchase
No comments	Decision to purchase	Decision to purchase

Source: the authors

In a phase before Experiment 1, 102 respondents identified smartphone brands that have greater/lesser familiarity and greater/lesser perception of quality. For this, the authors created a questionnaire on the Google Forms platform with brands from several smartphone devices. The authors asked to rate them on a scale of zero to ten (totally unknown to fully known and no quality to extreme quality) for each brand. The scale was developed by Oliveira-Castro et al. (2008) and adapted in this research.

The results showed that the Samsung Galaxy smartphone (mean = 8.239 and standard deviation 2.479) was the strongest brand at the time of this research, and the Hisense U1 brand (mean 0.689 and standard deviation 0.821) was the weakest. Thus, these were the brands selected for Experiment 1, representing the two extremes of brand strength.

Still, before the experiment, the comments that formed the e-WOM were written by the researchers, simulating the brands' consumers' observations. They were created based on actual consumer reviews and product ratings. Many e-commerce pages allow consumers to comment or rate the product. These comments are tools to assist in choices related to the product (perception of quality, consumer satisfaction, buyer recommendations, third-party reviews, etc.).

Next, the researchers built the experiment's page with a layout similar to an e-commerce online retail page with a familiar look to the participant (see Figure 2). As it is not the object of this study, the authors did not show the sale price of the brand in the image. However, the researchers presented the product's picture, product type, technical data, and comments regarding the item. Positive comments are four or five stars, while negative comments are one or two stars. The researchers also manipulated the comments so that the negative ones negated the positive comments, dealing with the same attributes. The researchers used the same positive/negative opinions for both the strong branded and the weak branded smartphone.

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The researchers built six experimental groups - combining two levels of brand strength (strong x weak) with three levels of e-WOM valence (negative, neutral, and positive evaluative comments from consumers). In each one, all the information presented was identical, except the e-WOM statements, which the researchers showed in a total of eight: Group 1 (strong brand with eight negative comments), Group 2 (strong brand with eight positive comments), Group 3 (strong brand with no comments), Group 4 (weak brand with eight negative comments), Group 5 (weak brand with eight positive comments) and Group 6 (weak brand with no comments).

Figure 2

Illustration of the two images used in Experiment 1

Source: the authors

Five hundred seven subjects (507) participated in the research, randomly distributed among the six groups in a cross-section. Table 2 shows the variables, their codes, median

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values, percentage values in the sample, and minimum and maximum values. The sample power test was equal to 99.98% for logistic regression. Thus, the sampling power has good reliability to reduce Type 2 Error.

Table 2

Descriptions of Experiment 1 variables

Variables	Codes	Median	%	Min	Max
Decision to purchase	0 or 1		40.2% (decided to purchase)	0 (decided not to purchase)	1 (decided to purchase)
Brand strength	0 or 1		49.1% (strong)	0 (weak)	1 (strong)
E-WOM valence	From 0 to 2		34.3% positive – 32.9% negative – 32.7% neutral	0 (negative)	2 (positive)
Sex	0 or 1		52.3% (woman)	0 (man)	1 (woman)
Purchase frequency	From 0 to 5	3	9.9% (median)	0 (never purchase)	5 (Always purchase)
Search for opinion	From 0 to 5	1	55.5% (median)	0 (never)	5 (5 times or more)
Importance level to opinions	From 0 to 10	7	14.6% (median)	0 (unimportant)	10 (extremely important)
Age		24	10.5% (median)	16	68
Number of children		0	76.5% (median)	0 (no child)	4 (4 or more children)
Educational level	From 0 to 7	4 - incomplete higher education	49.9% (median)	0 (incomplete primary)	7 (complete graduated)
Family income per month	From 0 to 7	5 – From R$ 6,102.00 to R$7,457.00	14.8% (median)	0 (up to R$ 672.00)	7 (more than R$ 10,000.00)

Source: the authors

The researchers randomly allocated all the participants to the experiment groups electronically through the Survey Monkey Platform feature (block randomization). After exposure to the image of the smartphone device, the participants answered questions about the purchase decision, sociodemographic profile, purchase frequency of the smartphone product, and generic search for opinions (frequency in the search for opinions from other people for the brand purchase and level of importance to other people's views for the brand purchase). The researchers used logistic regression for data analysis, with the dependent variable codes 0, when the respondent did not decide to purchase, and 1, when the respondent decided to do so. All the codifications for the independent variables are in Table 2.

