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How does sensory brand experience influence brand equity? Considering the roles of customer satisfaction, customer affective commitment, and employee empathy

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ABSTRACT

Building a favorable sensory brand experience is crucial in services settings to strengthen the competitive position of a brand and its equity. However, little empirical research exists in this area. Additionally, and surprisingly, most of the research on service brand experience neglects the importance of employees. This study investigates the effect of sensory brand experience on brand equity in the banking industry, through customer satisfaction and customer affective commitment. It also examines whether employee empathy moderates the impacts of sensory brand experience on customer satisfaction and customer affective commitment. Based on data collected through a panel of 1739 customers, the hypothesized structural model is tested using path analysis. Results show that sensory brand experience has a positive indirect impact on brand equity, through customer satisfaction and customer affective commitment. Customer satisfaction positively influences customer affective commitment, and employee empathy negatively moderates the relationship between sensory brand experience and customer satisfaction.

1. Introduction

In an ever more competitive, interconnected and transparent business environment, brands must offer memorable experiences to their customers if they want to differentiate themselves and build a solid competitive position (Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2002; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999). This challenge is especially relevant in the services sector (e.g., Markovic, Iglesias, Singh, & Sierra, 2018) because of the distinctive nature of a service (i.e., intangible, heterogeneous, inseparable, and perishable) (Berry, 1980; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985), and the numerous touch-points that exist between services brands and their customers (Grönroos, 2006). A favorable brand experience increases customer satisfaction, enhances customer affective commitment, improves the quality of the brand-customer relationships, and strengthens brand equity (e.g., Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Iglesias, Singh, & Batista-Foguet, 2011; Lin, 2015; Yao, Wang, & Liu, 2013).

According to Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009), brand experience is composed of four distinct dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral. However, some researchers suggest that the sensory dimension is particularly relevant in services settings (e.g., Goldkuhl & Styvén, 2007; Lin, 2015), and even more specifically in the banking industry (Chahal & Dutta, 2015). This industry is currently immersed in a profound revolution (Bennett & Kottasz, 2011), because the recent financial crisis undermined the industry's reputation, and obliged banks to provide better customer experiences in order to regain customer trust (Johnson & Peterson, 2014). On one side, most banks are closing many branches and enhancing online customer service channels in search of more agile and personalized experiences (Gilbert, Meyer, & Fuchs, 2013). For example, the five largest British banks closed around 1700 branches in the period 2011–2016 (Treanor, 2016), and Wells Fargo recently announced plans to close > 400 American branches by the end of 2018 (Gray, 2017). On the other, banks are also trying to improve the experience they offer customers in a much more selective network of offices. In order to achieve this, many banks are paying special attention to building sensory brand experiences that enable them to connect with the various senses of their customers (Hultén, 2011). For example, Santander Bank is opening new offices with an innovative design that includes intelligent lighting and air conditioning systems to improve customer experience and heighten comfort. Likewise, the bank is also developing visual and auditory systems to improve the experience of older people, as well as people with disabilities.

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Also with the aim of improving the sensory brand experience in its offices, Lloyds Bank has developed a white tea and thyme perfume. Other banks, including the National Australia Bank and China Merchants Bank, also have their own fragrances. Overall, one of the key strategies of financial services brands to strengthen their competitive position, regain customer trust and satisfaction, and increase their equity is building a superior sensory brand experience in their branches (Lin, 2015). Unfortunately, from an academic perspective, there are still few theoretical proposals on how to build and manage sensory brand experiences, as this is an emerging field (e.g., Hultén, 2011). Similarly, little empirical research exists on the impact of sensory brand experience on key customer outcomes (e.g., customer satisfaction and customer affective commitment) (e.g., Moreira, Fortes, & Santiago, 2017) and brand outcome variables (e.g., brand equity) in the services sector (e.g., Chahal & Dutta, 2015).

In parallel to building a better sensory brand experience, a services brand should also place special emphasis on recruiting, training, and developing employees (Berry, 1981; Grönroos, 2011) because they are the ones that can make or break the brand (Roper & Davies, 2007) in each of their personal interactions with customers. Employees are the main stakeholders in services settings (e.g., Balmer, 2010; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001), and consequently, the provision of a superior experience will depend on employees believing and sharing the values of the brand (Ind, Iglesias, & Markovic, 2017; Ind, 2007) and acting accordingly (Markovic Markovic, 2016; Morrison & Crane, 2007). This also means that employees must have high levels of empathy so that they can understand customer expectations and react quickly and effectively to their demands (Davis, 1996; Homburg, Wieseke, & Bornemann, 2009). Surprisingly, despite the emphasis that traditional services literature places on the central role of employees (e.g., Berry, 1981; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001), most of the research on service brand experience neglects the key importance of employees (e.g., Ding & Tseng, 2015; Nysveen, Pedersen, & Skard, 2013).

This article addresses the above-discussed shortcomings in the current literature by investigating the effect of sensory brand experience on brand equity in the banking industry, considering the roles of customer satisfaction, customer affective commitment, and employee empathy. Data are collected in Spain, by means of an online panel composed of 1739 customers. Structural equation modeling via partial least squares is used to simultaneously test the hypothesized relationships. The following sections present the Theoretical background and hypotheses development, the Methodology, the Data analysis and results, and the Discussion and conclusion.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1. The effect of sensory brand experience on brand equity

In the last decade, several scholars have acknowledged that managing experiences ought to be a key concern for any brand (Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2002; Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999). Experiences are different from goods and services (Iglesias, Singh, & Batista-Foguet, 2011; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). From the branding perspective, experiences are the takeaway impressions created in the minds of customers because of their interactions with brands (e.g., Carbone & Haeckel, 1994; Klaus & Maklan, 2007). These interactions can be direct or indirect. Direct interactions generally occur when customers purchase, consume, or use the brand's goods or services; whereas indirect interactions mainly take place when customers experience the brand's advertising, marketing communications, word-of-mouth recommendations, news reports, and reviews (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009) (p. 53) define brand experience as "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) as well as behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications and environments." From this standpoint, brand experience contains four dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). The sensory dimension of brand experience is the focus of this study, and comprises the tactile, visual, auditory, olfactory, and gustatory stimulations generated by brands in customers (Hultén, 2011). The sensory dimension captures the degree to which the brand appeals to the five senses of the customers, and also the extent to which these customers find the brand interesting in a sensory way (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). Although the brand's sounds (e.g., in-store signature music) and smells (e.g., in-store perfumes, candles, product scent) can rapidly boost the sensory experience of customers (e.g., Hultén, 2011), the brand's colors, shapes, typefaces, and designs can also stimulate customer senses (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997). An element that is part of the brand environment (e.g., the product) can stimulate diverse customer senses at the same time (e.g., visual and gustatory). Accordingly, researchers have highlighted the importance of studying brand experience from a multi-sensory perspective (i.e., capturing all five human senses) and argue that a multi-sensory brand experience can boost the brand's value-generation processes and equity (e.g., Hultén, 2011; Hultén, Broweus, & van Dijk, 2009; Lin, 2015; Moreira, Fortes, & Santiago, 2017).

