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## **The Impact of Customer Experience on Word-Of-Mouth in Aesthetic Clinics' Services**

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July, 2024





BUSINESS  
SCHOOL

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Department of Marketing, Operations and General  
Management

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## RESUMO

As organizações competem cada vez mais com base na experiência do cliente. Dominar este pilar traz uma vantagem competitiva para aqueles que avaliam estrategicamente e trabalham para gerar uma experiência positiva para os seus clientes.

O objetivo desta pesquisa é avaliar a Experiência do Cliente dos serviços da Clínica de Estética Onodera em Portugal e seu impacto na Satisfação, Valor Percebido e Word-of-Mouth. Portanto, foi realizado um estudo quantitativo aplicando um questionário a 141 clientes das Clínicas Estéticas Onodera em Portugal (Braga, Lisboa e Porto). A análise de dados combinou análise descritiva, análise de confiabilidade e análise de mediação.

Os resultados obtidos, por meio do questionário, mostram que a maioria dos clientes tem uma experiência positiva com as Clínicas Onodera em Portugal. Ao utilizar testes de hipóteses, foi possível concluir que, neste estudo, a Experiência do Cliente tem um impacto positivo na Satisfação, Valor Percebido e no Word-of-Mouth, e que o Valor Percebido tem um impacto positivo no Word-of-Mouth.

Por fim, são apresentadas oportunidades de melhoria para estudos futuros, como a extensão da pesquisa a outras Clínicas Estéticas em Portugal com características diferentes (clínicas maiores, com um maior número de clientes, unidades menos recentes) e em diferentes regiões do país.

**Palavras-chave:** Experiência do Cliente; Satisfação; Valor Percebido, Word-of-Mouth, Clínicas de Estética.

**Sistema de Classificação JEL:**

M10 - Administração de Empresas (Geral).

Y40 - Dissertações





## ABSTRACT

Organizations are increasingly competing on the basis of customer experience. Mastering this pillar brings a competitive advantage to those who strategically assess and work to generate a positive experience for their customers.

The aim of this research is to evaluate the Customer Experience of Onodera's Aesthetic Clinic services in Portugal and its impact on Satisfaction, Perceived Value, and Word of Mouth. Therefore, a quantitative study was carried out by applying a questionnaire to 141 customers of the Aesthetic Clinics Onodera in Portugal (Braga, Lisbon and Porto). The data analysis combined descriptive analysis, reliability analysis and mediation analysis.

The results obtained, through the questionnaire, are positive, showing that most customers have a positive experience with the Onodera Clinics in Portugal. By using hypotheses testing it was possible to conclude that, in this study, Customer Experience has a positive impact on Satisfaction, Perceived Value and on Word-of-Mouth. And that Perceived Value has a positive impact on Word-of-Mouth.

Finally, improvement opportunities for future studies are presented, such as extending the research to other Aesthetic Clinics in Portugal with different characteristics (bigger clinics, with a greater number of customers, less recent units) and in different regions of the country.

**Key-words:** Customer Experience; Customer Satisfaction; Perceived Value, Word-of-Mouth; Aesthetic Clinics.

**JEL Classification System:**

M10 – Business Administration (General).

Y40 – Dissertations.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	i
RESUMO.....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Context .....	1
Research questions .....	3
Research objectives .....	3
Method .....	4
Scope .....	4
Structure of the document .....	5
1 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
1.1 Customer Experience .....	7
1.2 From Service Quality to Customer Experience.....	8
1.3 Measuring Customer Experience .....	10
1.4 Satisfaction .....	12
1.5 Perceived Value.....	13
1.6 Word-of- Mouth .....	13
1.7 Conclusion and Conceptual Framework .....	16
2 METHOD.....	17
2.1 Research Context.....	17
2.2 Research Design.....	18
2.3 Questionnaire .....	18
2.4 Pre-test.....	19
2.5 Data Collection.....	19
2.6 Sample.....	19
2.7 Data Analysis .....	19

2.8	Conclusion.....	20
3	ANALYSIS OF RESULTS.....	21
3.1	Introduction .....	21
3.2	Sample Characterization .....	21
3.3	Customer Experience Analysis .....	23
3.4	Perceived Value, Satisfaction, And Word-Of-Mouth Analysis .....	25
3.5	Reliability of the Scales.....	28
3.6	Mediation Model: Research Hypotheses Testing.....	29
3.7	Main Considerations .....	32
	CONCLUSION .....	37
	Answer to the Research Questions.....	37
	Limitations .....	40
	Suggestions for Future Research.....	41
	REFERENCES .....	43
	ANNEXES.....	47
	Annex A – Questionnaire .....	47
	Annex B –Test Results from Mediation Model 4 .....	59

## TABLE INDEX

Table 3.1 Relationship duration of the sample for each Clinic .....	23
Table 3.2 Descriptive Analysis of Customer Experience by item.....	24
Table 3.3 Descriptive analysis of customer perceived value, satisfaction and word-of-mouth by item.....	27
Table 3.4 Cronbach's Alphas for the instrument dimensions .....	28
Table 3.5 Count, Number of Items, Minimum, Maximum, Mean and Standard Deviation for the mains constructs of this study.....	29
Table 3.6 Validation of the research hypotheses .....	35

## FIGURE INDEX

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Model .....	16
Figure 3.1 Academic Level.....	22
Figure 3.2 Income Ranges .....	22
Figure 3.3 Customer Experience effect on Satisfaction .....	30
Figure3.4 Customer Experience effect on Perceived Value.....	30
Figure 3.5 Customer Experience, Perceived Value and Satisfaction effect on Word-of-Mouth .....	31
Figure 3.6 Mediation results .....	31

## INTRODUCTION

The introduction will present the dissertation framework. Afterwards, the research questions, the general and specific objectives, the method, the scope and the structure of the dissertation will be disclosed.

### Context

The majority of the academic and professional literature on customer experience was created in the following of Pine and Gilmore's (1998) landmark paper on the experience economy. They claimed the rise of the experience economy as the fourth stage of the economic progression, following the agrarian, industrial, and service economies. These authors defined that "experiences are a distinct economic offering, as different from services as services are from goods"(p. 97). Because of this new context, for businesses to reach customers and create differentiation, they need to focus their strategies on the customer experience (Jain et al., 2017).

However, this gradual shift from consumption of commodities to goods, services and experiences went through several stages. According to Lemon & Verhoef (2016), Customer Experience has its roots in different marketing concepts such as Customer Buying Behaviour Process Models, Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty, and Service Quality. Each of them helped to build the different dimensions that make up the Customer Experience. Although all these premisses are important and are part of the understanding of Customer Experience, academics and practitioners have not agreed on a common concept of it (Gupta, 2016). From this perspective, different nomenclatures arise such as Service Experience, Customer Service Experience and Customer Experience (Bueno et al., 2019); this concept diversification, reflects the different number of scales to measure experience.

Experience measurement evolved from the SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman et al., 1988), to SERVPERF (Croning and Taylor, 1992), to EXQ (Klaus and Maklan, 2012), and to the New EXQ (Kuppelwieser and Klaus, 2021). The gradual change of scales from service quality to customer experience is an unclear phenomenon. For Gupta (2016), "continuing to measure service quality is probably necessary for most firms, but not sufficient. Organisations are increasingly competing on the basis of customer experience and although the 'experience' concept is defined imprecisely, market researchers will serve their organisations and customers

better if they take an active role in updating the customer experience measurement and agree on measures of it” (p. 57).

As recommended by the respective authors of EXQ and New EXQ, Klaus & Maklan (2012), and Kuppelwieser & Klaus (2021), it is important to replicate the scale of Customer Experience in new segments and sectors, in larger samples, different countries and cultures to serve as a basis for the reproducibility of the scale as well as to contribute to Customer Experience studies, which are considered literature gaps. Filling this gap can allow organisations to plan strategies to achieve a high level of customer experience and, as a result, develop competitive advantage (Gupta, 2016).

Kuppelwieser and Klaus (2021) suggested as future research directions that it “would be advantageous to examine how the scale (EXQ updated) explains important marketing outcomes, such as word-of-mouth behaviour” (p. 628). Recognizing the strength and practical relevance of the aesthetic clinics segment and considering that consumers of the beauty industry are more conscious of their personal care and appearance, they seek verification and recommendations of the service quality of the beauty centres (Kampani & Jhamb, 2022). As a result, customer interactions have a significant influence on how and what customers think (Kampani & Jhamb, 2022). Therefore, analysing the Customer Experience effect on Word-of-Mouth is of extreme relevance for the beauty sector, particularly for the Aesthetic Clinics segment.

Lemon & Verhoef (2016) traced the roots of customer experience to customer satisfaction and loyalty. They believe customer satisfaction is crucial to the total understanding of customer experience. Additionally, Klaus and Maklan (2012, 2013) concluded that service experience has a significant impact on customer satisfaction along with word-of-mouth intentions and loyalty. The literature has addressed the relationship between these two concepts, however, there are few studies related to the Beauty industry, which can be identified as a research gap. In this sense, evaluating customer’s experience effect on satisfaction in the Aesthetic Clinics segment is pertinent.

Furthermore, some scientific works have introduced the concept of Customer Experience in the beauty segment. Petacci (2019), in a study in aesthetic clinics in Brazil, confirms that quality of the experience positively influences Customer Perceived Value.

According to data from the World Bank (2020), the service sector is responsible for generating 65.7% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In Portugal, the service sector also has a high weight in GDP. According to AICEP (2020), this sector accounted for 75.8% of Gross Value Added (GVA) and employed 69.9% of the active population in 2020. These



data leads to a clear recognition of the importance of services in the world economy, including in Portugal. Moreover, according to ANEP (2020), the personal care sector represents more than two hundred thousand jobs in Portugal. An important segment of this sector is the aesthetic clinics. In a Target Group Index (TGI) study by Marktest (2016), 21.6% of women resident in mainland Portugal report having gone to a beauty centre in the last 12 months; characterizing a major industry for the Portuguese economy. The relevance of services in the Portuguese economy, the strong demand the beauty centres generate, and the lack of studies about customer experience in this context, make it a relevant gap that needs to be filled.

Onodera Estética Clinics is reference in the beauty sector and considered the largest aesthetic clinics' chain of Brazil. With over 40 years of market experience and more than 50 units distributed in the country, it has operated through the franchise model since 2000. The chain opened a head office and franchise unit in 2021 in Portugal, more specifically in Braga. A franchisee opened units in Porto and in Lisbon. Despite its recent arrival in Portugal, Onodera wants to analyse the impact of the experience its customers have on Satisfaction, Value Perception and Word-of-Mouth in the Portuguese context.

### **Research questions**

Considering the contextualisation presented above, this research will aim to answer the following research questions:

**Q1:** What is the Customer's Experience in Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics' Services in Portugal and its impact on Satisfaction, Perceived Value, and Word of Mouth?

**Q2:** What measures can Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics take to increase their Customer Experience and customers' Word-of-Mouth?