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RESULT OF EXPERIMENT 1

The effect of the independent variables on the brand's purchase decision showed a moderately low explained variance (R^2 Nagelkerke = 32.5%, with Chi-Square = 139.7; $p \leq 0.01$). Table 3 shows the results of the estimates. The brand strength (B = 1.41; $p \leq 0.01$) and the e-WOM valence (B = 0.79; $p \leq 0.01$) were positive and significant predictors of the purchase decision, with emphasis on brand strength. In particular, the interactive relationship of a strong brand with a negative valence of e-WOM (B = - 0.91; $p \leq 0.01$) was significant and negative compared to the reference group (control group without e-WOM for the strong brand). The relationship between positive e-WOM and the strong brand was insignificant ($p > 0.05$) compared to the control group.

The interactive relationships of the weak brand with negative e-WOM (B = - 2.08; $p \leq 0.01$) and positive e-WOM (B = - 0.67; $p \leq 0.05$) were significant and negative compared to the reference group (control group without e-WOM for the weak brand). The control variable "search for opinion" was also positive and significant (B = 0.22; $p \leq 0.01$), and the others were not significant ($p > 0.05$). The estimate of the interaction of the weak brand with positive e-WOM is negative. Still, the value is higher than the value of the estimation of the reference group.

Table 3

Effect of brand strength and e-WOM on smartphone purchase decision

Independent variables	Estimate	Standard Error	Sig.
Brand strength (main effect)	1.41	0.23	**
E-WOM valence (main effect)	0.79	0.15	**
Strong brand and positive E-WOM	0.75	0.43	
Strong brand and negative E-WOM	-0.91	0.34	**
Strong brand without E-WOM	0.46	0.71	reference
Weak brand and positive E-WOM	-0.67	0.33	*
Weak brand and negative E-WOM	-2.08	0.40	**
Weak brand without E-WOM	-1.61	0.37	reference
Purchase frequency	0.00	0.06	
Search for opinion	0.22	0.07	**
Importance level to opinions	0.04	0.05	
Sex	-0.26	0.22	
Age	0.03	0.02	
Number of children	0.31	0.16	
Educational level	-0.17	0.10	
Family income per month	-0.09	0.05	

* $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$
Source: the authors

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Figure 3 illustrates the result in purchase decision probability for each level of combination of brand strength and e-WOM. The stronger brand is more likely to be purchased (compared to the weaker brand). When there are many positive comments, the probability increases slightly. However, the likelihood drastically reduces when there are many negative comments (e-WOM of negative valence).

Figure 3

The joint effect of e-WOM and the brand strength on the probability of purchase decision for the smartphone
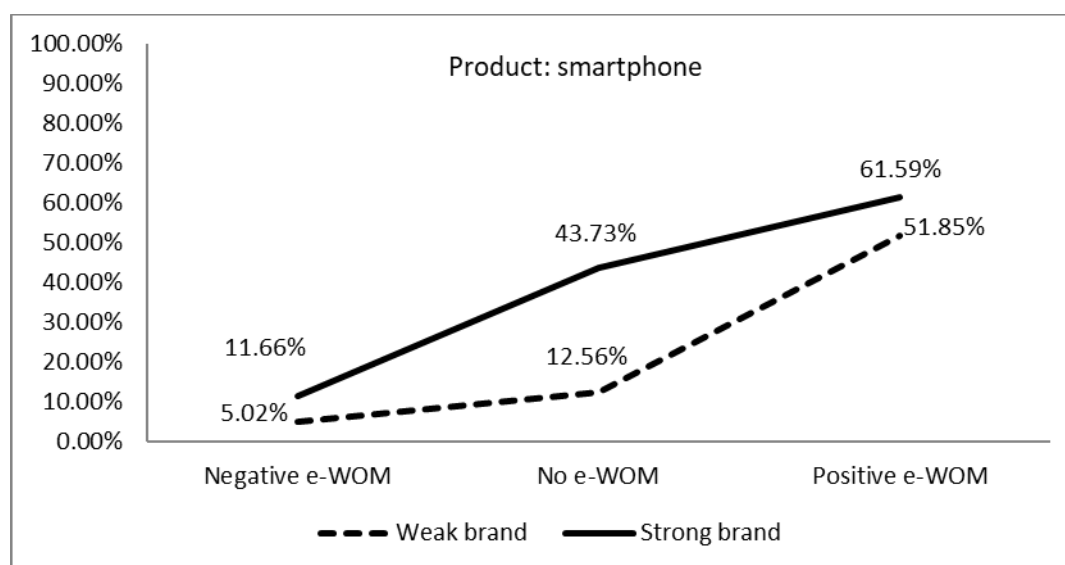
Source: the authors