Regarding the other three dimensions of brand experience, the affective dimension relates with sentiments, feelings, and emotions that brands induce in customers. Hence, it captures the degree to which customers perceive the brand as an emotional brand (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). The intellectual dimension has to do with the imaginative and analytical thinking that brands trigger in customers. Namely, it captures the extent to which the brand makes customers think and stimulates their curiosity and problem-solving capabilities (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). Finally, the behavioral dimension encompasses customer attitudes and actions caused by brands. It relates to the degree to which customers engage in physical behavior and bodily experiences when using the brand (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009).

Not all brand experiences are equal in terms of strength and intensity (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2013). While some brand experiences can be ordinary and commonplace (Carù & Cova, 2003), others may be strong and memorable (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). For instance, Macy's and Dell are considered as ordinary, or even weak, experiential brands (e.g., Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009), while Starbucks and Apple are among the most cited brands in academic marketing research for providing strong and memorable brand experiences (e.g., Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Hultén, 2011; Morrison & Crane, 2007). Strong and memorable brand experiences are likely to produce many organizational advantages, including enhanced customer satisfaction, loyalty, brand-customer relationships, brand personality, and brand equity (e.g., Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Iglesias, Singh, & Batista-Foguet, 2011; Lin, 2015; Sahin, Zehir, & Kitapçı, 2011; Yao, Wang, & Liu, 2013). Accordingly, researchers argue that in an increasingly competitive business environment, organizations must focus on improving brand experiences (e.g., Frow & Payne, 2007; Haeckel, Carbone, & Berry, 2003).

Brand equity is one of the most important constructs within the field of brand management, from both academic and managerial perspectives (Yang, Liu, & Li, 2015). Traditionally, brand equity is defined as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers" (Aaker, 1991, p. 15). More recently, however, several scholars conceptualize brand equity as a relational market-based asset generated by means of interactions and relationships between brands and their customers (e.g., Davcik, Vinhas da Silva, & Hair, 2015; Hooley, Greenley, Cadogan, & Fahy, 2005; Srivastava, Fahey, & Christensen, 2001).

The link between brand experience and brand equity is fundamentally studied in the services sector. For instance, in a business-to-business services setting, Biedenbach and Marell (2010) provide empirical evidence for a positive influence of customer experience on brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty, which are the four dimensions of brand equity proposed by Aaker (1991). In an online retailing context, Chen (2012) shows that brand experience has a positive effect on brand equity, measured by brand strength, attractiveness, uniqueness, and likeability. In the mobile phone industry, Sheng and Teo (2012) provide empirical evidence for a positive effect of customer experience (sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral) on brand equity. In the hotel industry, Xu and Chan (2010) propose that the quality of customer experience is a key determinant of overall brand equity. In a study on event marketing, Zarantonello and Schmitt (2013) find that sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral brand experiences are positively related to brand equity. In an empirical study on Starbucks, Cleff, Lin, and Walter (2014) show that sensory, affective, cognitive, behavioral, and relational brand experiences have a positive influence on brand equity, and that the sensory and affective dimensions have an especially large positive influence. Similarly, in the airline industry, Lin (2015) finds that, although affective, behavioral, and intellectual brand experiences have a positive impact on brand equity, the main type of innovative brand experiences positively affecting the brand equity of Cathay Pacific, EVA Airways, and Korean Air are sensory experiences. Likewise, in a catering services context, Moreira, Fortes, and Santiago (2017) show that sensory-stimulated brand experiences have a positive effect on brand equity. In accordance with these findings from various services settings, including the banking industry, the authors hypothesize that:

H1. Sensory brand experience has a positive effect on brand equity.

2.2. *The effect of sensory brand experience on customer affective commitment*

Developing customer commitment is essential for any brand, because committed customers are less sensitive to price (Hess and Story, 2005) and to punctual episodes of poor brand performance (Story & Hess, 2010). Scholars identify two types of customer commitment – continuance and affective (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Evanschitzky & Wunderlich, 2006; Fullerton, 2003). Continuance commitment conceptualizes the need by the customer to maintain a relationship with a brand, due to a lack of alternatives, or high switching costs (Evanschitzky & Wunderlich, 2006); while affective commitment is defined as an emotional response that originates from the psychological identification and attachment of customers to a brand (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Fullerton, 2003).

Managers have traditionally used brand communications and advertising as the key tools to elicit strong emotional responses from customers (Frow & Payne, 2007). However, in the current hyper-competitive environment, several scholars argue that brands need to deliver strong, memorable, and unique experiences if they want customers to develop positive emotions and feelings toward the brand (e.g., Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Mosley, 2007). Surprisingly, scant empirical research exists relating brand experience to customer affective commitment. Among this scant research, Iglesias, Singh, and Batista-Foguet (2011) show that sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual brand experiences are positive determinants of customer affective commitment. Similarly, Jung and Soo (2012) find that affective and behavioral brand experiences are positive antecedents of customer affective commitment.

In accordance with the above-presented scant empirical findings and the conceptual line of argument, and focusing on the sensory dimension of brand experience, which is crucial in the services sector (Lin, 2015), and especially in the banking industry (Chahal & Dutta, 2015), the authors postulate that:

H2. Sensory brand experience has a positive effect on customer affective commitment.

2.3. *The effect of sensory brand experience on customer satisfaction*

Since the mid-1980s, the topic of customer satisfaction has been increasingly researched, especially in the fields of marketing and services (e.g., Anderson, 1994; Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Churchill Jr & Surprenant, 1982; Oliver, 1980). Traditionally, customer satisfaction is conceptualized as the post-consumption evaluation of the firm/brand and/or its offerings, dependent on the perceived value, quality, and expectations (e.g., Anderson, 1994; Oliver, 1980). More recently, however, several authors argue that customer satisfaction is the key outcome of brand experience (e.g., Chahal & Dutta, 2015). Accordingly, Meyer and Schwager (2007) conceptualize customer satisfaction as the accumulation of multiple customer experiences with the brand. Similarly, Lin (2015) proposes that customer satisfaction is the emotional and psychological result of individual customer experiences, and White and Yu (2005) argue that customer satisfaction is an affective summary response to brand experiences.