### **Research objectives**

This study proposes as its general objective: To evaluate the Customer Experience of Onodera's Aesthetic Clinic services in Portugal and its impact on Satisfaction, Perceived Value, and Word of Mouth.

After the general objective, there are more specific objectives that are intended to be achieved with this thesis:

- To measure the Customer Experience of Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics' services in Portugal.
- To measure customers' perception of Satisfaction, Perceived Value, and Word of Mouth of Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics' services in Portugal.
- To analyse the impact of the Customer Experience on Satisfaction, Perceived Value, and Word of Mouth of Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics' services in Portugal.
- Produce management recommendations on how Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics could improve Customers' Experience and influence Word-of-Mouth

## **Method**

To achieve the proposed objective and answer the research questions, the present research will be conducted in the form of a quantitative empirical study with inferential research design. Data collection will be based on primary data through an online survey, and in a cross-sectional temporal horizon. The questionnaire will be based on the following constructs - Customer Experience, Satisfaction, Perceived Value and Word-of-Mouth - to better understand how clients perceive the services of Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics in Portugal.

The object of this study is the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera Portugal, which is a Brazilian Chain of Aesthetic Clinics with three units in Portugal, namely in Braga, Porto and Lisbon. Onodera offers a full range of body, facial and medical treatments. Data collected was processed and analysed using the statistical analysis software IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29) and the PROCESS Macro for SPSS developed by Andrew F. Hayes (version 4.2).

## **Scope**

According to Yin (2009), each research strategy presents its own advantages and disadvantages, depending basically on three conditions: a) the type of research question; b) the control that the researcher has over effective behavioural events; c) the focus on historical phenomena, as opposed to contemporary phenomena. Furthermore, the author explains that, in general, case studies represent the preferred strategy when questions of "how" and "why" arise, when the

researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on contemporary phenomena embedded in some real-life context.

The present study presents a set of general research objectives on the universe of Customer Experience in Onodera's aesthetic clinics in Portugal. The first research question seeks to understand how the Customer's Experience in Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics in Portugal is and how it impacts the constructs mentioned before. The second research question seeks to explain measures and suggestions on how to increase Onodera's Customer Experience and customers' Word-of-Mouth.

This research approach is also justified due to the lack of studies that relate the two universes: Customer Experience and Beauty Sector, both to replicate the scale of Customer Experience in new segments and sectors, different countries and cultures; and to contribute to Customer Experience studies, which are considered literature gaps. Additionally, it is justified due to the impact that the variables Satisfaction, Perceived Value, and Word-of-Mouth have in the beauty sector, which are also considered literature gaps (Klaus and Maklan, 2012 and 2013; Kuppelwieser and Klaus, 2021).

### **Structure of the document**

The document structure is as follows:

**Chapter 1** - Introduction – This chapter provided the study framework, the presentation of the research questions, the general and specific objectives, a preview of the methodological procedures used, the scope, and, finally, the structure of the research.

**Chapter 2** - Literature Review - This chapter presents the theoretical basis that raised the research question and supported the development of the research objectives and propositions. In this part of the document, it outlines the concepts of Customer Experience initially, detailing the evolution from Service Quality to Customer Experience. It then covers the measurement of Customer Experience, followed by discussions on the concepts and metrics related to Satisfaction, Perceived Value, and Word-of-Mouth. Finally, it presents the conceptual model and conclusions.

**Chapter 3** – Method - The third chapter will present the research context and design, the questionnaire, pre-test and data collection method as well as the sample. Finally, the methods and techniques to be used in data processing and analysis.

**Chapter 4** - Analysis and discussion of results – This chapter will present the data collected and their respective analyses using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29) and version 4.2 of the PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2022) and, finally, a discussion of the results.

**Chapter 5** - Conclusions – The last chapter will present the main conclusions of this study, first by answering the research questions, subsequently, by providing management recommendations. It will also address possible limitations of the study and some suggestions for future studies.

# 1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The Literature Review aims to analyse the previous studies on Customer Experience, identifying research gaps that support the development of the research model. This chapter starts with the different concepts of Customer Experience, then approaches the evolution of Service Quality to Customer Experience, and the different types of measurements of Customer Experience. Afterwards, sections on Satisfaction, Perceived Value and finally Word-of-Mouth are disclosed, building the foundation to develop the research model.

## 1.1 Customer Experience

Customer Experience has been gaining more attention from researchers and managers in the marketing and service areas; it is a central objective for organizations in their strategies to achieve competitive advantage and satisfied customers (Jain et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

According to Lemon & Verhoef (2016), the roots of Customer Experience in Marketing were traced back to the 1960s with Customer Buying Behaviour Process Models. Later, the concepts of Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty emerged followed by the Service Quality view in the 1980s.

Customer Experience literature, construct and as an actual offering started after the article “Welcome to the Experience Economy” of Pine and Gilmore (1998). The authors explained that economy evolved from commodities (fungible) to goods (tangible) to services (intangible) and “the next competitive battleground lies in staging experiences.” (p. 98). For the authors, experiences engage with the customers in a way that generates a memorable event.

Since then, Customer Experience has been studied and different definitions and concepts were proposed. For example, Verhoef et al. (2009) emphasize the holistic nature of the construct and that it is built not only by elements that are in the retailer’s control, but it also involves the clients’ cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to the retailer. For Klaus and Maklan (2013), Customer Experience is “the customer’s cognitive and affective assessment of all direct and indirect encounters with the firm relating to their purchasing behaviour” (p. 228).

For Jain et al. (2017), “Customer experience is the aggregate of feelings, perceptions and attitudes formed during the entire process of decision making and consumption chain involving

an integrated series of interaction with people, objects, processes and environment, leading to cognitive, emotional, sensorial and behavioural responses” (p. 649).

The three definitions above have in common the focus on the experience through the customer point of view, however each definition brings a new perspective on the customer’s view. While Verhoef et al. (2009) specifies that customer experience is the client’s reaction, (cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical) to the retailer, Klaus and Maklan (2013) argue that beyond the response of clients to the retailers (direct encounter) is the evaluation of all the encounters (direct and indirect), meaning that all of the retailers image, profile and reputation that do not include a direct encounter is judged by the client and its experience is based on this judgment. Jain et al. (2017) proposal posits that both direct and indirect encounters should be analysed. These authors explain that Customer Experience can be both a process and an output: the ongoing process of interaction and learning (process) and the cumulative outcome of knowledge and responses (output). It is dynamic, involves interactivity with the environment, and, at the same time, it reflects customers' expressions of their experiences.

In different articles related to the topic Customer Experience, different nomenclatures arise such as service experience and customer service experience and sometimes these terms are used interchangeably (Bueno et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2017). Contrary to what one may think, the main difference between the concepts of customer experience and service experience lies in the subjects of the experiences. In the customer experience, the customer plays a central role, meaning that the focus is on the customer perception of the experience, while service experience addresses different types of actors such as customers, representatives of the service provider or people’s experience network (Bueno et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2017).

Thus, according to Jain et al. (2017), “Service experience is an integral part of the customer experience. It becomes imperative to have a deeper understanding of service experience in order to fully understand and manage customer experience” (p. 649).

## **1.2 From Service Quality to Customer Experience**

To understand the basis for customers’ evaluation of service quality and whether they are satisfied or not is a complex task. Thus, in 1988, Parasuraman et al. proposed an instrument that allows measuring the perception of customers regarding the quality of a particular service by comparing it with their expectations of the provision of that same service. Thereby, the SERVQUAL scale arises, with the following dimensions: Tangibility; Reliability; Responsiveness; Assurance; and Empathy. Conceptually, SERVQUAL measurement involves

perceived quality. Therefore, the greater the difference between the comparison of the perceived service with the expected service, the more distant are the customer evaluations in relation to their expectations, and the lower the evaluation of the quality of service of the company being evaluated.

Later, Croning and Taylor (1992) developed an alternative instrument. This instrument is called SERVPERF and, according to the authors, it would be more suitable for assessing the quality of services, since this construct "quality of services" should be measured as a customer attitude in the dimensions of quality, and not from the difference between expectations and performance. Another positive aspect of the instrument is the number of items to be measured, as SERVPERF uses only half the questions of SERVQUAL.

In a systematic review of the literature on customer experience, Bueno et al. (2019) concluded that the most adopted scale was SERVQUAL. Although commonly applied, this approach has been the subject of substantial criticism and debate. Gupta (2016) outlined the restrictions of the SERVQUAL scale for measuring customer experience, emphasising that customers compare their overall experiences in every encounter with a company with good value in use. Therefore, not only do direct interactions with the firm have an impact on customers' impressions of it, but also indirect interactions through commercials, brand reviews, news, and word-of-mouth from other customers. This is not the case of SERVQUAL as it simply contrasts customer experience with expectations, which are dynamic and change from one interaction to the next. SERVQUAL exclusively focuses on the outcomes of the service process; it ignores post-service results, pre-service interactions, and the moment of truth. SERVQUAL solely assesses consumers' opinions on service providers' delivery methods; it makes no attempt to predict "what" consumers expect a delivery method should be. As a result, it only considers the perspective of the provider rather than of the consumer. Klaus and Maklan (2012) further argue that Quality Experience should be measured holistically, considering all stages and interactions rather than just one specific service interaction.

Besides service quality not being the ideal way to measure customer experience (Gupta, 2016), authors differ widely on the understanding and definition of this notion (Bueno et al., 2019). This lack of agreement reflects on the great number of authors who created their own scales to measure customer experience in different areas of study (Bueno et al., 2019), what hinders the identification of a generic metric for this concept (Gupta, 2016). The existence of all the different types of metrics is mainly based on the fact that "Customer Experience Quality" is much broader and less defined than the concept of product or service quality, making its measurement far more challenging and complex. (Klaus and Maklan, 2011).

### **1.3 Measuring Customer Experience**

It is critical to stress that consumers want more than just competent service (Meyer and Schwager, 2007); they want an engaging and memorable experience (Gilmore and Pine, 2002). In this new context, Customer Experience is replacing service quality as a strategy to enhance market competition (Gupta, 2016). Therefore, organizations can no longer ignore its strategic importance for their business but need to face the challenges that come with it, more precisely, the lack of a definition and corresponding measurement. (Klaus, 2011).

With the aim of finding a way to measure consumer experience, Brakus et al. (2009) decided to assess experiences from the customer's standpoint. The authors devised a scale comprising four dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioural, to measure brand experience. They found that sensations, feelings, and behavioural responses result from stimuli related to the brand, such as design, identity, packaging, communication, and environment. Moreover, they found that the brand experience directly impacts consumer satisfaction and loyalty.

Bagdare and Jain (2013) developed another scale. They identified that the customer experience in the retail sector consists of 12 variables grouped into four dimensions: joy, mood, leisure, and distinctive. The scale for measuring the retail experience was developed and validated in the context of “brick and mortar” personal lifestyle retail stores in Indore, India. The authors recommend that studies applying the scale be conducted in other retail channels and stores and in different contexts, cultures, and countries for validation purposes.