Conversely, the weaker brand is less likely to be purchased (compared to the strong brand). When there are many positive comments, the likelihood increases with some robustness. However, when there are many negative comments (e-WOM of negative valence), the probability decreases even more.

DISCUSSION OF EXPERIMENT 1

Experiment 1 allows us to infer that the e-WOM valence and brand strength positively influence the purchase decision. Both increase the chances of deciding to purchase, which some authors have already demonstrated (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2014; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Oliveira-Castro et al., 2016; Porto & Oliveira- Castro, 2015; You et al., 2015; Zablocki et al., 2019). Brand strength had a greater main effect on the experience

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product purchase decision than e-WOM, which signals that its programmed reinforcing effect is adequate.

The interactive effects clarify what the literature points to as controversial (Ho-Dac et al., 2013; Uncles et al., 2010). Positive e-WOM is more influential in the purchase decision of the weak brand than the strong one. This result suggests the bracing effect of positive e-WOM on the weak brand, increasing the chances of consumers considering it as a purchase option. In this sense, e-WOM is an aid, usually temporary, for the weak brand. The weak brand becomes more attractive, while the strong brand, which is previously attractive, becomes approximately stable. Positive e-WOM did not significantly generate a supplementary effect on the purchase decision for a strong brand, possibly because branding already makes consumers perceive it as potentially causing praise (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Marginally, one occasion of recognition would not be enough to suddenly increase the likelihood of a decision that would be at an already high level.

Negative e-WOM, on the other hand, reduces the purchase decision of the strong brand more sharply than the weak brand, which indicates its weakening effect on the strong brand. This result demonstrates that the informational reinforcement level of the strong brand programmed by the manager (Oliveira-Castro et al., 2008) is not oblivious to the effect of criticism. These negative reviews can deter consumers from considering the strong brand for acquisition. Therefore, spontaneous consumer disclosures can alter the impact of branding activities (Maslowska et al., 2017; Severi et al., 2014) or momentarily compensate for their lack.

Negative e-WOM reduced the purchasing decision probabilities of both the weak brand and the strong one. Thus, the aversive effect of e-WOM is visible and consistent (Nadarajan et al., 2017). When there are failures in the product's configuration made by those responsible for the brand, it can generate brand depreciation (Balagi et al., 2016). Its effect on the behavior of other consumers can drastically inhibit purchase chances.

Sociodemographic variables did not influence the dependent variable. This result can indicate a generalization for any consumer profile of the results found. Regardless of consumers' characteristics, the effects of e-WOM and brand strength would be the same. However, the search for opinions, one of the covariates, affected the purchase decision (Chen, 2001; You et al., 2015). Thus, those consumers who are more attentive to the praise or depreciation of brands are more likely to decide to purchase.

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The sensitivity of e-WOM has a distinct effect on purchase decisions, previous corroborating research (Ho-Dac et al., 2013; Uncles et al., 2010). However, this result may be due to the type of product investigated and the format of the decision response measure. Experiment 2 can clarify whether there is any generalization of the effects between products and the dependent variable measures.