Following these more modern approaches to the conceptualization of customer satisfaction, many scholars are now examining the link between brand experience and customer satisfaction from an empirical perspective. For example, in the context of product brands, Başer, Cintamür, and Arslan (2015) find that sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual brand experiences have a positive influence on customer satisfaction. Similarly, in the retailing sector, Ha and Perks (2005) show that a consumer who enjoys impressive brand experiences becomes a highly satisfied consumer; and Ishida and Taylor (2012) find that sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual brand experiences have a positive indirect impact on customer satisfaction through brand personality. Considering brands from both the goods and services sectors, Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009) provide empirical evidence for the same indirect impact as Ishida and Taylor (2012), but also for a direct influence of sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual brand experiences on customer satisfaction. Similarly, Kim, Lee, and Suh (2015) find that the sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral experiences of customers with a shopping mall brand determine their satisfaction with the brand. Likewise, in the automotive industry, Şahin, Turhan, and Zehir (2013) show that sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual brand experiences have a positive influence on brand satisfaction. In the airline industry, Lin (2015) obtains the same results, and Kim, Chua, Lee, Boo, and Han (2016) find that sensory brand experience is positively related to customer satisfaction. In a similar vein, in the banking industry, Khan et al. (2016) find that online brand experience is a positive antecedent of customer satisfaction; and Chahal and Dutta (2015) show that sensory experience significantly determines customer experience with the brand, which in turn has a positive effect on customer satisfaction. In line with these previous results from the banking industry and other contexts, and with the aim of gaining further empirical insight into the effects of the sensory dimension of brand experience, which is key in the banking industry (Chahal & Dutta, 2015), the authors hypothesize that:

H3. Sensory brand experience has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

2.4. *The moderating influence of employee empathy on the effects of sensory brand experience on customer affective commitment and customer satisfaction*

Empathy is a relevant construct in the literature on services and is crucial for a mutual understanding between social actors (e.g., Davis, 1996; Kenny & Albright, 1987). More precisely, in services settings, empathy is a core determinant of favorable customer-employee interactions (Aggarwal, Castleberry, Ridnour, & Shepherd, 2005; Giacobbe, Jackson Jr, Crosby, & Bridges, 2006), and therefore a fundamental skill for service employees (Ahearne, Jelinek, & Jones, 2007; Pilling & Eroglu, 1994).

Empathy is widely conceptualized as the ability to understand and react to the thoughts and feelings of others (Barrett-Lennard, 1981; Goldstein & Michaels, 1985; McBane, 1995; Pilling & Eroglu, 1994). Several scholars propose that employees with high levels of empathy can more easily identify and address customer needs and desires (e.g., Dawson, Soper, & Pettijohn, 1992; Homburg, Wieseke, & Bornemann, 2009) and are more likely to be helpful – so producing experiences that are rich in interpersonal concern and emotional contagion (e.g., McBane, 1995). The concept of emotional contagion is introduced in the literature on social psychology (Gump & Kulik, 1997) and suggests that feelings and emotions can be transmitted from person to person – even through short interactions – and leave an enduring memory (e.g., Rozin & Royzman, 2001).

Employees can transfer positive feelings and emotions to customers (Howard & Gengler, 2001) and these feelings are likely to create an affective commitment in customers (Mende & Bolton, 2011) if employees are sufficiently empathic during these interactions (Lee, Comer, Dubinsky, & Schafer, 2011; Wieseke, Geigenmuller, & Kraus, 2012). This is especially important in services settings, due to the greater amount of employee-customer interactions that such settings entail when compared to goods contexts (Grönroos, 2006). Considering that the customer orientation of service employees involves developing empathy toward customers, which is essential for understanding their needs and desires (e.g., Giacobbe, Jackson Jr, Crosby, & Bridges, 2006; Stock & Hoyer, 2005), researchers from the field of services suggest that when service employees have a strong customer orientation, customers develop greater affective commitment toward the services brand or company (e.g., Hennig-Thurau, 2004; Markovic et al., 2018). Accordingly, Hennig-Thurau (2004) proposes that developing affinity and familiarity with customers can increase affective commitment to the service provider. Similarly, Daniels, Glover, and Mellor (2014) show that perceived empathy has a positive impact on affect.

Apart from relating employee empathy to customer feelings and emotions, scholars also argue that when employees portray an empathic attitude, customers will be more satisfied with the brand (e.g., Markovic et al., 2018). As empathic employees are concerned about and better understand customer needs and desires (Saxby, Celuch, & Walz, 2015), they can better personalize the service for each customer and so improve customer satisfaction (Giacobbe, Jackson Jr, Crosby, & Bridges, 2006; Jones & Shandiz, 2015). Accordingly, Stock and Hoyer (2005) and Hennig-Thurau (2004) find that those service employees with a strong customer orientation can make customers more satisfied.

Finally, in addition to associating employee empathy with customer affective commitment and satisfaction, scholars also relate empathy to brand experience. Employees are key stakeholders in services brands (e.g., Balmer, 2010; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Iglesias, Markovic, Singh, & Sierra, 2017), as they can make or break the brand (Roper & Davies, 2007) when interacting with customers and shaping their brand experience (Iglesias, Singh, & Batista-Foguet, 2011). When customers perceive that employees behave in an empathic manner (i.e., trying to understand and address their needs and desires) during their interactions, they tend to assess employee performance more positively and have a better brand experience (Wieseke, Geigenmuller, & Kraus, 2012). Being able to understand and address customer needs and desires enables employees to deliver a quality service (Puccinelli, Andrzejewski, Markos, Noga, & Motyka, 2013), and thereby improve customer experience with the brand (Markovic et al., 2018). This is especially true in services contexts, where some scholars argue that employee empathy is an important determinant of customer brand experience (e.g., Markovic et al., 2018; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985, 1988; Rust & Oliver, 1994).

Although previous research has either directly or indirectly associated employee empathy with brand experience, customer affective commitment, or customer satisfaction, few researchers are examining employee empathy as a moderator of the impacts of brand experience on customer affective commitment and customer satisfaction. This gap is surprising because when employees behave in an empathic manner, favorable customer experience with the brand can plausibly be expected to turn into even greater customer affective commitment to and satisfaction with the brand. In line with this rationale, based on the above-discussed literature, and focusing on the sensory dimension of brand experience because of its key importance in the services sector (Lin, 2015), and specifically in the banking industry (Chahal & Dutta, 2015), the authors posit that:

H4. The greater employee empathy, the stronger the effect of sensory brand experience on customer affective commitment.