Maklan and Klaus (2011) questioned whether the correct tools were being used to help companies improve their customer experience. The authors explained that “continuing to measure service quality is probably necessary for most firms, but not sufficient. Market researchers need to develop an appropriate measure for the concept of customer experience” (Maklan and Klaus, 2011, p.778). In this context, the authors recognized that measuring Customer Experience should encompass a holistic evaluation that combines cognitive and emotional aspects of value from the customer's perspective. Instead of merely comparing against benchmarks or expectations, the assessment should delve into the intrinsic value derived from the organization's offerings, considering not only the attributes of product and service delivery but also the actual value-in-use. Moreover, the evaluation should extend beyond functional aspects, incorporating emotional responses that align with the organization's promise. To ensure a comprehensive understanding, it is essential to establish a reasonable time frame, covering both pre and post-service delivery, allowing customers to assess their



experiences across various channels over time. Additionally, the validity of the measure should be confirmed through behavioural indicators. (Maklan and Klaus, 2011).

Accordingly, Klaus and Maklan (2012) developed the EXQ Scale to measure customer's service experience taking into account the above premises, different from SERVQUAL and SERVPERF. EXQ Scale was initially developed for the mortgage lending industry where 19 items were identified in four dimensions, namely: Product Experience (consumer's perception of the possibility to compare offerings); Outcome Focus (reduction of transaction cost and focus on results); Moments-of-Truth (assesses the service's resilience), and Peace-of-Mind (contemplates all customer evaluations: pre, during and post purchase and is strongly associated with emotional aspects of services).

Kashif et al. (2016) applied the EXQ scale in the healthcare segment in Malaysia. The "Moments-of-Truth" dimension had a significant impact on the perception of the customer experience, highlighting the importance of the hospital team in demonstrating flexibility, credibility, and the accuracy of information provided to the patient. According to the findings, there is a need to hire personnel with interpersonal skills and knowledge of their work domain to create a memorable experience. "Outcome Focus" and "Product Experience" were ranked relatively low based on the factor scores achieved by each dimension on experience. This result supports the fact that customer emotions in the healthcare sector play a significant role in the evaluation of service encounters (Helena et al., 2008) and should be emphasized by healthcare professionals.

Kuppelwieser and Klaus (2021) decided to update the original EXQ scale and adapted it to a three-dimensional scale: the brand (pre-purchase), the service provider (during purchase), and post-purchase experience; composed of 25 items. From this update, and because it measures the holistic customer experience through all its phases, including the direct and indirect interactions of customers and other actors, the authors decided to test the EXQ scale in both business to consumer (B2C) and business to business (B2B) settings. For the B2C context they analysed the professional service setting, while for the B2B they analysed farmers and their agricultural good's suppliers. They concluded that all three EXQ dimensions, in general, apply in both B2C and B2B contexts. Below each dimension of the scale is explained in more detail.

Brand Experience is part of the customer experience prior to purchase. This moment reflects the customer's process of searching for alternatives, that is, the customer assesses and compares the brand with its competitors' offerings. It is the perceived value that consumers attribute to all the points of encounter with the brand, from price to the buying and delivery

experience. In this stage the consumer is influenced by its social environments, like reference groups, and by sources of information, such as social media.

The Service Provider Experience stage covers four themes that develop around the customers' interaction with the service provider: physical presence of the provider; the staff; its policies and practices. The first theme relates to the ease and/or challenge of using the provider's channels, therefore it is the process experience itself. The second is the assessment of customers' encounters with provider's staff. The third is about the influence that the physical environment plays in the purchase process. The last one is the situational role, like task oriented and location.

The last dimension of the new Customer Experience (EXQ) scale is the Post-Purchase Experience, this stage is defined by the after purchasing, using and/or consuming of the offering. It includes the service recovery, retention, and any post-purchase interaction.

#### **1.4 Satisfaction**

According to Oliver (2010), satisfaction is one's opinion on whether a product or service is judged to have delivered a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment, including levels of under or over fulfilment. The author highlights that fulfilment of satisfaction is judged with reference to a standard that is the base for comparison. Therefore, satisfaction involves an outcome and a comparison reference.

Customer experiences play a major role in the process of building customer satisfaction (Dalla Pozza, 2014). Consumers can have experiences when they look for items, purchase them, and use them (Verhoef et al., 2009). Combinations of these experiences can, in turn, have an impact on evaluations of goods and services, including customer satisfaction, attitudes, and purchase intention (Brakus et al., 2009).

Lemon & Verhoef (2016) traced roots of customer experience to customer satisfaction and loyalty. They believe that customer satisfaction is crucial to the total understanding of customer experience. Additionally, Klaus and Maklan (2012, 2013) concluded that the service experience has a significant impact on customer satisfaction. Aligned with the perspective of Klaus and Maklan (2012), it is believed that customer experience will have a positive impact on satisfaction.

The beauty industry involves processes with strong interaction between the service supplier and the customer (Kampani & Jhamb, 2022). Consequently, it is likely that the customer experience will also have an effect on satisfaction. Therefore, the following hypothesis arises:

**H1:** The Customer Experience has a positive and significant impact on Satisfaction of Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics' customers in Portugal.

## **1.5 Perceived Value**

Zeithaml (1988) defined perceived value as the consumer's overall evaluation of a product's utility based on perceptions of what is given and obtained. What is received depends on what consumers may want, which could be volume, high quality or even convenience. The same happens to what is given; it can be money expended, time and/or effort. Value represents a trade-off of gives and takes.

Sweeney and Soutar (2001) identified that when investigating consumption value, multiple value dimensions explain consumer choice better than does a single value item, both statistically and qualitatively. These authors propose a scale – PERVAL - with four dimensions and 19 items, to assess the construct "Perceived Value" including utilitarian and hedonic components. The four dimensions are emotional, social, price/value for money and performance/quality.

Furthermore, some scientific works have been introducing the concept of Customer Experience in the beauty segment. Petacci (2019), in a study in aesthetic clinics in Brazil, confirmed that the quality of the experience positively influences the Customer Perceived Value. Once already studied and confirmed the relationship customer experience on Perceived Value in the domain of aesthetic clinics services in another country where the culture shares common traits with Portugal, it is reasonable to believe that it may also hold true in a Portuguese context. Therefore, the following hypothesis arise:

**H2:** The Customer Experience has a positive and significant impact on the Perceived Value of Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics' customers in Portugal.

## **1.6 Word-of- Mouth**

Brown et al. (2005) posit that the core element of Word-of-Mouth (WoM) is that information on goods, services, organizations, places, and other topics can travel from one customer to another. According to the same authors, Word-of-Mouth communication, in its broadest meaning, refers to any information about a particular object, such as a business or brand, that is spread from one person to another either directly or through some other kind of

communication. The authors recall that word-of mouth can be either positive or negative, but naturally marketers are interested in promoting positive recommendations.

According to Martin (2017), several studies on Word-of-Mouth reveal its strategic importance for organisations, including those operating in the human health sector. The author also explains that although the findings emphasise the significance of WoM, several research gaps remain. For example, due to the strong focus on hospitals, current research appears to overlook WoM concerning health care providers such as general practitioners or nursing homes. Therefore, there is an important relationship to be further explored between WoM and Aesthetic Clinics, framed as general health care providers.

Kuppelwieser et al. (2022) found that Customer Experience (CX) plays a crucial role in the Customer Perceived Value (CPV) – Word-of-Mouth relationship, thereby confirming the existence of a direct link between CPV (social/hedonic/utilitarian value), CX and WoM. This study was built under the context of two types of services: high-end professional service (mass grocery service) and utilitarian service (retail banking). The three types of value analysed in the study are based on the concepts of Sweeney and Soutar (2001) study. These authors argue that the Utilitarian value refers to “the utility derived from the (product’s) perceived quality and expected performance” (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001: p.211), Hedonic value is “the utility derived from the feelings or affective states that a product generates” (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001: p.211) and Social value refers to “the utility derived from the product’s ability to enhance social self-concept” (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001: p.211). Once considering Sweeney and Soutar (2001) concepts, the beauty industry can integrate both the utilitarian and the hedonic values. Additionally, according to the Kuppelwieser et al. (2022), CPV, in all its types, not only affects consumers’ behavioural intentions but, more importantly, their WoM behaviour. Therefore, analysing this relationship in the aesthetic clinic services context is valuable for academics and practitioners. Given the arguments it is believed to hold true in the Aesthetic clinic services in Portugal. Hence, the following hypothesis arise:

**H3:** Perceived Value has a positive and significant impact on Word-of-Mouth in Onodera’s Aesthetic Clinics in Portugal.

Oliver (1989) in Brown et al. (2005) found a positive influence of Satisfaction on Word-of-Mouth in the automobile dealership industry. Accordingly, further investigation of this relationship in the Aesthetic Clinics services is important, especially since the beauty industry can be considered a professional service – highly customized, long contact time, applied in meeting customers’ needs (Cronin et al., 2000). Aesthetic clinics are specifically oriented to what the customer needs, for example, specific body and/or facial treatments for blemishes,

hair removal, sagging, and body massages, specifically customized for the patient's health condition. It is a high contact service as employees are in direct contact with the patients to provide their services. Based on these arguments. It is reasonable to believe that Satisfaction will have a positive impact on Word-of-Mouth in the Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics in Portuguese, therefore it is considered relevant to formulate the following research hypothesis:

**H4:** Satisfaction has a positive and significant impact on Word-of-Mouth in Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics in Portugal.

Kuppelwieser and Klaus (2021) suggested as future research directions that it "would be advantageous to examine how the scale (EXQ updated) explains important marketing outcomes, such as word-of-mouth behaviour" (p. 628). Recognizing the strength and practical relevance of the aesthetic clinics' segment and considering that consumers of the beauty industry are more conscious of their personal care and appearance, they seek verification and recommendations of the service quality of the beauty centres (Kampani & Jhamb, 2022). As a result, customer interactions have a significant influence on how and what customers think (Kampani & Jhamb, 2022). The authors' study was based on the services of beauty salons, which share great similarities with the aesthetic clinics' services, since patients from the clinics usually will consider a recommendation from his or her social group, because this type of services are related to physical and appearance change, what consequently is very related to a patient' self-esteem. Therefore, choosing a specific brand or professional for that service requires trust and, as a result, consumer previous experiences, satisfaction and perceived value of the service provided are factors that will influence costumers' word of mouth. Consequently, it is likely that the customer experience will influence word of mouth in aesthetic clinics. Therefore, the following hypotheses emerge:

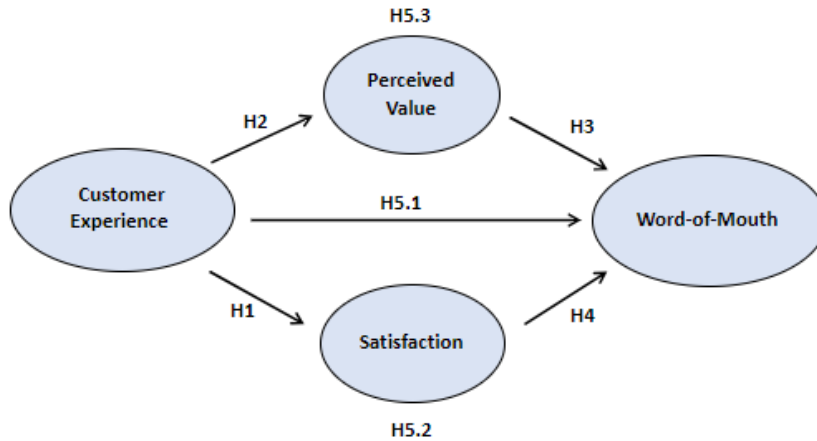
**H5:** Customer Experience has a positive and significant impact on Word-of-Mouth of Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics' customers in Portugal.

