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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to assess whether a handmade message communicated on the social media network can enhance brand love to a handmade fashion brand and how brand love can lead to different consumer responses including enhanced perceived country of origin image of the brand, higher social media engagement and increased purchase intention towards the brand. An experimental online design was used to measure the effect of handmade product descriptor cues in an Instagram post, which generated 287 valid responses. The data was analyzed using partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS). The results mainly support the model by confirming that positive attitudes to handmade fashion products enhances brand love. The study's findings also suggest positive associations between brand love and macro-country image, social media engagement and purchase intention. Social media engagement and micro-country image were also found as antecedents of purchase intention. This research adds further insights in the study of brand love towards international fashion brands considering the role that social media and the use of handmade product descriptor cues play in the international promotion of Spanish Fashion Small Medium Enterprises.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to assess whether a handmade message communicated on the social media network can enhance brand love to a handmade fashion brand and how brand love can lead to different consumer responses including enhanced perceived country of origin image of the brand, higher social media engagement and increased purchase intention towards the brand. An experimental online design was used to measure the effect of handmade product descriptor cues in an Instagram post, which generated 287 valid responses. The data was analyzed using partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS). The results mainly support the model by confirming that positive attitudes to handmade fashion products enhances brand love. The study's findings also suggest positive associations between brand love and macro country image, social media engagement and purchase intention. Social media engagement and micro country image were also found as antecedents of purchase intention. This research adds further insights in the study of brand love towards international fashion brands considering the role that social media and the use of handmade product descriptor cues play in the international promotion of Spanish Fashion Small Medium Enterprises.

Keywords: Instagram, Country of Origin, Clothing, Brand Love, Handmade

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Spanish fashion sector, far from being mainly formed of the well-known large companies, comprises small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and micro-SMEs. The 98.6% of the Spanish fashion companies have less than 50 employees (INE, 2021). In today's market environment, most Spanish fashion SMEs are coping with intense competition characterized by minimal product differentiation. Hence, Spanish fashion brands are trying to differentiate using a singular propose of value. On one hand, offering artisan handmade and even premium articles of extraordinary quality creates a unique concept of contemporary crafts. According to Fuchs et al. (2015), handmade products are perceived to be made with love by the craftsperson and even to contain love. On the other hand, by being present on social media and building strong emotional relationships with their consumers (Palazón et al., 2014).

The final objective is to get brand lovers to their brands. The nascent literature proposes diverse brand love models that predict brand acceptance, brand loyalty, positive worth-of-mouth (WOM) and resistance to negative information (Batra et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2014); as far as higher engagement and more positive brand associations (Kang, 2015). However, the role that the “handmade” messages, so relevant in fashion artisan products, can play on brand love is a pending gap in the literature.

This study aims threefold: First, to investigate the effect of the “handmade” social media message on the attitude to handmade fashion products and brand love. Second, to explain the impact of brand love on country-of-origin image perception, social media engagement

and purchase intention. Thirdly, to examine the micro country image and social media engagement as direct and indirect antecedents of purchase behavior.

This study is important to marketers and practitioners for these three reasons: First, this paper is one of the few attempts to understand the value of artisanal fashion products as an intrinsic cue, focusing on how consumers perceive the value of handmade fashion products. Moreover, although brand love has received considerable attention in consumer behavior literature, relatively little is known about new antecedents of brand love (Riivits-Arkonsuo & Leppiman 2015). In particular, the study of the influence of “handmade message” on brand love to promote sales has been limited (Fuchs et al., 2015; Bhaduri et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2019; Frizzo et al., 2020).

Second, there is growing literature amongst researchers using social media as a marketing and communication tool to promote fashion brands and products and achieve different marketing purposes (Hsu, 2019; Wang & Lee, 2020). However, the role that social media can be played to promote handmade products from SMEs in the fashion industry has been seldom investigated, being an interesting literature gap.