H5. The greater employee empathy, the stronger the effect of sensory brand experience on customer satisfaction.

2.5. Inter-relationship between customer affective commitment, customer satisfaction, and brand equity

Even if historically customer satisfaction is one of the most researched topics within the discipline of marketing (Oliver, 1997) and the antecedents of customer satisfaction are widely researched (e.g., brand experience) (e.g., Başer, Cintamür, & Arslan, 2015; Khan et al., 2016), scholars are paying less attention to its consequences. More specifically, when empirically studying the consequences of customer satisfaction, researchers primarily focus on behavioral outcome variables, such as customer purchase intentions (e.g., Mai & Ness, 1999; Martenson, 2007) and customer loyalty (e.g., Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Chang & Tu, 2005). Unexpectedly, however, customer satisfaction has not been widely related from an empirical standpoint to affective outcome variables, such as customer affective commitment.

This scant research includes studies primarily developed in the services sector. For example, in a restaurant setting, Lai (2015) finds that customer satisfaction boosts customer affective commitment. Similarly, in the travel industry, Richard and Zhang (2012) show that customer satisfaction with a travel agency increases customer affective commitment to that agency. Likewise, in the banking industry, Saxby, Celuch, and Walz (2015) provide empirical evidence for a positive effect of customer satisfaction on customer affective commitment. In a study encompassing four services settings (i.e., retailing, entertainment, banking, and transport), Dimitriades (2006) operationalizes customer commitment by only including its affective component, and finds a positive consequence for customer satisfaction. Similarly, in a theater company, Johnson, Sivadas, and Garbarino (2008) show that customer satisfaction has a positive influence on customer affective commitment. In line with these results from diverse services settings, including the banking industry (Saxby, Celuch, & Walz, 2015), the authors hypothesize that:

H6. Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on customer affective commitment.

Scholars do not widely link customer satisfaction with customer affective commitment from an empirical standpoint, but satisfaction is repeatedly related to brand equity. For instance, in a business-to-business services setting, Geigenmüller and Bettis-Outland (2012) propose that customer satisfaction with a service boosts service brand equity. Similarly, in banking and discount store services, Ha, Janda, and Muthaly (2010) highlight that customer satisfaction is crucial and has a strong and positive influence on brand equity. In the same vein, Hsu (2012) argues that customer satisfaction in the life insurance industry plays a central role and has a positive effect on brand equity. Likewise, in a study on winery experience, Nella and Christou (2014) show that

Table 1
Constructs and items used in the questionnaire.

Constructs	Items	Reference(s)
Sensory brand experience	This brand makes a strong impression on my visual sense or other senses. I find this brand interesting in a sensory way. This brand appeals to my senses.	Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009)
Customer affective commitment	I enjoy being a customer of this brand. I have positive feelings about this brand. I feel attached to this brand.	Mende and Bolton (2011)
Customer satisfaction	All in all, I am very satisfied with this brand. The touch-points with this brand meet my expectations of the ideal touch-points with this type of brands. The performance of this brand has fulfilled my expectations.	Homburg, Wieseke, and Bornemann (2009)
Employee empathy	The brand employees give customers individual attention. The brand employees deal with customers in a caring fashion. The brand employees have the customer best interest at heart. The brand employees understand the needs of their customers.	Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1994)
Brand equity	Even if another brand has the same features as this brand, I would prefer to buy this brand. If I have to choose among different brands offering the same type of service, I would definitely choose this brand. Even if another brand has the same price as this brand, I would still buy this brand.	Yasin, Noor, and Mohamad (2012) Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000)

the higher the level of visitor satisfaction, the greater the winery brand equity.

In a study on hospital marketing, Kim, Kim, Kim, Kim, and Kang (2008) find a positive indirect effect of customer satisfaction on brand equity, through brand awareness, which is a dimension of brand equity (Aaker, 1996). In the context of retail brands, Pappu and Quester (2006) show a positive influence for customer satisfaction with the retailer on retail brand equity. Likewise, in higher education, Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos, and Bourlakis (2016) find that student satisfaction with a university has a positive effect on the university's brand equity. Similarly, in a study on environmentally-responsible information and electronics products, Chen (2010) finds a positive effect of green customer satisfaction on green brand equity. Finally, in a cross-cultural study involving multiple brands from different sectors, Torres and Tribó (2011) find that customer satisfaction is a positive antecedent of brand equity. In accordance with these previous empirical results from diverse fields, the authors postulate that:

H7. Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on brand equity.

In addition to relating customer satisfaction to brand equity, some scholars either directly or indirectly associate customer affective commitment with brand equity (e.g., Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Dwivedi & Johnson, 2013; Sierra, Iglesias, Markovic, & Singh, 2017). For example, Fullerton (2005) finds that affective commitment decreases switching intentions, and Gundlach, Achrol, and Mentzer (1995) suggest that positive feeling toward a specific brand can prevent searching for alternative brands. Customers who have low switching intentions and who do not search for alternative brands can be considered brand-loyal customers (Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer, 1995). This traditional understanding of loyalty as a continuous act of repurchase of a specific brand's products and/or services constitutes its behavioral dimension (Moliner-Velázquez, Gil-Saura, & Ruiz-Molina, 2011; Oliver, 1997; Zins, 2001). More recently, however, scholars have also recognized the attitudinal (or intention-based) dimension of loyalty (Kumar & Advani, 2005; Moliner-Velázquez, Gil-Saura, & Ruiz-Molina, 2011; Zins, 2001), and defined brand loyalty in terms of customer desire to recommend the brand to others, customer preference for one brand over other brands, and customer feeling of attachment to a brand (e.g., Fournier, 1998; Markovic et al., 2018; Moliner-Velázquez, Gil-Saura, & Ruiz-Molina, 2011; Šerić, Gil-Saura, & Mollá-Descals, 2013). Moreover, many scholars acknowledge that brand loyalty is a dimension of brand equity (e.g., Aaker, 1996; Biedenbach, Bengtsson, & Wincent, 2011; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005, 2006).