**H5.1** Customer Experience has a direct, positive, and significant impact on Word-of-Mouth of Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics' customers in Portugal.

**H5.2:** Customer Experience has a positive and significant impact on Word-of-Mouth of Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics' customers mediated by Satisfaction.

**H5.3:** Customer Experience has a positive and significant impact on Word-of-Mouth of Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics' customers mediated by Perceived Value

The development of the proposed study hypotheses and conceptual model, which is represented in Figure 2.1, is supported, and based on the literature review. This model represents the hypotheses of the research proposal.



*Figure 1.1 Conceptual Model*

## 1.7 Conclusion and Conceptual Framework

Customer Experience has been gaining more attention from researchers and managers in the marketing and service area. The relevance of services in the Portuguese economy, the strong demand the beauty centres generate, and the lack of studies about customer experience in this context, make it a relevant gap that needs to be fulfilled.

In light of this happening, researchers can enhance their contributions to organizations and customers by actively participating in the updating of customer experience measurement and by reaching a consensus on its metrics. For this reason, this study intends to evaluate the impact of Customer Experience in Satisfaction, Perceived Value and Word-of-Mouth of customers from the Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics in Portugal, as well as the mediating effect of Satisfaction and Perceived Value and their impacts on Word-of-Mouth.

## 2 METHOD

Based on the research objectives and the literature review presented previously, this chapter aims to explicitly outline the methods used in the research process. Thus, it will present the research context. Sequentially, the research design, the questionnaire, the pre-test, the data collection methodology, and the techniques for data treatment and analysis employed in the research process will be explained. These elements will provide the support needed to test the research hypotheses underlying the analysis model of this dissertation.

### 2.1 Research Context

As already mentioned, the economic and social value of the service sector and the beauty segment in Portugal is undeniable. Therefore, this research focus in the service sector, more specifically the Aesthetic Clinics' Services in Portugal. The Aesthetic Clinics' Chain participating in the research is Onodera Estética.

Onodera Estética Clinics is reference in the beauty sector and considered the largest aesthetic clinics' chain of Brazil, with over 40 years of market and more than 50 units distributed in the country, operating through the franchise model since 2000. The chain opened a head office and franchise unit in 2021 in Portugal, more specifically in Braga. Through the franchise model, a franchisee has opened in Porto and in Lisbon. (Source: study company, 2024).

The Aesthetic clinic offer a full range of body, facial and medical treatments. Among them, there are massages, peels, high-tech devices for reducing measurements, treatments for cellulite, localised fat and stretch marks, among other services. The chain's positioning in the market is based on attributes such as: tradition, the first Franchise aesthetics clinic in Brazil; a benchmark in aesthetics and innovation; reliability and differentiated services. The Franchise format operated by the chain establishes standardised operating processes, service flows and treatments, among others. It also specifies lay outs and the visual identity of the units and staff uniforms, training programmes and monitoring to ensure that the established standards are being met. It also has an in-person and telephone Hidden Customer programme, Net Promoter Score (NPS), the aim of which is to check the quality of customer service at the Network's units, as well as to identify possible non-conformities and provide corrective actions to remedy them.

## **2.2 Research Design**

To confirm the previous stated hypothesis, the research was conducted in the form of a quantitative empirical study. Data collection was based on primary data through an online survey, and in a cross-sectional temporal horizon. Before the period of data collection, a pre-test survey was conducted.

## **2.3 Questionnaire**

A questionnaire was developed to assess the respondent profile, the Customer Experience, the Satisfaction, the Perceived Value, and the Word-of-Mouth (WoM). These four presented constructs were selected based on the literature review.

The questionnaire (Annex A) is composed of 56 questions to assess the respondent profile, their customer experience, their satisfaction, their perceived value, and word-of-mouth (WoM). The questions used are divided into five distinct parts:

1. Sociodemographic questions: 9 questions related to the customer profile such as age, gender, academic level, region of residence, marital and employment status, their household income, as well as how long they have been clients of the clinic.

2. EXQ Scale: 25 questions referring to customer experience - with three dimensions: Brand Experience (7), Service Provider Experience (11), Post-Purchase Experience (7); applied for the B2C context - proposed by Klaus and Kuppelwieser (2021).

3. Customer Satisfaction: 5 questions referring to the satisfaction construct adapted from Dagger, et al. (2007).

4. Customer Perceived Value: 8 questions based on Walsh et al. (2014)

5. Word-of-mouth Scale: 9 questions involving the measurement of the level of word-of-mouth based on the work of Brown et al. (2005).

In terms of measurement scale, a 7-point Likert scale was used to assess the constructs Customer Experience, Satisfaction, Perceived Value, and Word-of-Mouth, where respondents selected their degree of agreement/disagreement with the statements and where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 7 "strongly agree".



## **2.4 Pre-test**

A pre-test of the questionnaire was carried out online with twenty-three clients from the study universe with the aim of assessing possible problems related to the interpretation of the questions, structuring of the questionnaire, suggestions for improvement, among others.

These customers' comments and responses to the pre-test were received by telephone and e-mail and made it possible to make linguistic/semantic corrections, as well as minor changes to some questions that raised doubts, to facilitate understanding and reduce the likelihood of them being interpreted differently from what was intended. The answers from the pre-test were not considered when analysing the results.

## **2.5 Data Collection**

The data was collected by applying the questionnaire online using the Qualtrics platform from June 2023 to February 2024. The questionnaire link was sent by e-mail to clients registered in the database of the three clinics (Braga, Lisbon and Porto). This register includes clients, former clients, and prospects. Those who had registered in the database at least three times were sent an e-mail informing them of the enquiry.

## **2.6 Sample**

This research sample is a convenience sample obtained through the distribution of the questionnaire link among clinic clients who met the selecting criterial; defined as having used the service regularly within the maximum period of 6 months preceding the questionnaire application date and being 18 years of age or more. These requirements resulted in 141 responses.

## **2.7 Data Analysis**

The data analysis was conducted through descriptive analysis, reliability analysis, and mediation analysis. The descriptive analysis was used to characterize the sample and the constructs mentioned before – Customer Experience (Brand Experience, Service Provider Experience, Post-Purchase Experience); Satisfaction; Perceived Value and Word-of-Mouth. After the descriptive analysis is done, it is important to ensure the reliability/internal consistency of the variables, by calculating Cronbach's Alpha. Finally, the mediation model

and the corresponding research hypotheses were tested using the IBM SPSS Statistics program (version 29) along with the Macro Process for SPSS, developed by Andrew F. Hayes (version 4.2).

## **2.8 Conclusion**

This section outlines the methods used in the research process. It started by explaining the research context (an aesthetic clinic from Brazil operating in the franchise model for more than 20 years– Onodera Estética, and recently opening in Portugal) then, it explained the research design. Later, the questionnaire to be used in data collection was constructed. To improve the quality of data collection, the questionnaire was subject to a pre-test. After the questionnaire was finalized, data collection proceeded where a total of 141 responses were collected. Finally, the statistical methodology to be used to process and analyse the collected data was determined.

## 3 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the statistical results obtained from the collected sample data will be presented and interpreted, allowing for its characterization and the testing of research hypotheses. In this context, the chapter will begin with the description of the sample, followed by the testing of the formulated study hypotheses.

### 3.2 Sample Characterization

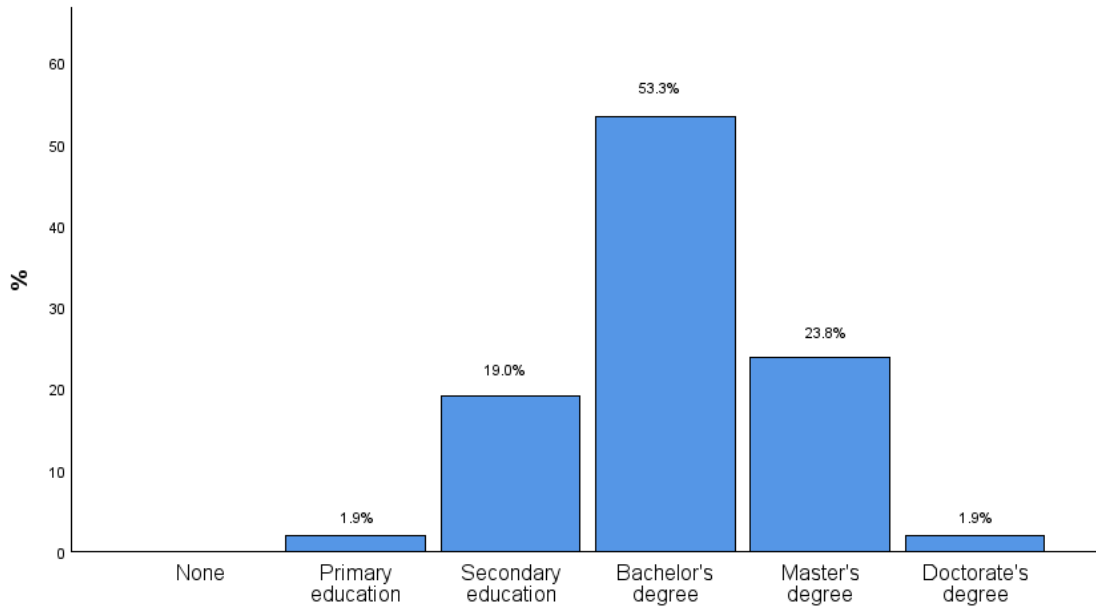
The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics software, version 29. A sample of 141 responses was obtained, of those, 108 individuals fully completed the survey.

With the aim of analysing the profile of the survey respondents, socio-demographic variables such as “Gender”, “Age”, “Academic Level”, “Marital Status” and “Employment Status” were considered. In addition to these variables, other questions were included, such as for how long the respondents have been a client at the Onodera Aesthetics Clinic, their region of residence and average net monthly household income.

The sample presents a strong predominance of the female gender, accounting for 94.4% (102 women). In terms of marital status, 62.9% are married, 21.9% are single, and 9.5% are divorced.