Third, the study of the clothing industry from an international perspective has been analyzed by authors such as Rienda et al. (2021), who studied the role of social media in the development of international activities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating within the fashion sector of the United Kingdom and Ireland. Despite this, the study of brand love towards this kind of international fashion brands requires future research, as Ismail & Melewar (2015) and Liapati et al. (2015) have remarked.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Instagram social media network and the Cue-utilization Theory

The **Cue-Utilization Theory** can help to understand the consumers' behaviours in Instagram. This theory suggests that consumers use product-related cues as a reference to evaluate the quality of a product. Consumers respond to both extrinsic cues and intrinsic cues (Olson, 1978). Products have several extrinsic and intrinsic cues that influence consumers' quality perceptions (Collins-Dodd & Lindley, 2003). Extrinsic cues are not inherent to the physical properties of a product (Richardson et al., 1994), include price, brand name, country of origin and packaging-label (Teas & Agarwal, 2000). Intrinsic cues include information about the composition of the products, such as fabrication, construction/ craftsmanship, textiles, colors.

Based on the **Cue-Utilization Theory**, the following lines will focus on the study of a specific intrinsic cue: the use of a handmade message on social media to generate a positive attitude to handmade fashion products, encouraging brand love and, consequently, sales, which, as the **Theory of Brand Attachment** postulates (Batra et al., 2012), will bring interesting business benefits; three of them investigated in the present study: social media engagement, country image and increased purchase intent.

2.2 Brand love antecedents: attitudes towards handmade products

Derived from the notion of interpersonal love in psychology, the concept of brand love has gained scholarly attention in the field of marketing (Batra et al., 2012), which measures the passion, affection, caring etc., towards a brand. To encourage brand love diverse cues can be used. One of the most relevant ones in the case of tangible fashionable products is a "handmade message". For example, Fuchs et al. (2015) examined whether and how the claimed production method (manual or machine) affects the attractiveness

of the product. Their study suggests that manufacturing a product by hand or marketing it as such could lead to a more positive attitude towards the brand. As it is difficult for a consumer to understand, simply from external appearances, whether a product is artisanal or not, product descriptor cues that indicate artisanal contributions may help consumers position the product in their minds to form value judgments (Rao & Monroe, 1988). This leads to the proposal of our first hypothesis:

H1 The more positive attitudes towards handmade fashion products, the higher the level of brand love to the handmade fashion brand.

2.3. Brand love effects: perceptions (country image), attitudes (social media engagement) and behaviors (buying intention)

Following Ajzen and Fishbein's **Theory of Attitude–Behavior relations**, (1977), three main responses guide the effects of our model: perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. First, about how **brand love can improve perceptions**, the **Irradiation Perspective** can be used to understand how brand love can improve macro country image, which is the impressions that the consumers have of a country's overall economic, social, technological, and political situation (Pappu et al., 2007). That is, although the strength of a brand's image is partly attributable to the image of the brand's origin (Shocker et al., 1994), the reverse may also be hold: a consumer's positive (negative) perception of a given brand may impact the consumer's perceptions of the country associated with the brand (Lampert & Jaffe, 1998). Following this line of research, the **Halo Effect Theory** refers to an tendency to use global impressions to judge specific characteristics (Feingold, 1992). Therefore, as consumers become more familiar with the products, and so able to detect their true quality, it's reasonable to propose that the belief that love is in the

products of the handmade fashion brand, will have a spillover effect on the perceived country image through a prosocial halo (Liu et al., 2019). So,

H2 Brand love to a handmade fashion brand will enhance the macro country image of the handmade fashion brand

Secondly, as regards how brand love can improve **attitudes**, previous research on the handmade effects (Liu et al., 2019), suggests that the handmade effect extends to consumers' social media engagement behaviours, which means liking, sharing (virality) and comments (commitment). More specifically, Liu et al. (2019) investigated reciprocity behavior in the form of enhanced social media engagement with the brand given that consumers increasingly use social media to interact with brands and spread word-of-mouth. Rietveld et al. (2020) tested their model on 46.9 K Instagram posts from 59 brands in six sectors. The results showed that visual emotional and informative appeals encoded in brand-generated content (such as those concerning handmade messages) have an impact on consumer engagement. Hence, we propose that as handmade products symbolically "contain love", there is no doubt about the effect of the handmade message connecting the consumers more emotionally with the brand, enhancing brand love. Therefore, it could be stated that:

H3 Brand love to a handmade fashion brand will enhance its social media engagement

Thirdly, **purchase intention** is characterized as a behavioural consequence of consumer-brand relationships that measures the intention to buy the product. In a recent study, brand love has influenced purchased intention for neo luxury brands (Rodrigues & Rodrigues, 2019). Based on previous literature, purchase intention may predict or direct a real future

behavior; that is, it may predict the realization of a purchase (Ramayah et al, 2010) by the customer. So:

H4 Brand love to a handmade fashion brand will enhance its buying intention

2.4. Other direct and indirect antecedents of buying intention

Companies now place considerable value on how social media can be used to shape consumer brand perception and influence their buying intention. Accordingly, several authors have shown that behavioural intention is one of the consequences of brand engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Following this reasoning, it is proposed that engagement towards a handmade fashion brand in the social media network will have an impact in terms of a greater intent to purchase that brand. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H5 Social media engagement with a handmade fashion brand will have a positive impact on purchase intention toward the same brand.