Apart from brand loyalty, academics also propose that affective commitment (Martin & Brown, 1990; Matthews, Son, & Watchravesringkan, 2014) and attachment/identification (Lassar, Mittal, & Sharma, 1995) are dimensions of brand equity. For instance, Burmann, Jost-Benz, and Riley (2009) introduce a model of brand equity that integrates external and internal brand strength perspectives, where commitment is considered a component of internal brand strength. Correspondingly, Feldwick (1996, p. 11) proposes a conceptualization of brand equity as "a measure of the strength of consumer attachment to a brand." Although previous research has primarily linked affective commitment with brand equity through the dimensions of brand equity, some recent empirical studies have investigated affective commitment as an antecedent of brand equity (e.g., Šerić, Mikulić, & Gil-Saura, 2016; Sierra, Iglesias, Markovic, & Singh, 2017), as it is plausible to expect that when customers feel identified with a specific brand and develop a strong emotional attachment to that brand, brand equity will increase (Šerić, Mikulić, & Gil-Saura, 2016). This is aligned with the recent suggestions about studying brand equity dimensions as brand equity antecedents (Wang, Kandampully, Lo, & Guicheng, 2006), which is a natural step in advancing the understanding of the brand equity construct (Šerić, Mikulić, & Gil-Saura, 2016).

Among the scant empirical research causally relating affective commitment (i.e., a dimension of brand equity) to brand equity, in the field of corporate services brands, Sierra, Iglesias, Markovic, and Singh (2017) find that customer affective commitment to a brand has a positive effect on brand equity. Similarly, in the context of higher education, Jillapalli and Jillapalli (2014) show that student commitment positively influences brand equity. Finally, in the hotel industry, Šerić, Mikulić, and Gil-Saura (2016) find that affective commitment has a positive impact on brand equity. In line with scant previous research, and aiming to gain further empirical insights into this relationship, the authors posit that:

H8. Customer affective commitment has a positive effect on brand equity.

3. Methodology

3.1. Questionnaire and measures

The questionnaire was based on constructs that were measured using and adapting existing scale items in the literature (see Table 1). All responses were recorded by means of an ordinal 7-point Likert scale, that ranged from "completely disagree" to "completely agree." A double-blind back-translation process was applied to the questionnaire to translate the items into Spanish.

In addition, the questionnaire was pre-tested in two ways. Firstly, to avoid potential misinterpretation by respondents, 3 professors and 3 practitioners from the areas of brand management and brand experience were asked to assess the adequacy of the questions from the conceptual standpoint, and the way in which they were posed. Secondly, 10 target respondents were asked to evaluate the questionnaire's ease of comprehension.

3.2. Data collection and sample

Data collection was conducted in Spain in 2016, using an online customer panel for the banking industry. All Spanish regional states were represented in the sample. Regarding the sampling procedure method, a non-probabilistic sampling by quotas was implemented. The quotas established in the socio-demographic variables were representative of the Spanish population.

Respondents answered several filtering questions that proved their engagement in the use of banking services. This approach resulted in a sample of 1739 customers, whose ages ranged from 18 to 65, with an average age of 40.46, a median age of 40, and 50.1% of respondents were female. 30% of respondents had a high-medium/high social status, 51.1% a medium social status, and 18.9% a medium/low-low social status. Table 2 depicts the sample profile in detail, including the distribution of respondents across the Spanish regional states.

4. Data analysis and results

The authors used structural equation modeling via partial least squares (PLS-SEM) to simultaneously test the hypothesized relationships in Smart PLS 3.0 software. PLS-SEM is a variance-based estimation procedure based on a set of multiple regressions and ordinary least square estimators. The procedure is an iterative algorithm that first solves the blocks of the measurement models, and then estimates the path coefficients in the structural model. Several scholars have argued that PLS-SEM is a suitable procedure to test complex models and complex relationships between constructs (e.g., Chin, Marcolin, & Newsted, 2003; Eggert, Ulaga, & Schultz, 2006; Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009; Sarkar, Echambadi, & Harrison, 2001). In addition, scholars have proposed that PLS-SEM is an appropriate procedure when the research objectives are exploratory in nature (e.g., Peng & Lai, 2012). Thus, PLS-SEM is suitable to analyze the hypothesized model in this study (Fig. 1), because (1) the model is complex (i.e., it involves 16 items for 5 constructs), (2) it contains complex relationships (i.e., mediators and moderator), and (3) several hypothesized relationships that are part of the model are under-researched from an empirical standpoint.

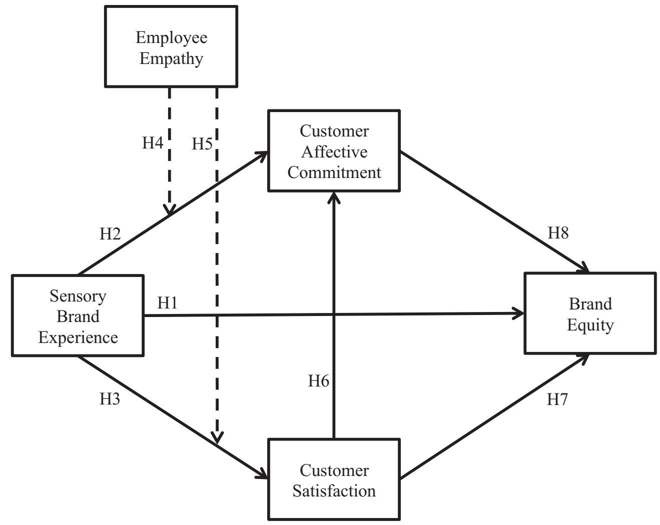

Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

Table 2
Sample profile.

		%
Gender	Male	49.9
	Female	50.1
Age	18–29	19.8
	30–49	56.4
	50–65	23.8
Social status	high-medium/high	30.0
	medium	51.1
	medium/low-low	18.9
Spanish regional states	Andalucía	16.4
	Aragón	4.0
	Principado de Asturias	2.9
	Islas Baleares	1.7
	Islas Canarias	3.6
	Cantabria	1.5
	Castilla- La Mancha	3.9
	Castilla-León	6.9
	Catalunya	14.1
	Comunidad Valenciana	10.7
	Extremadura	1.9
	Galicia	6.8
	La Rioja	0.3
	Comunidad de Madrid	15.5
	Comunidad Foral de Navarra	0.5
	País Vasco	5.2
	Región de Murcia	4.1

4.1. Measurement assessment

Table 3 includes the basic indexes of central tendency (i.e., mean and median) and variability (i.e., standard deviation). To assess the adequacy of the measures, the authors estimated the convergent validity through: item reliability, construct reliability, and average variance extract (AVE) (see Table 3). Firstly, item reliability was evaluated based on the factor loadings of the items (i.e., observed variables) on their respective constructs. As all the factor loadings were higher than the threshold value of 0.6, convergent validity was supported. Secondly, construct reliability was assessed through both composite reliability (CR) values and Cronbach alpha coefficients. As all the CR values and Cronbach alpha coefficients were higher than the threshold value of 0.7, convergent validity was supported. Thirdly, the AVE was assessed because it is the summary indicator of convergence. As all the AVE values were higher than the threshold value of 0.5, convergent

Table 3
Item descriptive and convergent validity.