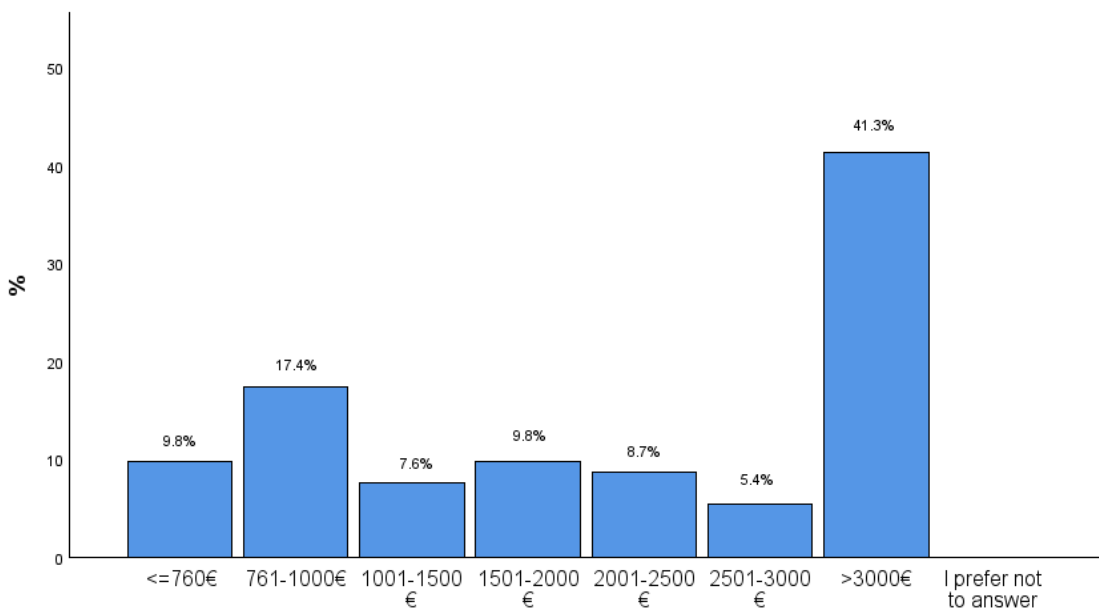
Ages ranged from 20 to 81 years, with an average age of 47.1 years (SD=11.9). The age group ranging from "36 to 50 years old" represents the largest percentage of elements in the sample (49.1% of responses), followed by clients between "51 and 65 years old" with 29.6%. Clients between "20 and 35 years" represent 14.8% of responses. The lowest percentage corresponds to the age group of "Over 65 years old" with only 6.5% of respondents.

Regarding "Academic Level," it has been grouped into six distinct categories. The profile of the respondents regarding their academic level can be observed in Graph 4.1, where it is possible to verify that the majority of respondents have completed a undergraduate's degree (53.3%), followed by those with a completed master's degree (23.8%). There is also a significant group who have completed secondary education (19%).



*Figure 3.1 Academic Level*

The net monthly household income was segmented into seven ranges based on the minimum wage in Portugal (760,00 € - DGERT, 2023). According to the collected data (Graph 4.2), there is a predominance of respondents whose incomes fall within the highest range (41.3% with income over 3000,00 €). It is also worth noting the ranges from 761,00 € to 1000,00 € (17.4%) and the concentration of income in the ranges from 1501,00 € to 2500,00 €, representing a total of 18.5% of the survey respondents.



*Figure 3.2 Income Ranges*

The data relating to the variable characterizing the duration of the relationship with the clinic will be analysed separately for each clinic, considering the different periods of operation between them (Table 3.1). Most clients, in the sample, from Lisbon and Porto clinic have been clients for less than 1 year, with 50% (Lisbon) and 54.8% (Porto) of clients being very recent clients (less than 6 months). The highest percentage in the Braga Clinic is from clients Between 6 months and 1 year category (35.1%). The percentage of relatively long-standing clients is the lowest among the four categories (19.3% for more than 2 years only in Braga) Porto and Lisbon have no respondents in this category, this is noticeable considering the recent opening of the clinics in Porto and Lisbon.

*Table 3.1 Relationship duration of the sample for each Clinic*

	Onodera Clinic					
	Lisboa		Porto		Braga	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Less than 6 months	10	50.0	17	54.8	14	24.6
Between 6 months and 1 year	9	45.0	7	22.6	20	35.1
Between 1 and 2 years	1	5.9	7	22.6	12	21.1
2 or more years	0	0,0	0	0.0	11	19.3
Total	20	100.0	31	100.0	57	100.0

### 3.3 Customer Experience Analysis

To assess the Customer Experience with the services provided by the Aesthetic Clinics franchise network, the mean and standard deviation were calculated for all the items of the dimensions that comprise the Customer Experience (EXQ) scale. Additionally, the percentage distribution of responses across the various points of the scale (from 1=Strongly Disagree to 7=Strongly Agree) was analysed for each of the 25 evaluated items (Table 3.2).

Thus, and according to the compiled data, it is possible to make some considerations. Firstly, the items that presented the highest averages are related to the Brand Experience dimension, ranging between 6.2 and 6.6 with most values close to the high point of the scale. Namely, with the highest average, items BRE1 and BRE5, "The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera has a good reputation." and "The people who work at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera represent the company brand well.", respectively (average=6.6).

Table 3.2 Descriptive Analysis of Customer Experience by item

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE		SCALE								
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	Strongly Agree
<b>BRAND EXPERIENCE</b>		<b>6.5</b>	<b>0.80</b>							
BRE1	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera has a good reputation.	6.6	0.77	0.0%	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%	8.1%	18.9%	72.1%
BRE2	I am confident in the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera's expertise.	6.4	1.16	2.2%	0.0%	0.7%	1.5%	13.9%	16.8%	65.0%
BRE3	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera gives independent advice (on which product/service will best suit my needs).	6.3	1.05	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%	3.8%	9.0%	24.8%	60.2%
BRE4	I choose the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera not because of the price alone.	6.3	1.23	2.2%	0.0%	2.2%	3.7%	8.1%	24.4%	59.3%
BRE5	The people who work at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera represent the company brand well.	6.6	0.93	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%	5.9%	17.6%	73.5%
BRE6	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera's offerings have the best quality.	6.3	1.12	1.6%	0.8%	0.0%	2.4%	11.3%	22.6%	61.3%
BRE7	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera's offerings are superior.	6.2	1.20	1.6%	0.8%	1.6%	3.2%	11.9%	24.6%	56.3%
<b>SERVICE PROVIDER EXPERIENCE</b>		<b>6.4</b>	<b>1.02</b>							
SPE1	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera advises(d) me throughout the process.	6.4	1.14	0.0%	0.8%	5.3%	2.3%	6.8%	17.4%	67.4%
SPE2	Dealing with the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera is easy.	6.6	0.97	0.7%	1.5%	0.7%	0.0%	4.4%	14.0%	78.7%
SPE3	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera keeps me informed.	6.3	1.22	0.8%	3.0%	1.5%	1.5%	8.3%	20.3%	64.7%
SPE4	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera demonstrates flexibility in dealing with me.	6.6	1.12	1.5%	1.5%	0.7%	0.7%	6.0%	11.2%	78.4%
SPE5	At the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera I always deal with the same forms and/or same people.	6.2	1.36	3.1%	0.0%	1.6%	7.1%	7.1%	23.6%	57.5%
SPE6	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera's personnel relate to my wishes and concerns.	6.5	1.20	2.3%	0.8%	1.5%	0.8%	6.1%	16.0%	72.5%
SPE7	The people I am dealing with at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera have good people skills.	6.8	0.79	0.0%	0.7%	2.2%	0.0%	1.5%	7.4%	88.2%
SPE8	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera delivers a good customer service.	6.5	1.22	2.3%	1.5%	0.0%	1.5%	6.9%	12.2%	75.6%
SPE9	I have built a personal relationship with the people at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera.	5.8	1.67	6.1%	0.0%	3.1%	7.6%	16.8%	13.7%	52.7%
SPE10	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera's facilities are better designed to fulfill my needs than their competitors.	6.3	1.09	0.9%	0.9%	0.9%	1.9%	13.2%	22.6%	59.4%
SPE11	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera's offline facilities are designed to be as efficient as possible (for me).	6.5	0.86	0.0%	0.8%	0.8%	1.6%	7.0%	24.0%	65.9%
<b>POST-PURCHASE EXPERIENCE</b>		<b>6.0</b>	<b>1.19</b>							
PPE1	I choose the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera because they know me.	5.0	2.18	15.1%	4.2%	2.5%	10.9%	14.3%	14.3%	38.7%
PPE2	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera knows exactly what I want.	5.9	1.53	3.9%	1.6%	3.1%	5.5%	14.8%	24.2%	46.9%
PPE3	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera keeps me up-to-date about their products and latest developments	6.0	1.53	4.0%	1.6%	3.2%	1.6%	15.2%	19.2%	55.2%
PPE4	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera will look after me for a long time.	5.8	1.65	4.7%	2.8%	2.8%	6.6%	11.3%	24.5%	47.2%
PPE5	The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera deal(t) well with me when things go(went) wrong.	6.4	1.26	1.8%	1.8%	0.9%	3.7%	4.6%	18.3%	68.8%
PPE6	I am happy with the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera as my provider.	6.3	1.36	3.1%	1.6%	0.0%	3.9%	7.1%	18.9%	65.4%
PPE7	Being a customer of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera gives me social approval.	5.1	2.17	14.6%	3.4%	4.5%	6.7%	14.6%	15.7%	40.4%

The Brand Experience dimension is related to the prior to purchase phase of the customer experience, where customers evaluate and compare the brand with its competitors' offerings as they search for alternatives. Therefore, the results found indicate that there is a positive perception of the aesthetic clinic under study from customers when choosing between different service providers.

The Post-Purchase Experience dimension, on the other hand, presented the lowest averages and the highest standard deviations, with items PPE1 - "I choose the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera because they know me." (mean = 5.0 and standard deviation = 2.18) and PPE7 - "Being a customer of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera gives me social approval." (mean = 5.1 and standard deviation = 2.17) standing out in this regard. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, despite having the lowest average values, these values are clearly above the central point of the scale (point 4). Another point to be addressed is that for these two items there was a greater distribution of perceptions across the various points of the scale, indicating heterogeneity in responses.

Item SPE7 "The people I am dealing with at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera have good people skills." obtained the highest average (6.8) in the Service Provider Experience dimension. It should be highlighted that the Service Provider Experience covers four themes that revolve around the customers' interaction with the service provider: the physical presence of the provider; the staff; its policies, and practices. It is also noteworthy that SPE2 records a significant number of individuals around values 6 and 7 on the Likert-type evaluation scale (92.6% of cases). On the other hand, the lowest average in this dimension was item SPE9 - "I have built a personal relationship with the people at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera." (5.8).

After analysing the sample perception of Customer Experience with Aesthetic Clinic Onodera services, it is evident that, overall, the results were very satisfactory, as they are well above the central point of the scale. It is worth noting that employees in both the "Brand Experience" dimension (BRE5) and the "Service Provider Experience" (SPE7) were well evaluated, with over 90% of clients rating them at values 6 and 7 on the scale, which corresponds to very high levels of agreement.