On another side, and based on Nebenzahl et al., (2003), the country image construct can be considered at both a macro level (capturing impressions of a country's overall economic, social, technological, and political situation; Pappu et al., 2007) and a micro level (capturing consumers' product-related evaluations of a country; Roth & Romeo., 1992). Following this line of research, according to Oberecker & Diamantopoulos (2011), we support that general beliefs about a country in terms of economic conditions, political structures, or cultural aspects affect consumer perceptions of the country's products (Heslop & Papadopoulos, 1993; Pappu et al., 2007; Roth & Romeo, 1992): Then:

H6 A better macro-country image of a handmade fashion brand will enhance its micro-country image

Lastly, and according to Zhang et al. (2016), based on the **Theory of Reasoned Action**, country's image has a significant influence on the consumers' purchase decisions and purchase intention (Nadeau et al., 2008). In this line of research, Garcia-De Los Salmones et al (2022), investigated the effects of the macro and micro country image on consumer brand preferences, and obtained that these judgments directly influence purchase intention and choices regarding products originating from such a country. These findings lead us to propose that:

H7 The better the micro country image of a handmade fashion brand is, the higher the purchase intention towards the same brand.

Figure 1 shows the proposed model.

(Figure 1)

3. RESEARCH METHOD

We have selected a Spanish fashion designer brand member of ACME (Spanish Association of Fashion Creators), which has an active presence on Instagram through an official account and 117k followers.

3.1 Sample

Recent studies indicate that women are the most active social media users on Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2021). Thus, our sample is formed only by women which are appropriate for our research context and a frequent practice in fashion marketing research (Michon et al., 2008). The participants of our study are residents of the United States. With over 120 million active Instagram users, the United States is the photo-sharing app's leading market based on audience size (Statista, 2021a). Women accounted for 57.9 percent of Instagram users in the USA (Statista, 2021b). USA occupies the eighth position among the top ten main clients of Spanish fashion (ICEX, 2021).

A total of 294 participants were involved in the study. Participants were recruited from an online panel service (i.e. Amazon Mechanical Turk) and were rewarded with a small compensation. Non-users of Instagram (never use: 7) were excluded from the sample.

3.2 Design and procedure

The questionnaire was introduced to the participants as a survey about the promotion of fashion on Instagram; consequently, the women addressed had to be Instagram users. They were presented with a post in an Instagram frame containing an image of an outfit from one of the brand's collections with manipulated text on the foot of the post indicating that the garment "was handmade and made in Spain".

3.3 Measures

7 Likert scales adapted from previous literature. Attitude to handmade fashion products was measured using an adapted version of the bipolar scale for attitudes of Choi et al. (2001); Brand love was measured through the scale of Carrol & Ahuvia, (2006). Macro country image was measured through the scale of Oberecker & Diamantopoulos, (2011), adapted from Pappu et al. (2007). The measures of the micro country image were taken by Roth & Romeo (1992). Social media engagement was measured with seven items adapted from Valentini et al. (2018) based on the online supporting behavior scale (Paulin et al., 2014). Purchase intention was measured through the scale of Hung et al. (2011), adapted from Schlosser et al. (2006).

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), and the software SmartPLS 3.3.3. PLS was chosen because of its advantages, for example, its simplicity, its adequacy for small-medium samples, and the possibility of

simultaneously testing a group of indicators and testing hypotheses in a multi-level system.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Measurement Model

As Table 1 shows, all outer loadings of the reflective constructs are well above the threshold value of 0.70, which suggests sufficient levels of indicator reliability.

(Table 1)

As Table 2 shows all AVEs exceed the recommended threshold of 0.50 and the CR values were about 0.80, well about the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022). Thus, reliability and convergent validity can be established.