EXPERIMENT 2 - METHOD

Experiment 2 compared the effect of e-WOM and brand strength on consumers' purchase decisions for experience service brands. The factorial design (2x3) between-subjects had the purchase decision for the brand as a dependent variable. The manipulated variables were the exposure of a strong or weak service brand and the e-WOM valence (negative, neutral, or positive). The authors defined the brand strength in a phase before the experiment. Table 4 shows the experimental design.

Table 4

Design of Experiment 2

E-WOM valence	Experience service	
	Weak brand	Strong brand
Negative comments	Decision to purchase	Decision to purchase
Positive comments	Decision to purchase	Decision to purchase
No comments	Decision to purchase	Decision to purchase

Source: the authors

The service chosen for the research was the travel hosting reservation. Researchers characterize hospitality services as providers of pure experience (Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013). Websites for booking accommodation usually bring consumer reviews and opinions about this service (Tripadvisor, 2021). Therefore, consumers who use these services can be a more reliable source in conveying their experience and service rating.

In a phase before Experiment 2, the researchers identified which hotel brands installed in Brazil, under the economic classification, have greater/less familiarity and greater/lesser perception of quality. For this, a questionnaire was created on the Google Forms platform with brands from various hotel chains, in which the participating individuals (N=52) should rate them on a scale from zero to ten (entirely unknown for fully known) and (without any quality to extreme quality) for each brand, similar to Experiment 1.

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The results showed that the Ibis budget hotel chain (mean 1.86 with a standard deviation of 1.390) and the Slaviero Slim budget hotel chain (mean 0.136 with a standard deviation of 0.468) were the ones with the highest and lowest brand strength score, respectively. Therefore, the authors chose these brands as the two extremes in the experimental phase.

Before the experiment, the authors simulated consumers' comments to form the e-WOM variable. The researchers prepared the reviews based on actual consumer reviews and service ratings. The comments resulted from a compilation of opinions found on the Tripadvisor website about the hotels of the Ibis and Slaviero Slim chains with the omission of the respective authors. We manipulated the comments to fit clearly and fully as positive or negative. We omitted any expression that allowed the identification of the hotel (e.g., the city name). The negative comments were the negation of the positive comment, dealing with the same attributes. We used the same positive/negative opinions for both the strong and weak brands hotel chains. As for the scores, we rated the hotels from one to five stars. Positive comments are four or five stars, while negative comments are one or two stars.

Then, we built the experiment page with a layout similar to the Tripadvisor e-recommendation page. We showed the hotel's name, the services it offers (e.g., business center, free internet, free parking, restaurant, suites, etc.), and the pictures of the establishment (without brand identification). This information was identical for all groups, except for the hotel name (see Figure 4). As it is not the object of study, we did not show the sale price of the brand in the picture. However, we presented the picture of the service and its attributes and the comments.

In all, there were six experimental groups - a combination of two levels of brand strength (strong x weak) with three levels of e-WOM valence (negative, neutral, and positive evaluative comments from consumers). In each one, all the information presented was identical, except for the comments: Group 1 (strong brand with eight negative comments), Group 2 (strong brand with eight positive comments), Group 3 (strong brand with no comments), Group 4 (weak with eight negative comments), Group 5 (weak brand with eight positive comments) and Group 6 (weak brand with no comments).

Three hundred thirty-five (335) subjects participated in the research, randomly distributed among the six groups. Table 5 presents the variables, their codes, median values, percentage values in the sample, and minimum and maximum values. The sample power test was equal to 99.33% for logistic regression. Thus, the sampling power has good reliability to reduce Type 2 Error.