### **3.4 Perceived Value, Satisfaction, And Word-Of-Mouth Analysis**

Similarly to what was done for the Customer Experience, the sample results regarding the average and standard deviation of each of the constructs Perceived Value, Satisfaction, and Word-of-Mouth are presented in Table 3.3.

According to the analysed data, eight items compose the Perceived Value dimension, it should be noted that the average values are high, almost always close to or above 6, with a few exceptions. Items PV2, PV3 and PV4 tie for the highest average in this section (6.5). on the other hand, items PV7 "The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera improve the way I am perceived" (5.3) and PV8 "The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera make a good impression on other people" (5.3) stand out with the lowest average in the dimension. It can be added that these items are those that presented a greater distribution of responses along the scale, indicating that there is a significant variability of perceptions. It is important to highlight that these two questions are related to social perception, therefore indicating how customers perceive the social utility (e.g., status, prestige) that the consumption of the services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera conveys. Therefore, the perception of recognition and appreciation from the local community, which governs the social life of the service consumers, needs to be reassessed to improve the consumer's perception of social value.

Most items in the Satisfaction dimension obtained an average of 6.3, which we can consider quite satisfactory, as it is very close to the maximum point of the scale. However, when analysing the questions individually, SATISF4 "I feel satisfied that the results of my treatment at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera are the best that can be achieved" (5.7) and SATISF5 "The extent to which my treatment has produced the best possible outcome at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera is satisfying" (5.7) showed lower averages than the others. This lower satisfaction index for these items signals that the results of treatments should be treated as an area for improvement, both in communication regarding the alignment of expectations and in the efficiency of treatments, aiming to increase customer satisfaction.

The Word-of-Mouth results are also considered satisfactory: of the nine items that characterize the dimension, only two items have an average of less than 6.0. Item WoM4 "I made sure that others know that I use the services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera." had the lowest mean (4.9), accompanied by the greatest scale dispersion, indicating less unanimity on this issue. And item WoM6 "I recommended the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera to family members." (5.8) with the second highest standard deviation in this dimension (2.12), just behind WoM4 (2.33). These results indicate that there may be a need to focus consumer commitment through identification, in addition to customer satisfaction, to promote Word-of-Mouth Behaviours (Brown et al., 2005).



*Table 3.3 Descriptive analysis of customer perceived value, satisfaction and word-of-mouth by item*

DIMENSIONS		SCALE								
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	Strongly Agree
<b>PERCEIVED VALUE</b>										
PV1	The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera have consistent quality.	6.4	1.12	0.9%	1.8%	0.0%	3.5%	9.6%	18.4%	65.8%
PV2	The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera are well made.	6.5	1.14	1.7%	1.7%	0.0%	1.7%	5.0%	20.2%	69.7%
PV3	The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera are one that I would enjoy.	6.5	1.04	1.6%	0.8%	0.0%	1.6%	4.1%	20.3%	71.5%
PV4	The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera would make me feel good.	6.5	1.05	1.6%	0.0%	0.8%	2.5%	4.9%	18.9%	71.3%
PV5	The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera offer value for money.	5.8	1.31	1.8%	0.9%	1.8%	8.2%	26.4%	21.8%	39.1%
PV6	The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera are a good for the price.	5.9	1.37	2.7%	0.9%	1.8%	5.4%	22.3%	21.4%	45.5%
PV7	The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera improve the way I am perceived.	5.3	1.91	8.4%	3.6%	4.8%	9.6%	21.7%	12.0%	39.8%
PV8	The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera make a good impression on other people.	5.3	2.00	9.4%	4.7%	3.5%	10.6%	17.6%	10.6%	43.5%
<b>SATISFACTION</b>										
SATISF1	My feelings towards the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera are very positive.	6.3	1.28	2.5%	0.8%	0.8%	4.2%	5.9%	17.8%	67.8%
SATISF2	I feel good about coming to the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera for my treatment.	6.3	1.28	2.6%	0.9%	0.9%	4.3%	6.0%	21.4%	64.1%
SATISF3	Overall I am satisfied with the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera and the service it provides.	6.3	1.33	3.4%	0.0%	1.7%	2.5%	7.6%	16.9%	67.8%
SATISF4	I feel satisfied that the results of my treatment at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera are the best that can be achieved.	5.7	1.59	5.9%	0.0%	3.0%	5.9%	16.8%	27.7%	40.6%
SATISF5	The extent to which my treatment has produced the best possible outcome at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera is satisfying.	5.7	1.60	6.4%	0.0%	1.8%	6.4%	20.9%	24.5%	40.0%
<b>WORD-OF-MOUTH</b>										
WoM1	If a friend was looking for an aesthetic clinic, I would recommend the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera.	6.3	1.33	2.6%	0.0%	3.5%	1.7%	11.3%	12.2%	68.7%
WoM2	If I was helping my son, daughter, or other close relative make a decision on what aesthetic clinic to visit, I would recommend the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera.	6.3	1.32	2.7%	0.0%	3.6%	0.9%	10.7%	12.5%	69.6%
WoM3	I mentioned to others that I use the services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera.	6.1	1.54	3.7%	2.8%	1.9%	1.9%	11.2%	14.0%	64.5%
WoM4	I made sure that others know that I use the services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera.	4.9	2.33	19.1%	3.2%	2.1%	14.9%	8.5%	9.6%	42.6%
WoM5	I spoke positively about the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera employee(s) to others.	6.4	1.30	2.8%	1.8%	0.0%	1.8%	6.4%	12.8%	74.3%
WoM6	I recommended the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera to family members.	5.8	2.12	12.7%	2.9%	0.0%	3.9%	3.9%	10.8%	65.7%
WoM7	I spoke positively of the the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera to others.	6.3	1.49	4.7%	0.9%	0.0%	4.7%	5.6%	13.1%	71.0%
WoM8	I recommended the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera to acquaintances.	6.1	1.74	7.8%	1.0%	0.0%	3.9%	7.8%	10.7%	68.9%
WoM9	I recommended the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera to close personal friends	6.0	1.82	8.5%	0.9%	0.9%	5.7%	5.7%	13.2%	65.1%

### 3.5 Reliability of the Scales

Since the aim of this study was not to work with the items individually, but rather with the scales to assess Customer Experience with the Aesthetic Clinics' service, Satisfaction, Perceived Value and Word-of-Mouth, it was necessary to check the corresponding internal consistency. According to Marôco and Garcia-Marques (2006, p. 70), the internal consistency or reliability of a scale "assesses the consistency with which a given set of measurement items estimates a given construct or latent dimension" and its ability to obtain the same results when applied repeatedly.

The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient assesses the reliability of a scale, and its value varies on a scale from 0 to 1. Thus, a scale is classified as having appropriate reliability when the  $\alpha$  value is equal to or greater than 0,70 (Marôco and Garcia-Marques, 2006).

The results of the reliability assessment of the scales are shown in Table 3.4. The four scales: Customer Experience (EXQ); Satisfaction, Perceived Value and Word-of-Mouth scales had values above 0.70, reflecting the reliability of these instruments.

*Table 3.4 Cronbach's Alphas for the instrument dimensions*

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha coefficient
<b>Customer Experience (EXQ)</b>	<b>0.970</b>
Brand Experience	0.946
Service Provider Experience	0.956
Post-purchase Experience	0.885
<b>Satisfaction</b>	<b>0.973</b>
<b>Perceived Value</b>	<b>0.946</b>
<b>Word-of-Mouth</b>	<b>0.933</b>

Regarding the Customer Experience (EXQ) construct, the three dimensions - Brand Experience, Service Provider Experience and Post-Purchase Experience - showed values above the 0.70 mark, ranging from 0.885 to 0.956. In this respect, it is important to emphasise that the EXQ scale, the focus of this study, had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.970, thus it is classified as having appropriate reliability.

Once the Cronbach's alpha results are above 0.70 for the various items representing the main constructs under study - Customer Experience, Satisfaction, Perceived Value and Word-of-Mouth - these sets of items can be used to construct new composite variables. These variables will be created from the mean values. Table 3.5 below shows the descriptive results of the new composite variables (Constructs) with their respective minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation values.

*Table 3.5 Count, Number of Items, Minimum, Maximum, Mean and Standard Deviation for the mains constructs of this study<sup>1</sup>*

<b>Estatísticas Descriptivas</b>						
	<b>Count</b>	<b>Number of Items</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
<b>Customer Experience</b>	59	25	3.4	7.0	6.4	0.86
Brand Experience	102	7	1.7	7.0	6.5	0.80
Service Provider Experience	95	11	2.2	7.0	6.4	1.02
Post-Purchase Experience	66	7	2.7	7.0	6.0	1.19
<b>Satisfaction</b>	99	5	1.0	7.0	6.1	1.40
<b>Perceived Value</b>	75	8	1.0	7.0	6.0	1.27
<b>Word-of-Mouth</b>	83	9	1.7	7.0	6.1	1.36

All the constructs have a mean equal to or greater than 6.0 and a standard deviation between 0.86 and 1.40. The lowest average between the variables is Perceived Value (6.0), Nevertheless, it should be noted that, despite having the lowest average values, these values are clearly above the central point of the scale (point 4).

### **3.6 Mediation Model: Research Hypotheses Testing**

The present chapter aims to test the hypotheses previously presented in the study. The mediation model was tested using PROCESS Macro for SPSS developed by Andrew F. Hayes (version 4.2) and the significance level was set at  $p < 0.05$ . (Test Results from Mediation Model 4 are in Anex B).

The direct effect of Customer Experience on Satisfaction was positive and significant ( $B=0.969$ ,  $s.e.=0.0879$ ,  $t=11.0294$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with Customer Experience accounting for 72.1% of the variation in Satisfaction. Therefore, confirming H1.

<sup>1</sup> The quantity of data (Count) varies from construct to construct as not all the individuals in the sample answered all the questions. Given the relatively small sample size, to test the mediation model, bootstrapping was used to estimate the regression coefficients and their confidence intervals.

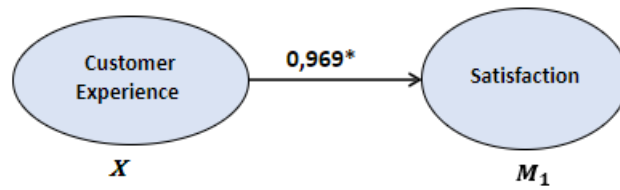


Figure 3.3 Customer Experience effect on Satisfaction

\*  $p < 0.001$

The direct effect of Customer Experience on Perceived Value was positive and significant ( $B=0.880$ ,  $s.e.=0.0692$ ,  $t=12.7099$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), with Customer Experience accounting for 77.5% of the variation in Perceived Value. Therefore, confirming H2.