(Table 2)

About discriminating validity, the analysis of cross-loadings indicates that all the loads of the indicators of each latent variable that are part of the model are greater than their correlations with the indicators of other constructs (Chin,1998). Table 3 verifies that, following the Fornier & Larker criteria (1981), all the square roots of the AVE of each construct are greater than the highest correlation with any other construct of the model.

(Table 3)

A more adjusted measure for the assessment of discriminating validity is the HTMT criterion (Henseler et al., 2015). All HTMT values are clearly lower than the threshold value of 0.90, except for the constructs purchase intention (PC) and social media engagement (SME), which gives a value of 0.902. A dissociated correlation between 2 constructs close to 1 would indicate absence of discriminating validity. We found, then, in our model a discriminant validity problem. There are different ways to handle

discriminant validity problems according to Hair et al, (2012). The first approach retains the constructs that cause discriminant validity problems in the model and aims at increasing the average monotrait-heteromethod correlations and/or decreasing the average heteromethod-heterotrait correlations of the constructs' measures. To decrease the average heteromethod-heterotrait correlations, we decided eliminate items that are strongly correlated with items in the opposing construct. Specifically, the item PC3 of the construct purchase intention was eliminated. After the debugging process, all HTMT values are well above the threshold value of 0.90. Moreover, the confidence interval's HTMT value should not be close to 1. In addition to examining the HTMT ratios, we tested whether the HTMT values are significantly different from 1. This requires computing bootstrap confidence intervals obtained by running the bootstrapping option. After running bootstrapping, the columns labeled 2.5% and 97.5% show the lower and upper bounds of the 95% (bias-corrected and accelerated) confidence interval. Neither of the confidence intervals includes the value 1. As expected, since the HTMT threshold of 0.90 already supports discriminant validity, the bootstrap confidence interval results of the HTMT criterion also clearly speak in favor of the discriminant validity of the constructs. Hence, the proposed model meets the established criteria.

4.2 Structural model

In order to analyze the predictive capacity of the structural model, the R^2 was first evaluated using the bootstrapping technique (table 4). All the constructs exceed the 0,1 value as recommended. Second, the predictability of the model was evaluated by applying the Stone-Geisser Q^2 test (Chin, 1998) for each dependent construct using the blindfolding procedure. The resulting Q^2 values larger than 0 indicate that the exogenous

constructs have predictive relevance for the endogenous construct under consideration, thus confirming the predictive power of the model.

Hypothesis tests were performed using the Bootstrapping procedure with 5000 subsamples and a Student's two-tailed t-distribution test with a significance of 0.05, according to Leguina (2015). Table 4 illustrates the results of hypotheses tests for the research model which shows that all the postulated relationships amongst the constructs are highly significant at $p < 0.001$, except to H4 which is significant at $p < 0.01$.

Results are fully in line with the relationships and indications previously established in literature and proven in the proposed model. Consistent with expectations, attitude towards handmade fashion products was found to be a significant determinant of brand love. This means that better attitudes towards handmade fashion products positively influence brand love to a handmade fashion brand ($\beta_1 = 0.454$, $t = 8.523$, $p < 0.001$), which supports H1.

Brand love (BL) has a significant positive influence on macro-country image (MCI) supporting H2 ($\beta_1 = 0.473$, $t = 8.604$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, brand love shows a powerful positive impact on social media engagement (SME) supporting H3 ($\beta_1 = 0.855$, $t = 36.464$, $p < 0.001$). Brand love (BL) has also a positive impact on purchasing intention (PC) supporting H4 ($\beta_1 = 0.29$, $t = 3.07$, $p < 0.01$). Social media engagement (SME) has also a significant positive influence on purchase intention (PC) supporting H5 ($\beta_1 = 0.499$, $t = 5.279$, $p < 0.001$). Lastly, Macro country image (MCI) has a positive impact on micro country image (MICI) as expected ($\beta_1 = 0.55$, $t = 10.568$, $p < 0.001$) supporting H6; and micro country image (MICI) has a significant positive influence on purchasing intention (PC) supporting H7 ($\beta_1 = 0.18$, $t = 4.242$, $p < 0.001$).

(Table 4)

5. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH.