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Table 5

Description of Experiment 2 variables

Variables	Codes	Median	%	Min	Max
Decision purchase	to From 0 to 10	6	11.2% (median)	0 (from 0% to 10% purchase probability)	10 (from 90% to 100% purchase probability)
Brand strength	0 or 1		50.2% (strong)	0(weak)	1 (strong)
E-WOM valence	From 0 to 2		32.7% positive – 34.0% negative – 33.3% neutral	0 (negative)	2 (positive)
Sex	0 or 1		60.1% (woman)	0 (man)	1 (woman)
Purchase fequency	From 0 to 5	3	38% (median)	0 (never purchase)	5 (always purchase)
Search for opinion	From 0 to 5	4	4.7% (median)	0 (never)	5 (5 times or more)
Importance level to opinions	From 0 to 10	8	40.3% (median)	0 (unimportant)	10(extremely important)
Age		24	5.1% (median)	16	68
Number of children		1	7.3% (median)	0 (no child)	4 (4 or more children)
Educational level	From 0 to 7	5 - incomplete higher education	24.1% (median)	0 (incomplete primary)	7 (complete graduated)
Family income per month	From 0 to 7	6 - From R$ 6,225.00 to R$ 10,375.00	22.8% (median)	0 (up to R$ 830.00)	7 (more than R$ 10,375.00)

Source: the authors

The researchers randomly allocated all the participants to the experiment electronically through the Survey Monkey Platform feature (block randomization). After exposure to the image of the website for the hosting reservation, the participants answered questions about the purchase decision, sociodemographic profile, purchase frequency of the smartphone product, and generic search for opinions (frequency in the search for opinions from other people for the brand purchase and level of importance to other people's opinions for the brand purchase). The researchers used the ordinal logistic regression for data analysis, with the dependent variable ranging from 0 to 10 (probability of purchasing). All the codifications for the independent variables are in Table 5.

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Figure 4

Illustration of the images used in Experiment 2
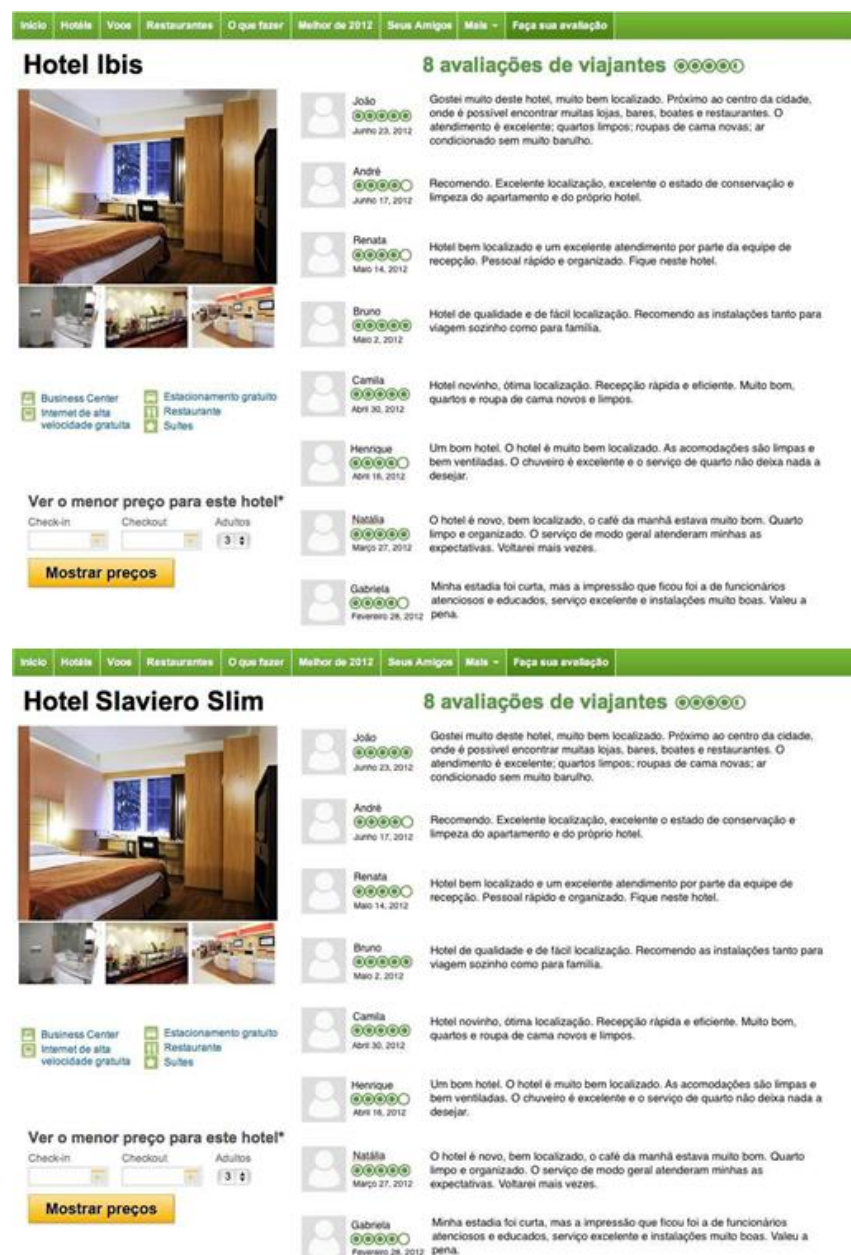
Source: the authors