Construct	Item	Mean	Median	SD	Loadings	Cronbach Alphas	CR	AVE
BE	BE1	4.88	5.00	1.65	0.94	0.92	0.95	0.86
	BE2	4.87	5.00	1.64	0.93			
	BE3	4.93	5.00	1.65	0.91			
CAC	CAC1	4.55	5.00	1.70	0.92	0.89	0.93	0.82
	CAC2	4.85	5.00	1.61	0.92			
	CAC3	4.62	5.00	1.70	0.88			
CS	CS1	5.09	5.00	1.59	0.95	0.95	0.97	0.90
	CS2	4.92	5.00	1.53	0.94			
	CS3	5.02	5.00	1.55	0.95			
EE	EE1	5.26	5.00	1.41	0.89	0.91	0.94	0.79
	EE2	5.10	5.00	1.47	0.89			
	EE3	5.43	6.00	1.41	0.87			
	EE4	5.02	5.00	1.49	0.90			
SBE	SBE1	4.01	4.00	1.72	0.93	0.93	0.95	0.87
	SBE2	4.08	4.00	1.73	0.94			
	SBE3	4.04	4.00	1.73	0.93			

Table 4
Convergent validity: cross-loadings analysis.

	BE	CAC	CS	EE	SBE
BE1	**0.941**	0.780	0.802	0.648	0.557
BE2	**0.928**	0.809	0.820	0.648	0.583
BE3	**0.913**	0.722	0.750	0.634	0.519
CAC1	0.751	**0.917**	0.760	0.629	0.688
CAC2	0.818	**0.924**	0.819	0.668	0.636
CAC3	0.690	**0.881**	0.667	0.583	0.654
CS1	0.823	0.793	**0.954**	0.729	0.565
CS2	0.802	0.784	**0.940**	0.730	0.577
CS3	0.806	0.782	**0.953**	0.727	0.560
EE1	0.597	0.593	0.666	**0.893**	0.437
EE2	0.645	0.639	0.710	**0.885**	0.483
EE3	0.557	0.537	0.614	**0.869**	0.368
EE4	0.655	0.676	0.726	**0.904**	0.528
SBE1	0.542	0.661	0.532	0.463	**0.934**
SBE2	0.569	0.688	0.576	0.490	**0.936**
SBE3	0.563	0.682	0.565	0.490	**0.930**

Note: In bold, the loadings between the items and the constructs they measure.

validity was supported. The authors also conducted a cross-loadings analysis, which shows that the items load more on the construct that they measure than on the other constructs, further supporting convergent validity (see Table 4).

The authors also estimated discriminant validity to further ensure the adequacy of the measures. Discriminant validity is evaluated by comparing the square root of the AVE of each construct with the bivariate correlations among constructs. A measurement model is considered to have acceptable discriminant validity if the square root of the AVE of each construct is higher than any of the bivariate correlations among the constructs. As all the square roots of AVE were higher than the bivariate correlations among the constructs, discriminant validity was supported. Table 5 depicts the assessment of discriminant validity.

4.2. Measurement equivalence

The authors tested for measurement equivalence to assess whether the constructs (via their scale items) were invariant across gender and social status. In the literature, there are two widely recognized techniques to test for measurement equivalence: confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998) and generalizability theory (Cronbach, Gleser, Nanda, & Rajaratnam, 1972). As the subsample size for gender and social status is large enough (i.e., > 75), the authors used CFA to assess the structural invariance of the constructs across gender and social status (see Table 6). Results show that the structure of the constructs is the same for men and women, and for the three social status groups. Constraining the measurement weights for the different groups of gender and social status does not suppose a worse fit (i.e., p-values > 0.05).

4.3. Common method variance

A potential problem of common method variance (CMV) arises in this research as data were collected from the same respondents (i.e., customers). The authors implemented construct level correction (CLC) to address this potential common method variance issue (Chin, Thatcher, Wright, & Steel, 2013). CLC involves creating as many CMV control constructs as constructs in the model. Each CMV control uses the same entire set of measured latent marker variables. The CMV construct is modeled as impacting each construct present in the hypothesized model. The authors used the latent marker variable of psychological risk, which contains the following three items (Keh & Pang, 2010): (1) the thought of using the services of this brand makes me feel psychologically uncomfortable, (2) the thought of using the services of this brand causes me to experience unnecessary tension, and (3) I would worry a lot when buying the services of this brand.

A high correlation between this latent marker variable and any other construct present in this study would confirm an issue of CMV. The lowest absolute correlation between the latent marker variable and the other constructs present in this research (r_s) is the CMV estimate (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). The r_s is a conservative estimate because an unadjusted correlation is influenced by the true covariance and by the CMV (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). In this study, the r_s is 0.111, which is associated with an R^2 of 0.012, indicating a low common source effect shared between constructs (see Table 7).

To control for CMV, all the correlations among constructs were adjusted using $r_s = 0.111$. All the correlations remained significant after adjusting for CMV, and therefore the authors concluded that the estimations of the parameters of the hypothesized model are not biased by CMV.

Table 5
Discriminant validity.

	BE	CAC	CS	EE	SBE
BE	0.93[a]				
CAC	0.83[b]	0.91			
CS	0.85	0.83	0.95		
EE	0.69	0.69	0.77	0.89	
SBE	0.60	0.73	0.60	0.52	0.93

[a] Square root of AVE in the diagonal.
[b] Pearson correlations among constructs.

Table 6
Measurement equivalence through CFA.

Gender (men: 868; women: 871)	χ2	df	p
Unconstrained	689.54	188	
Constraining measurement weights	705.51	199	
Difference	15.97	11	0.142

Social status (high: 521; medium: 889; low: 329)	χ2	df	p
Unconstrained	750.23	282	
Constraining measurement weights	765.54	304	
Difference	15.31	22	0.849

4.4. Structural model evaluation

The evaluation of the structural model contains the estimation and the statistical test of the hypothesized relationships. As the scores of the constructs in PLS-SEM analysis are aggregates of the observed variables, a degree of measurement error can influence the estimation of the path coefficients (i.e., PLS-SEM bias). To check for this kind of bias effect, bias corrected and accelerated bootstrap confidence intervals (Efron, 1987; Streukens, Wetzels, Daryanto, & De Ruyter, 2010) were added for every path coefficient of the structural model (see Table 8). The authors created 5000 bootstrap resamples (with replacement) from the original dataset to compute the standard error of the path coefficients. For the outcomes of the bootstrap procedure, no inconsistent results were obtained regarding the population inference using two procedures: (1) the point estimate, and (2) the bias-corrected interval estimation, which

Table 7
Correlation coefficients and R^2 between marker and constructs.