5.1 Conclusions and implications

First, attitude to handmade fashion products was demonstrated to be a predictor of brand love. So, and as Fuchs et al. (2015) demonstrated, a manual production method affects the attractiveness of the brand, leading to higher passion (love) towards this brand. Second, our results also show a significant relationship between the strength of brand love and three direct effects: (i) perceived macro country image, (ii) social media engagement and (iii) purchase intention toward the brand. That is, if a fashion brand is loved, the general beliefs about the country it comes from (in terms of economic conditions, and political structures) will be improved (Liu et al., 2019). Also, more brand love is linked to more social media engagement and higher buyer intention as Rodrigues & Rodrigues (2019) demonstrated. Lastly, three additional indirect effects have been demonstrated as far as: (i) social media engagement augments buying intention; (ii) macro-country image improves micro-country image, and (iii) micro-country image improves also buying intention as previous literature had demonstrated in the past for another kind of products.

Regarding managerial implications, three main aspects should be taken into consideration. First, our results encourage fashion managers to modify their company's branding strategy to communicate the handmade nature of their products. Second, this will lead consumers to perceive the handmade message as products made with love (Fuchs et al., 2015). Therefore, we advise fashion marketers to undertake efforts in their social media communications to induce and/or strengthen feelings of love toward their

products by emphasizing product descriptor cues such as handmade to enhance social media engagement with their brands and influence consumer's purchase intention. Hence, this study can help Spanish fashion marketers decide how to create social media content that contributes to strong consumer-brand relationships and how to promote their products internationally and achieve success in the export markets. Third, Spanish fashion companies have never had a prestigious country image with which to support the penetration of their products into foreign markets. Despite the government efforts during last years, to improve the country's image by specific campaigns to promote Spanish fashion abroad, the 'Made in Spain' label continued to add very little value to the products in the fashion sector. Consequently, it is particularly important for the Spanish fashion sector to know how to manage and improve its external image in the international markets. The empirical evidence provided by this research supports the investment of the Spanish fashion governmental institutions in marketing strategies to boost brand love by emphasizing handmade messages in the social media.

5.2 Limitations and further research

The first limitation concerns generalization in that the results cannot be extended beyond the current sample frame. This is because the sample consisted solely of North American women consumers. Future research should strive to gather samples from different markets. This would enable an investigation of cultural variations and individual differences. Second, given that brand names can be an important factor in evaluating fashion products, future studies understanding the specific effect of brand awareness might lead to important findings. Finally, other moderating variables might exist that could explain some unexpected results of the current study. In this respect, we invite

future research to analyze the effect of consumer variables in moderating the brand love–macro and micro country image–purchase intention relationship.

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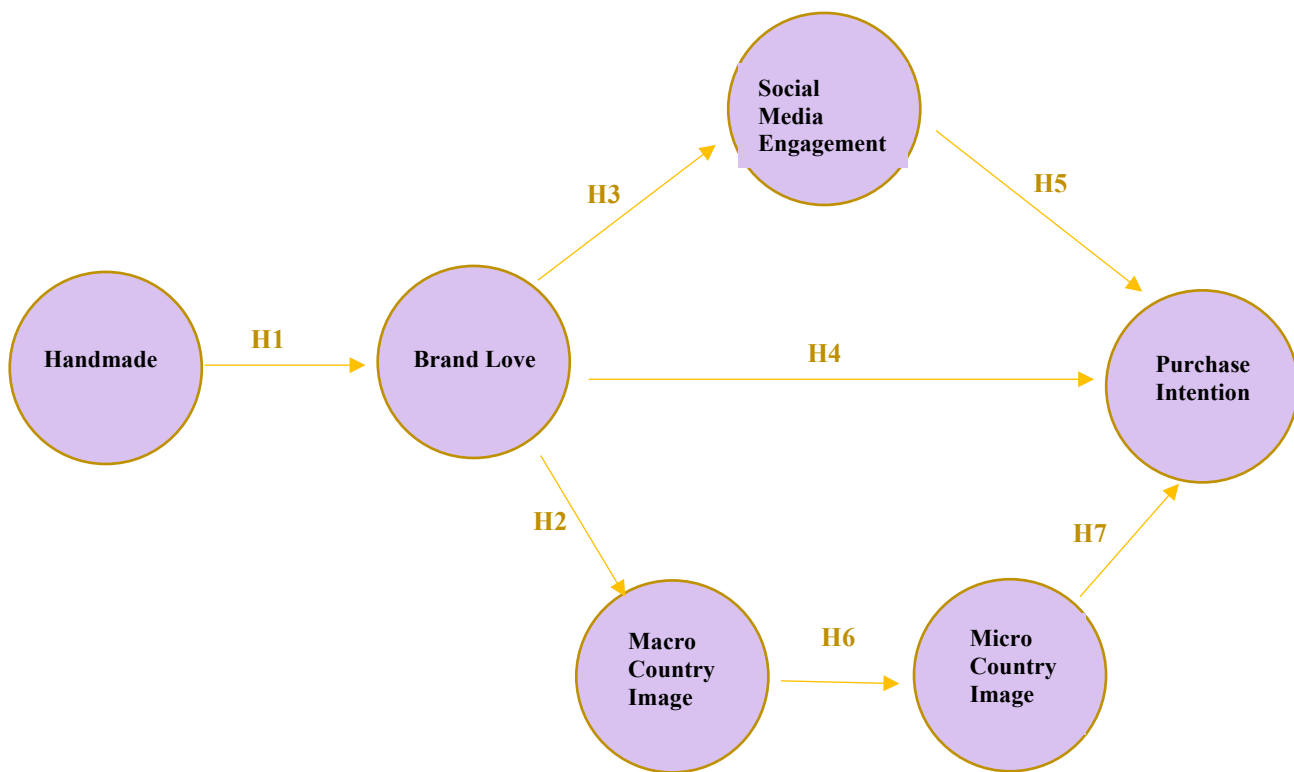
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Figure 1. Theoretical approach