RESULTS OF EXPERIMENT 2

The effect of the independent variables on the brand's purchase decision showed a moderately low explained variance (R^2 Nagelkerke = 26.5%, with Chi-Square = 95.3; $p \leq 0.01$). Table 6 shows the results of the estimates. The brand strength (B = 0.43; $p \leq 0.01$) and the e-WOM valence (B = 0.72; $p \leq 0.01$) were positive and significant predictors, with emphasis on

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e-WOM valence. In particular, the interactive relationship of a strong brand with negative e-WOM (B = - 2.02; p ≤ 0.01) was significant and negative compared to the reference group (control group without comments for the strong brand). The relationship between positive e-WOM and the strong brand was not significant (p > 0.05).

The interactive relationships of the weak brand with negative e-WOM (B = - 2.94; p ≤ 0.01) were significant and negative and with the positive e-WOM (B = 0.07; p ≤ 0.05) was significant and positive compared to the reference group (control group without comments for the weak brand). Control variables did not exert a statistically significant influence (p > 0.05).

Table 6

Effect of brand strength and e-WOM on purchase decision of hosting reservation

| Independent variables	Estimate	Standard Error	Sig.
Brand strength (main effect)	0.43	0.18	**
E-WOM valence (main effect)	0.72	0.08	**
Strong brand and positive E-WOM	0.47	0.30	
Strong brand and negative E-WOM	-2.02	0.38	**
Strong brand without E-WOM	-0.25	0.29	reference
Weak brand and positive E-WOM	0.07	0.30	**
Weak brand and negative E-WOM	-2.94	0.44	**
Weak brand without E-WOM	-1.94	1.05	reference
Purchase fequency	0.08	0.06	
Search for opinion	-0.03	0.04	
Importance level to opinions	0.01	0.08	
Sex	-0.02	0.12	
Age	0.00	0.01	
Number of children	0.07	0.09	
Educational level	0.02	0.06	
Family income per month	0.02	0.05	

* p < 0,05; ** p < 0,01
Source: the authors

Figure 5 illustrates the result in purchase decision probability for each level of combination of brand strength with e-WOM of the experience service. The stronger brand is more likely to be decided to purchase (compared to the weaker brand). When there are many positive comments, the likelihood increases slightly. However, the probability drastically reduces when there are many negative comments (negative e-WOM).

Conversely, the weaker brand is less likely to be decided to purchase (compared to the strong brand). When there are many positive comments, the probability increases sharply. However, when there are many negative comments (negative e-WOM), the chance decreases even more.