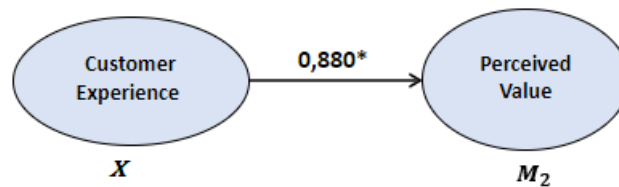


Figure 3.4 Customer Experience effect on Perceived Value

\*  $p < 0.001$

As a set, Customer Experience, Satisfaction, and Perceived Value accounted for significant variation in Word-of-Mouth, ( $R\text{-square}=0.7632$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The direct effect of Customer Experience was positive and significant ( $B=0.9605$ ,  $s.e.=0.2325$ ,  $t=4.1316$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), therefore, confirming H5.1. The direct effect for Satisfaction was negative but non-significant ( $B=-0.1808$ ,  $s.e.=0.2042$ ,  $t=-0.8854$ ,  $p=0.3807$ ); as for Perceived Value, the direct effect was positive, but only marginally significant. ( $B=0.5138$ ,  $s.e.=0.2591$ ,  $t=1.9829$ ,  $p=0.0535$ ). Therefore, H3 and H4 were not validated considering a significance level of  $p < 0.05$ . However, considering a threshold of just over 5%, we can consider H3 validated.

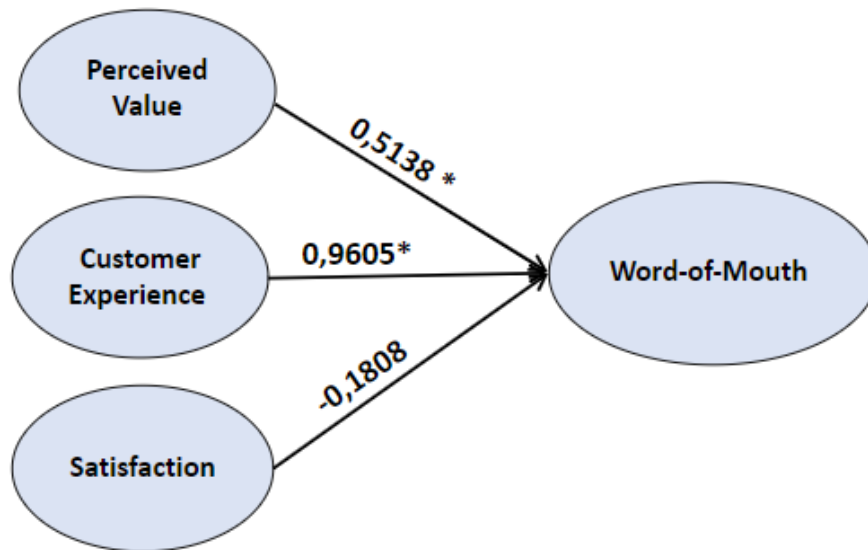


Figure 3.5 Customer Experience, Perceived Value and Satisfaction effect on Word-of-Mouth

\*  $p < 0.001$

The specific indirect effect of Customer Experience on Word-of-Mouth via Satisfaction is non-significant since 0 does fall between the lower and upper bound of the 95% Interval of Confidence ( $B = -0.1752$ , 95% Boot IC =  $-0.8376, 0.5653$ ).

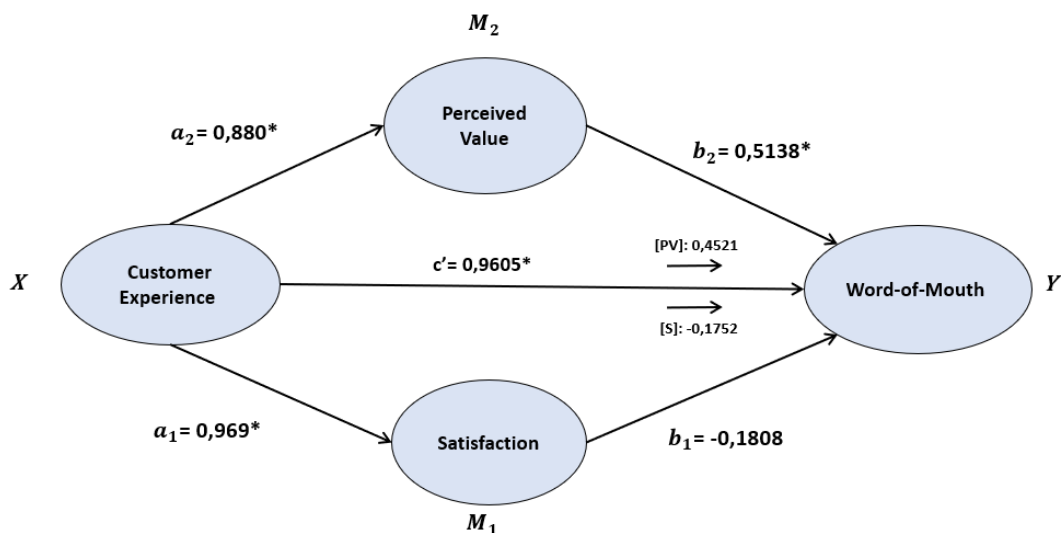


Figure 3.6 Mediation results

\*  $p < 0.001$

Notes: [PV] – Regression coefficient for the indirect effect through Perceived Value.

[S] – Regression coefficient for the indirect effect through Satisfaction.

The specific indirect effect of Customer Experience on Word-of-Mouth via Perceived Value is also non-significant ( $B = 0.4521$ , 95% Boot IC =  $-0.3936, 1.274$ ). Both H5.2 and H5.3 were refuted.

### **3.7 Main Considerations**

Throughout this chapter, the obtained results have been analysed and discussed, and now it is appropriate to systematize some of the main conclusions that have been reached.

Firstly, regarding the sample characterization, it was concluded that it is predominantly composed of female individuals, accounting for 94.4%, with an average age of 47.1 years of age and individuals with completed undergraduate degrees (53.3%). In terms of income, there is a predominance of the upper range exceeding €3000 per month. As for the duration of the relationship with the clinic, it was identified that almost three quarters of the clients (71.3%) have been engaged with the clinic for less than a year, but there is also a significant group related to the Braga Clinic (19.3%) who have been clients for more than two years. Porto and Lisbon have no respondents in this category; this is noticeable considering the recent opening of these clinics and that Braga is the oldest one.

It is important to mention that all constructs obtained Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.70, indicating their high reliability.

Overall, clients' perception regarding Service Experience is positive (mean = 6.4). The Brand Experience dimension has the highest average value (6.5), meaning it is the most positively evaluated. On the other hand, the Post-Purchase Experience dimension has the lowest average value (6.0), but still very high, considering it is a seven-point rating scale.

The positive results found regarding the overall perception of Service Experience, associated with the strong performance in the Brand Experience dimension, particularly items BRE1 and BRE5 with the highest average of the dimension (6.6), indicate a positive perception of the aesthetic clinic under study among customers when choosing between different service providers. From a management perspective, understanding and managing Brand Experience is crucial as it directly impacts consumer perceptions, preferences, and ultimately purchasing decisions. Therefore, the Aesthetic Clinic under study needs to focus on creating positive and consistent experiences across all touchpoints to enhance brand perception and loyalty among customers.

Post-Purchase Experience (6.0) and Service Provider Experience (6.4) are highly perceived by the respondents. In the Service Provider Experience dimension, items SPE7 (The people I

am dealing with at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera have good people skills.) and SPE2 (Dealing with the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera is easy.) stand out due to the employees' ability to understand customer needs, associated with the influence that the physical environment plays in the purchase process, as well as the ease and/or challenge of using the provider's channels. Lastly, the provider's policies and practices contribute significantly to enhancing the customer experience, indicating that attention should be given to attributes related to the professional competence of the clinic's staff, clinic location, clinic environment, and focusing on each client's objectives. In other words, reinforcement of staff training and space layout.

The customers' perception regarding the constructs Perceived Value (6.0), Satisfaction (6.1), and Word-of-Mouth (6.1) is also positive. Despite the positive results, there is room for improvement, and special attention should be given to items PV7 and PV8, which are related to social perception. These items indicate how customers perceive the social utility (e.g., status, prestige) conveyed by consuming services from the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera (Walsh et al., 2014). Therefore, the perception of recognition and appreciation from the local community, which influences the social life of the service consumers, needs to be reassessed to enhance the consumer's perception of social value. Some practical suggestions for enhancing the social value of the service provided could be to take part in fine local events (in the city or neighbourhood), either as sponsors or by offering a sample of the service to a group of local clients, for example, a foot massage. Another suggestion is to promote contests and giveaways on social media, so that the community realizes the value of the service and the brand in that social context.

Regarding the satisfaction dimension, it is important to highlight items SATISF4 (I feel satisfied that the results of my treatment at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera are the best that can be achieved) and SATISF5 (The extent to which my treatment has produced the best possible outcome at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera is satisfying), which showed lower averages in this construct. This indicates that the results of treatments should be considered an area for improvement, both in communication regarding the alignment of expectations and in the efficiency of treatments, aiming to increase customer satisfaction. Since it is a more technical area, it is suggested to adjust the processes of implementing treatments and enhancing staff training.

In the Word-of-Mouth dimension, the averages of items WoM4 (4.9) and WoM6 (5.8) indicate that there may be a need to focus on consumer commitment through brand identification (awareness), in addition to customer satisfaction, to promote Word-of-Mouth Behaviours (Brown et al., 2005). These authors believe that managers must consciously and

consistently define their organizations through all forms of interaction and communication with consumers. Managing identity, or putting a 'face' on the organization, provides consumers with an entity they can embrace and become committed to. This identification can be practically promoted through a brand identity that stands out from competitors, a strong presence on social media alongside local influencers, and sponsoring local events that engage the clinic's target audience.

In summary, when it comes to Perceived Value, Satisfaction and Word-of-Mouth special attention should be given to topics related to treatment outcome expectations, reassessment of community/local perception, and enhancing consumer commitment through brand identification. Among the topics to consider, some suggestions include informational brochures about each treatment and appointments with the clients to clarify specific issues in their cases.

Regarding the study hypotheses, H1, H2, H3, and H5.1 were confirmed. However, hypotheses H4, H5.2, and H5.3 were rejected (Table 3.6).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Kuppelwieser et al. (2022) argue that Customers Perceived Value, in all its types, not only affects consumers' behavioural intentions but, more importantly, their WoM behaviour. Therefore, the customers who perceive value from the service are more likely to recommend the service to other people, so there is a relationship between Perceived Value and Word-of-Mouth. This relationship is also verified in the current study, i.e., when customers perceive value from the service, they are more likely to recommend it to friends and family.

Nguyen et al. (2024) study reinforced that Perceived Value is essential in promoting positive Word-of-Mouth behaviours. The authors suggest that “by creating brand trust and loyalty, and a diversified and integrated channel system, customers can receive more benefits relative to reduced sacrifices, thereby contributing to fulfilling their needs. As a result, when satisfying their requirements, customers tend to share their positive experiences with friends, relatives, and acquaintances through many different forms, including WoM.” (Nguyen et al., 2024, p.111).