Source: Own elaborated

Table 1. Outer loadings

Factors	Indicators	Brand love	Handmade	Macro country image	Micro country image	Purchase intention	Social media engagement
Brand love (BL)	BL1	0.904					
	BL2	0.934					
	BL3	0.943					
	BL4	0.926					
	BL5	0.934					
Handmade (HAND)	HAND1		0.838				
	HAND2		0.837				
	HAND3		0.814				
	HAND4		0.723				
Macro country image (MCI)	MCI1			0.763			
	MCI2			0.807			
	MCI3			0.828			
	MCI4			0.696			
	MCI5			0.833			
	MCI6			0.868			
Micro country image (MICI)	DES				0.826		
	INN				0.792		
	PRE				0.890		
	WOR				0.836		
Purchase intention (PC)	PC1					0.957	
	PC2					0.959	
	PC3					0.956	
Social media engagement (SME)	SME1						0.878
	SME2						0.921
	SME3						0.920
	SME4						0.880
	SME5						0.903
	SME6						0.919
	SME7						0.938

Table 2. Construct Reliability (CR) and Validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Brand Love	0.960	0.969	0.862
Handmade	0.817	0.880	0.647
Macro-Country Image	0.888	0.915	0.642
Micro-Country Image	0.857	0.903	0.700
Purchasing intention	0.954	0.970	0.916
Social Media Engagement	0.965	0.971	0.825

Table 3. Discriminating validity according to the Fornier-Larcker criterion

	Brand Love	Handmade	Macro Country Image	Micro Country Image	Purchase Intention	Social Media Engagement
Brand Love	0.928					
Handmade	0.454	0.804				
Macro Country Image	0.473	0.387	0.801			
Micro Country Image	0.619	0.584	0.550	0.837		
Purchasing Intention	0.840	0.449	0.492	0.630	0.957	
Social Media Engagement	0.855	0.349	0.510	0.551	0.866	0.909

Notes: All pairs of correlations are significant; Boldface numbers on the diagonal are square root of the AVE (average variance extracted).

Table 4 Hypothesis tests results

Casual relations		β coefficients	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values	Significance
H1	Handmade → Brand love	0.454	0.464	0.053	8.523	0	***
BRAND LOVE DIRECT EFFECTS							
H2	Brand love → Macro country-image	0.473	0.476	0.055	8.604	0	***
H3	Brand love → Social media engagement	0.855	0.855	0.023	36.464	0	***
H4	Brand love → Purchasing intention	0.29	0.284	0.094	3.07	0.002	**
INDIRECT EFFECTS							
H5	Social media engagement → purchasing intention	0.499	0.506	0.094	5.279	0	***
H6	Macro country-image → micro country-image	0.55	0.554	0.052	10.568	0	***
H7	Micro country-image → purchasing intention	0.18	0.178	0.042	4.242	0	***

Note: **p-value<0.01; ***p-value<0.001