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Figure 5

The joint effect of e-WOM and the brand strength on the probability of purchase decision of the hosting reservation
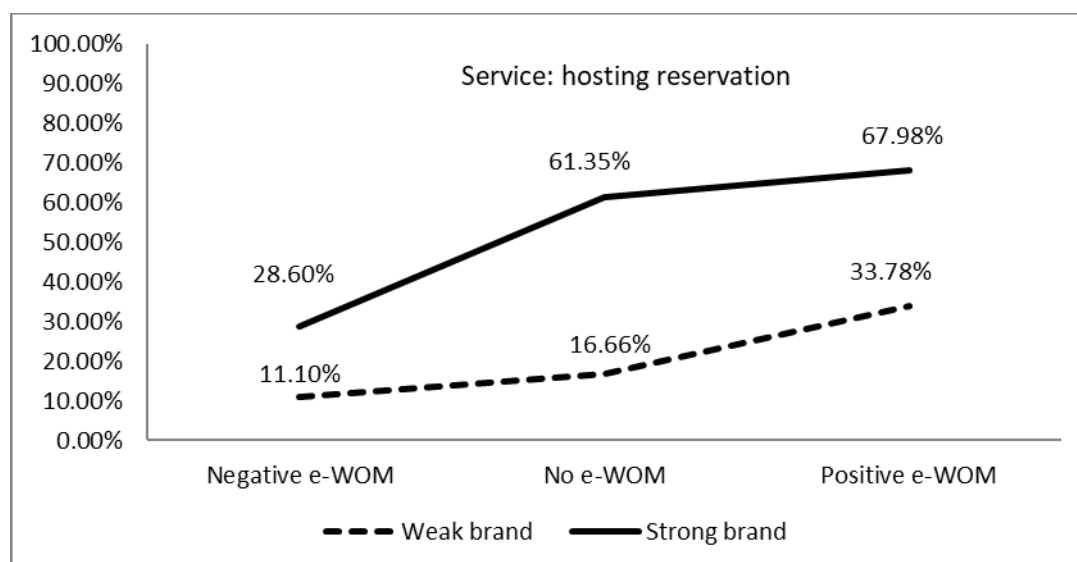
Source: the authors

DISCUSSION OF EXPERIMENT 2

The result allows us to infer that, for experience service and with a decision response scale different from the one used in Experiment 1, e-WOM and brand strength positively influence the purchase decision. Therefore, there is a generalization of the positive effect of both in the purchase decision, again corroborating the findings already found (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2014; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Oliveira-Castro et al., 2016; Porto & Oliveira-Castro, 2015; You et al., 2015; Zablocki et al., 2019). However, in Experiment 2, e-WOM is more influential than brand strength. This result demonstrates that among products with different experiences (Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013), the power of influence can vary, being more remarkable for pure experience services.

The positive e-WOM of consumers is more influential in the purchase decision of the weak brand than the strong one (bracing effect). Negative e-WOM, on the other hand, is more effective in the decision to buy the strong brand than the weak brand (weakening effect). Negative e-WOM reduces the likelihood of a decision to purchase both the weak and the strong

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brand (aversive effect). The positive e-WOM did not generate a supplementary effect on the purchase decision for the strong brand. Therefore, the result is very similar to that found in Experiment 1, varying only in the intensity of the influence.

Thus, there is a generalization principle: by changing the category, the interactive effects of e-WOM and brand strength continue to exist similarly for brand purchasing decisions. The sensitivity of e-WOM was again corroborated (Ho-Dac et al., 2013; Uncles et al., 2010; You et al., 2015). However, the weak brand's e-WOM has a greater reach. This result is possibly due to the consumer's lack of familiarity with the experienced service. It is only while using the service that the consumer will check the quality.

The reader should note that sociodemographic variables, purchase frequency, and search for opinion did not significantly influence the decision. This result suggests that the effect of e-WOM and brand strength is a generalized result in the population. That is, regardless of the consumer's characteristics, this effect occurs.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The results of both experiments show that the effects of electronic word-of-mouth advertising and brand strength are positive and direct in the decision to purchase both experience product and experience service, corroborating H1 and H2. Initially, both variables strongly influence the purchase decision, and they move in the same direction of influence (the stronger the brand and the positive e-WOM, the greater the effect). The results corroborate the findings that e-WOM alters brand perceptions and that brand management, reflected in the strength perceived by consumers, considerably impacts purchase decisions (East et al., 2008; Ho-Dac et al., 2013; Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013; Severi et al., 2014; Zablocki et al., 2019).

However, brand strength exerts a more powerful direct influence on the experience generating product, while e-WOM exerts a more substantial direct impact on the pure experience service. This result may have occurred because it is more difficult for the consumer to contact the sporadic service (booking for accommodation) than with a product of regular contact (smartphone). Also, we simulated the service's comments as coming from a more independent website (there are no sales tied to the advertised service) than the smartphone product (similar to e-commerce retail, in which there are sales tied to the advertised product). According to You et al. (2015), there is greater elasticity of e-WOM in sales, favoring independent websites.