Construct	Correlation coefficient	R^2
SBE	0.111	0.012
EE	−0.243	0.059
CAC	−0.111	0.012
CS	−0.264	0.069
BE	−0.224	0.050

Table 8
Path coefficients results.

	Estimate coefficients	Standard error	p-value	95% bias-corrected CI	Result
Direct effects					
H1: SBE → BE	−0.01	0.020	0.628	[−0.049; 0.029]	Not supported
H2: SBE → CAC	0.35	0.020	0.000	[0.308; 0.388]	Supported
H3: SBE → CS	0.29	0.022	0.000	[0.246; 0.331]	Supported
H6: CS → CAC	0.55	0.028	0.000	[0.496; 0.604]	Supported
H7: CS → BE	0.52	0.027	0.000	[0.471; 0.575]	Supported
H8: CAC → BE	0.41	0.032	0.000	[0.343; 0.468]	Supported
Moderating effects					
H4: SBE × EE → CAC	0.01	0.004	0.278	[−0.004; 0.013]	Not supported
H5: SBE × EE → CS	−0.02	0.006	0.001	[−0.032; −0.009]	Supported

proposes that estimator bias does not highly influence estimations.

At a significance level of 0.05, the estimated values of the path coefficients empirically support all the direct effects that are part of the hypothesized model, except the direct effect of sensory brand experience on brand equity ($\widehat{\beta}_1 = -0.01$; p = 0.628) (see Table 8). Specifically, sensory brand experience has a positive and direct effect on customer affective commitment ($\widehat{\beta}_2 = 0.35$; p = 0.000) and customer satisfaction ($\widehat{\beta}_3 = 0.29$; p = 0.000), which empirically supports H2 and H3, respectively. In addition, customer satisfaction has a positive and direct influence on brand equity ($\widehat{\beta}_7 = 0.52$; p = 0.000) and customer affective commitment ($\widehat{\beta}_6 = 0.55$; p = 0.000), which in turn has a positive and direct impact on brand equity ($\widehat{\beta}_8 = 0.41$; p = 0.000), thereby empirically supporting H7, H6, and H8, respectively. Finally, although employee empathy does not influence the relationship between sensory brand experience and customer affective commitment ($\widehat{\beta}_4 = 0.01$; p = 0.278), such employee empathy has a negative direct effect on the relationship between sensory brand experience and customer satisfaction ($\widehat{\beta}_5 = -0.02$; p = 0.001). Thus, while H4 is not empirically supported, H5 is statistically significant with negative sign.

After estimating the direct effects, the authors analyzed the indirect effects using the bootstrap procedure described by Preacher and Hayes (2004) and implemented in the SPSS macro developed by Hayes (2013). Table 9 shows the indirect effects, standard errors, and the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals obtained by applying bootstrap estimation. The three indirect effects studied are statistically significant (i.e., different from zero in the population), as the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval of their estimates does not contain zero. Thus, as the direct effect of sensory brand experience on brand equity is not significant, the authors concluded that customer affective commitment and customer satisfaction fully mediate the impact of sensory brand experience on brand equity. In addition, as the direct effect of customer satisfaction on brand equity is significant, the authors concluded that customer affective commitment is a partial mediator of the impact of customer satisfaction on brand equity.

Table 9
Assessing the indirect effects.

Mediation effects	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Standard error	95% bias-corrected CI	Result
SBE → CS → BE	Not significant	0.313	0.020	[0.275; 0.353]	Full mediation
SBE → CAC → BE	Not Significant	0.145	0.014	[0.120; 0.174]	Full mediation
CS → CAC → BE	Significant	0.330	0.025	[0.283; 0.380]	Partial mediation

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1. Theoretical contributions

In broad terms, this paper contributes to the literature by advancing knowledge of the brand equity formation process, which is especially relevant and requires further academic attention in services settings (e.g., Iglesias, Markovic, Singh, & Sierra, 2017; Šerić & Gil-Saura, 2012; Sierra, Iglesias, Markovic, & Singh, 2017). More specifically, this article contributes to the literature by showing that the direct effect of sensory brand experience on brand equity is not significant in the context of banking services. This finding is interesting and relevant, because previous research found that the direct effect of sensory brand experience on brand equity is significant in other services contexts – including catering services (Moreira, Fortes, & Santiago, 2017) and the airline industry (Lin, 2015). This implies that in the banking industry, relevant mediators for transferring positive sensory brand experience into enhanced brand equity are required. Accordingly, this research has shown that developing customer satisfaction with the brand, and affective commitment to the brand, is indispensable if brands want to turn positive sensory brand experience into improved brand equity in the banking industry. This is consistent with previous research that shows that customer evaluations of brand experience (e.g., Berry, 2000; Sierra, Iglesias, Markovic, & Singh, 2017) and their emotional responses (Haeckel et al., 2003; Morrison & Crane, 2007) are key to building brand equity.

This article also shows that, in the banking industry, customer satisfaction with the brand has a positive effect on customer affective commitment to the brand, which in turn positively influences brand equity. These findings further reinforce the central role of customer satisfaction in building brand equity within the context of brand experience in the services sector (e.g., Ha, Janda, & Muthaly, 2010; Hsu, 2012). Additionally, these results emphasize the notion that customer satisfaction is a key outcome of brand experience (e.g., Chahal & Dutta, 2015), which is aligned with the conceptualization of customer satisfaction as the accumulation of experiences that a given customer has with a specific brand (Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

Moreover, this research also suggests that high levels of customer affective commitment may be especially relevant in the context of services (Markovic et al., 2018; Sierra, Iglesias, Markovic, & Singh, 2017) since services are intangible and heterogeneous (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985), and so the task of providing a homogeneous quality experience is more challenging than in the field of products/goods (Booms & Bitner, 1981). Consequently, when customers affectively commit to a brand, they are more likely to blame occasional service failures on external factors that are not directly linked with the services brand itself (Story & Hess, 2010). Brand equity levels, therefore, are likely to remain less sensitive to such failures (Iglesias, Markovic, Singh, & Sierra, 2017; Sierra, Iglesias, Markovic, & Singh, 2017).