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More important than this finding is the moderating influence of e-WOM in the relationship between brand strength and purchase decision, corroborating H3. The explanation of this moderation makes the conflicting results of e-WOM effects clearer (Casaló et al., 2015; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Duan et al., 2008; East et al., 2008; Ladhari & Michaud, 2015). This interactive influence follows the behavioral perspective theory (Foxall, 2015), which considers situational variables representing the social setting in consumer behavior. Specifically, the study corroborated the sub-hypotheses H3b, H3c, and H3d, demonstrating the patterns of bracing, weakening, and aversive effects of e-WOM. These patterns are essential for brand management purposes (Keller & Lehmann, 2006).

The bracing effect showed that the weak brand could overcome the failures (or absence) of branding activities by encouraging positive e-WOM. However, the generation of positive e-WOM needs to be frequent. It is difficult for the brand manager to control, as consumers are responsible for issuing them, and comments from independent sales websites are more credible. Ho-Dac et al. (2013) and You et al. (2015) pointed out this occurrence for the sales of weak brands.

In turn, the weakening effect showed that the strong brand could have a considerable drop in decision probabilities when suffering a negative e-WOM. Thus, the branding activity, even if well elaborated and reflected in consumers' perceptions as a strong brand, does not protect the purchase rates of the massively denigrated brand. In general terms, branding aims to make the brand more valuable to the company and facilitate its marketing to consumers. This result has been systematically proven (Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Porto & Lima, 2015), but it does not prevent the occurrence of criticism by some consumers, which can invert the sales growth curve. The brand manager needs to pay attention to the volume of e-WOM in each sales region of the strong brand he manages.

The aversive effect of e-WOM is evident and widespread. It drastically reduces the chances of a strong brand's purchase decision and reduces the probability of buying weak brands. This result was intense for both the product and service. Therefore, managers need to be alert and avoid as much as possible that consumers feel harmed, wronged in a consumer relationship, and, in particular, when they attribute the relationship's failure to the company (Balagi et al., 2016).

We did not find the supplementary effect of e-WOM, refuting H3a. Ho-Dac et al. (2013) did not find it either. Thus, praising a strong brand on a buying occasion does not offer much

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gain to the manager of that brand. Branding work may be at its peak (Keller & Lehmann, 2006), and marginal gains are harder to achieve.

FINAL REMARKS

The evidence of the e-WOM effect patterns revealed in this research (bracing, weakening, aversive, and supplementary effect) provides opportunities for a research agenda that functionally investigates the purpose of consumer comments to potential buyers of products or services and company managers. Word-of-mouth advertising is helpful in brand marketing when applied to a brand that has used marketing or has given up on it, as long as the valence of this advertisement is identified.

The research, however, has some limitations that future investigations can deepen. We investigated only two product brands and two service brands. Future studies may try to find the same patterns for search products. It is possible to find out if there is a generalization of the results for this type of product.

This investigation analyzed the valence of consumer comments. Future research may look at the interaction effect between the volume of comments and brand strength and test the impact of these comments on actual purchase rates over time. Furthermore, other marketing variables, which do not represent branding effects, can interact with e-WOM and bring results complementary to those found here.

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Contribution of authors

Every author should account for at least one component of the work. Paper approved for publication need to specify the contribution of every single author.

Contribution	[Author 1]	[Author 2]	[Author 3]	[Author 4]
1. Definition of research problem	√	√	√	√
2. Development of hypotheses or research questions (empirical studies)	√	√		
3. Development of theoretical propositions (theoretical work)	√	√		
4. Theoretical foundation / Literature review	√	√		
5. Definition of methodological procedures	√		√	√
6. Data collection			√	√
7. Statistical analysis	√	√		
8. Analysis and interpretation of data	√		√	√
9. Critical revision of the manuscript	√	√		
10. Manuscript writing	√	√	√	√
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