Another key theoretical contribution of this research is that employee empathy negatively moderates the relationship between sensory brand experience and customer satisfaction. This finding implies that the higher the level of employee empathy, the lower is the impact of sensory brand experience on customer satisfaction. This finding is counterintuitive, as empathic employees tend to have a better understanding of customer needs (Saxby, Celuch, & Walz, 2015), which allows them to deliver better and more personalized experiences (Giacobbe, Jackson Jr, Crosby, & Bridges, 2006; Jones & Shandiz, 2015), and therefore achieve higher levels of customer satisfaction (Hennig-Thurau, 2004; Markovic et al., 2018). Thus, one would expect that the higher the level of employee empathy, the greater the impact of sensory brand experience on customer satisfaction. However, the counterintuitive moderating effect of this research implies that, if brands want to boost customer satisfaction, a positive sensory brand experience becomes less relevant when employee empathy is high than when it is low. This finding, although initially counterintuitive, resonates with previous literature from the field of services that argues that employees represent the key interface for successful customer-brand interactions (e.g., Gummesson, 1991; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Iglesias, Ind, & Alfaro, 2013) and can make or break the brand when interacting with customers (Ind, 2007; Ind, Iglesias, & Schultz, 2013; Markovic & Bagherzadeh, 2018; Roper & Davies, 2007). In essence, when employees are empathic (i.e., when they understand customer needs and desires and deliver experiences accordingly), they become the key driver to customer satisfaction. Consequently and comparatively, when evaluating the brand experience, customers then pay less attention to the positive sensory cues. Interestingly enough, from the opposite perspective, this also means that sensory brand experiences can be an extremely valuable tool to compensate for and deal with the consequences of the heterogeneous nature of services caused, for instance, by the variability of employee empathy levels (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985). When employee empathy levels are low, the impact of positive sensory brand experience on customer satisfaction is higher, and therefore a positive sensory brand experience can help compensate for low levels of employee empathy. This is in line with suggestions from the literature on store atmospherics (e.g., Turley & Milliman, 2000) and claims that atmosphere and its sensory cues can play a very significant role in enhancing service assessment, and thereby in creating customer satisfaction. Overall, this research further reinforces the relevant role that the sensory dimension of brand experience plays in services contexts (Goldkuhl & Styvén, 2007; Lin, 2015), and especially in the banking industry (Chahal & Dutta, 2015), in complementing and enriching service performance assessment by customers, especially when there is variability in employee performance due to a lack of empathy.

In contrast, this research has not found empirical evidence to support the moderating effect of employee empathy on the relationship between sensory brand experience and customer affective commitment. A potential reason can be found in the fact that while customer satisfaction is a post-consumption evaluation of the brand experience that takes into consideration several dimensions, including the perceived value, quality, or initial expectations (Anderson, 1994; Churchill Jr & Surprenant, 1982; Oliver, 1980; White & Yu, 2005), customer affective commitment is instead an emotional response (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Fullerton, 2003). In fact, previous research shows that sensory cues are capable of eliciting strong and instantaneous emotional responses (Chebat & Michon, 2003; Turley & Milliman, 2000) because they directly impact the limbic system, which is the part of the brain that processes and manages emotions (Spangenberg, Crowley, & Henderson, 1996). This means that positive sensory cues can elicit strong and fast emotional responses, and thus higher levels of customer affective commitment, that are not contingent on the evaluation of employee empathy levels.

5.2. Managerial implications

Brands in the banking industry are increasingly moving a relevant part of their operations into the online channel to provide a simpler, faster, and more convenient experience to their customers. However, in parallel, some of these brands are also investing significantly in improving the experience in a more selective number of branches. This is because there are some target customers, such as the elderly (i.e., the most relevant users of bank branches) who still appreciate the possibility of personally interacting with brand employees. From this perspective, banking brands should invest in employee training, as frontline employees are the key drivers for customer satisfaction and customer affective commitment in the bricks and mortar context.

However, if banking brands want to increase their equity, they should also invest in designing a superior sensory brand experience. Accordingly, managers should pay special attention to the visual, auditory and olfactory brand-customer interfaces, in order to adapt or redesign them to address customer requirements effectively. This is especially important when dealing with the requirements of specific customer segments, such as the elderly or people with disabilities, who can take more advantage of an improved sensory brand experience. Improving customers' sensory experience with the brand is essential in the banking industry, as it can boost the levels of customer satisfaction and customer affective commitment, which in turn are likely to increase brand equity.

Finally, brands in the banking industry should also leverage on the potential of music and fragrances to build an ecosystem of sensory cues capable of creating a more pleasant atmosphere and experience. These sensory cues, such as signature fragrances and music lists, should be designed in line with the brand identity and aim at boosting brand equity. The presence of positive sensory cues is important because, even if employees have a crucial role in building services brands (Markovic Markovic, 2016; Iglesias, Markovic, Singh, & Sierra, 2017; Ind, 2007) and in achieving high levels of customer satisfaction and customer affective commitment (Markovic et al., 2018), their performance cannot be constantly homogeneous. This is because service employees' attitudes, organizational commitment and/or empathy levels inevitably vary over time. In this regard, managers in service industries should understand that designing and orchestrating a superior sensory brand experience can compensate for and address the variability of customer service levels derived, for instance, from the heterogeneity of employee empathy when interacting with customers.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Notwithstanding its theoretical contributions and managerial implications, this research also has some limitations. First, this study is limited to the banking industry, and therefore the external validity of the findings is an issue. Future research should replicate this investigation and widen the diversity of services settings in the sample to discover if the results are consistent across the whole services sector. Testing the model in the field of goods and comparing the results across services and goods sectors would also be interesting. This approach could reveal some key particularities of services brands and how they ought to be managed compared to product brands. The second limitation is because the sample is only representative of the Spanish target population. Therefore, the generalizability of the results is a concern. Future studies should include surveys from other nations. Evaluating the sensorial experiences from nations with differing cultures (Imrie, 2005) would be interesting. For example, the Chinese are believed to pay more attention to intangible cues than American customers (Mattila, 1999). Thirdly, all the data for this research were collected through surveys, and therefore mono-method bias is an issue. Future research should triangulate this data source by gaining qualitative insight into the sensory brand experience framework (e.g., through focus groups or in-depth interviews).

In addition, future research could try to understand from an omnichannel perspective the impact of offline sensory brand experience on generating positive word-of-mouth in online environments. Another relevant line of research would be to test, through an experimental design, the impact of each type of sensory brand experience (i.e., sight, smell, taste, touch and sound) on consumer behavior, and more specifically, on evaluating the experience. Finally, in line with recent suggestions (e.g., Huang & Cai, 2015; Šerić, Mikulić, & Gil-Saura, 2016), future research could extend the model of this article by examining whether brand loyalty performs well as a consequence of brand equity.

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