*Table 3.6 Validation of the research hypotheses*

<b>Hypotheses</b>	<b>Results</b>
H1: Customer Experience has a positive and significant impact on Satisfaction of Onodera’s Aesthetic Clinics’ customers in Portugal.	<b>Validated</b>
H2: Customer Experience has a positive and significant impact on the Perceived Value of Onodera’s Aesthetic Clinics’ customers in Portugal.	<b>Validated</b>
H3: Perceived Value has a positive and significant impact on Word-of-Mouth in Onodera’s Aesthetic Clinics in Portugal.	<b>Validated</b>
H4: Satisfaction has a positive and significant impact on Word-of-Mouth in Onodera’s Aesthetic Clinics in Portugal.	Not Validated
H5: Customer Experience has a positive and significant impact on Word-of-Mouth of Onodera’s Aesthetic Clinics’ customers in Portugal	
H5.1 Customer Experience has a direct, positive, and significant impact on the Word-of-Mouth of Onodera’s Aesthetic Clinics’ customers in Portugal.	<b>Validated</b>
H5.2: Customer Experience has a positive and significant impact on Word-of-Mouth of Onodera’s Aesthetic Clinics’ customers mediated by Satisfaction.	Not Validated
H5.3: Customer Experience has a positive and significant impact on Word-of-Mouth of Onodera’s Aesthetic Clinics’ customers mediated by Perceived Value	Not Validated

As suggested by the previous authors, it is beneficial for Onodera to enhance perceived value through brand trust and loyalty to impact Word-of-Mouth. In practice, these actions involve participating in local events, providing informational brochures about each treatment, scheduling appointments with clients to clarify specific issues in their cases as well as a continuous investment in employee training.

Regarding hypothesis H5.2 and H5.3, Satisfaction and Perceived Value, respectively, are considered mediators between the impact of EXQ on Word-of-Mouth, this hypothesis arose based on Kampani & Jhamb (2022) argument that consumers of the beauty industry are more conscious of their personal care and appearance, they seek verification and recommendations of the service quality of the beauty centres. Therefore, choosing a specific brand or professional for that service requires trust and as a result, consumer previous experiences, satisfaction and perceived value of the service provided are factors that will influence costumers’ word of

mouth. However, although this indirect effect is not proven since presents a bootstrap confidence interval which straddles zero, it is possible to conclude that EXQ has a direct effect on WoM (H5.1).

The research results were surprising and a plausible explanation for the results is that the sample size is limited and potentially biased.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter presents the main conclusions of this study, based on the results discussed in the previous chapter. Initially, the research questions will be answered. Subsequently, management recommendations will be addressed. Finally, the chapter will outline some limitations of the study and offer suggestions for future research.

### Answer to the Research Questions

#### *What is the Customer's Experience in Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics' Services in Portugal and its impact on Satisfaction, Perceived Value, and Word of Mouth?*

In general, the Customer Experience (EXQ) level in the sample is positive, with an average score of 6.4 on a seven-point scale. The highest average was found in the Brand Experience dimension (6.5), indicating a positive perception of the aesthetic clinic among customers when choosing between different service providers. All dimensions scored 6 or above, representing very positive values.

The Post-Purchase Experience (6.0) and Service Provider Experience (6.4) were highly rated. In the Service Provider Experience dimension, notable items included the staff's good people skills (6.8) and the ease of dealing with the clinic (6.6). These high scores highlight the importance of the employees' ability to understand customer needs and the influence of the physical environment and ease of using the provider's channels. The provider's policies and practices also significantly enhance the customer experience, emphasizing the importance of staff competence and training, clinic location, environment, and focus on individual client objectives.

Customer perceptions of Perceived Value (6.0), Satisfaction (6.1), and Word-of-Mouth (6.1) were also positive. Despite these positive results, there is room for improvement, particularly in treatment outcome expectations, reassessment of community/local perception, and enhancing consumer commitment through brand identification.

The hypotheses of the research model were tested using the IBM SPSS Statistics program (version 29) along with the Macro Process for SPSS, developed by Andrew F. Hayes (version 4.2). The study of the model was motivated to seek a better understanding of the impact of Customer Experience in the context of Aesthetics Clinic Services in Portugal.

Thus, based on the results presented, hypotheses H1 and H2 were confirmed, i.e. the Customer Experience has a positive and significant impact on both Satisfaction and Perceived Value of the clients of the Aesthetic Clinics in Portugal. The results also show that 72.1% of the variability in Satisfaction and 77.5% of the variability in Perceived Value is explained by Customer Experience (EXQ), there is a high correlation between these constructs. These results are in line with studies published in other areas (Bueno et.al (2019), Jin et al (2013), Klaus and Maklan (2013) and Parasuraman et al. (1985)). Therefore, this study identified a strong relationship between Customer Experience, Customer Satisfaction and Perceived Value in the Onodera's Aesthetic Clinic services in Portugal.

Regarding the other hypotheses; H3, and H5.1 were confirmed. However, hypotheses H4, H5.2, and H5.3 were rejected. As a set, Customer Experience, Satisfaction, and Perceived Value accounted for significant variation in Word-of-Mouth, (76.32%).

According to the results, H4 was rejected as Satisfaction cannot be claimed to have a direct positive impact on WoM. On the other hand, Perceived Value has a positive and significant impact on Word-of-Mouth, considering a significance level of  $p < 0.01$ , confirming H3. The direct effect of Customer Experience on Word-of-Mouth was positive and significant, therefore, confirming H5.1.

H5.2 and H5.3 were also rejected because Satisfaction and Perceived Value cannot be sustained to mediate a positive and significant impact of EXQ on WoM. Consequently, although EXQ has a direct effect on WoM (H5.1), it does not have an indirect effect on Word of Mouth, through Satisfaction, nor Perceived Value.

### ***What measures can Onodera's Aesthetic Clinics take to increase their Customer Experience and customers' word-of-mouth?***

The analysis of the results and the conclusions presented provide some important considerations for the management of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera Portugal in the pursuit of Customer Experience and Word-of-Mouth, which, despite having obtained a satisfactory average in the evaluation, still has opportunities for improvement in its performance.

According to the collected results, it would be advisable to develop an action plan for the items assessed with the lowest averages across all dimensions. Additionally, the positive aspects identified in the research should be reinforced, particularly in the dimension of Brand Experience. The clinic's reputation relies on its employees, who serve as key ambassadors of the brand. This becomes particularly significant during the pre-purchase phase, as customers

assess and compare the clinic's offerings against those of competitors. From a management perspective, understanding and managing Brand Experience is crucial as it directly impacts consumer perceptions, preferences, and ultimately purchasing decisions. Therefore, the Aesthetic Clinic under study needs to focus on creating positive and consistent experiences across all touchpoints to enhance brand perception and loyalty among customers. Specifically, it could invest in the training and development of employees, as they represent the brand to consumers across all touchpoints. A service differentiation is, but not only, communicated through the employees and their actions.

The Service Provider Experience dimension, stand out due to the employees' ability to understand customer needs, associated with the influence that the physical environment plays in the purchase process, as well as the ease and/or challenge of using the provider's channels. Lastly, the provider's policies and practices contribute significantly to enhancing the customer experience, indicating that attention should be given to attributes related to the staff training on communication approaches to provide security and clear explanation of the aesthetic procedures. As well as to keep focused on each client's objectives and expectations. Staff also needs to be prepared to provide an efficient and clear communication of pre- and post-treatment requirements, as well as its side effects. The clinic's location, environment and layout should all be considered to enhance customer experience.

It is advisable to better understand the customer's perception regarding the Post-Purchase Experience dimension to ensure it meets their expectations and aligns with what the customer deems important. Items with lower ratings in this dimension relate to social approval and customers choosing the clinic because they are familiar with it or have prior knowledge of its services. This familiarity suggests that customers value personalized service, the clinic's understanding of their preferences or needs, or positive past experiences that make them feel comfortable and appreciated at that clinic.

The characterization of the customer profile, mostly represented by a high level of education and distributed across high salary ranges, allows mapping and aligning these customers' expectations to provide a positive experience. Some suggestions include informational brochures about each treatment, staff training to provide an efficient and clear communication of pre- and post-treatment requirements. The management team should also establish procedures for the staff to measure the time required and monitor the different stages of treatment to ensure a realistic expectation and a satisfactory experience to the customer.

Based on the results presented, enhancing Word-of-Mouth (WoM) in the aesthetic clinics sectors, in the context of the study, primarily involves investing in Customer Experience and

customers' perception of value from the service, for instance through more detailed information about the benefits of the treatments and/or through investment in visibility of the brand. Within the scope of this research, Customer Experience has a positive and direct impact on WoM. Individually, Perceived Value produces a positive and significant effect on Word-of-Mouth, but this is not the case for Satisfaction. The constructs of Satisfaction and Perceived Value, as mediators between EXQ (Customer Experience) and WoM, do not have a significant and positive influence within the framework of this study. Therefore, prioritizing investment in Customer Experience is crucial.

### **Limitations**

All research has limitations, and this study is no exception. The sampling design exclusively involved clients from a single chain of Aesthetic Clinics in Portugal, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Although the network has units across different regions of the country, the homogeneity of these clients is a notable factor. Consequently, the results can only be extrapolated to the specific sample gathered, rather than all customers of Aesthetic Clinics in Portugal. This limitation underscores the need for a larger and more diverse population sample to enhance the value of this research.

Another limitation found is related to the fact that data collection was mainly obtained through the questionnaire link that was sent by e-mail to clients registered in the database of the three clinics (Braga, Lisbon and Porto). This register included clients, former clients, and prospects. This is a limitation, because, as often respondents may not frequently check their email boxes, and these messages could go directly to spam or even those who are registered may choose not to receive further information and offers about the clinic's services. Despite having defined that only those who have used the clinic's services in the last six months could respond to the survey, data collection lasted about 8 months and during a period that is not the busiest in the clinic. The busiest period being the months leading up to summer, what can explain the small number of responses, as well as the recent opening of the Porto and Lisbon Clinics. Despite these limitations, reminder e-mails were sent to customers to encourage them to share their experiences in the surveys. Additionally, staff members in the clinics reminded patients in the waiting room to respond to the survey while they waited for their appointments. Flyers were placed in the clinics' waiting room to remind customers to check their e-mail inbox and complete the survey

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

For further research, it would be interesting to extend the research to other Aesthetic Clinics in Portugal and to more regions. Thus, it would be possible to obtain a better perception of the service provided in different parts of the country and with clinics with different characteristics (bigger clinics, with a greater number of customers, less recent units) and compare if regionality can interfere in the evaluation of the Customer. Experience. The influence on the perception of the different constructs of the current study, if age and income bracket can impact the perception of experience, segmenting units with higher average ratings in the EXQ and identifying if they present similar management aspects among themselves.

An interesting point for investigation would be the reassessment of the items comprising the EXQ Scale, aiming for better adaptation to the Beauty domain. The collected database offers numerous research possibilities, which can be considered positive as it will allow for the expansion of studies in an area where there is a scarcity of scientific publications.





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## ANNEXES

### Annex A – Questionnaire

#### Portuguese Version:

Este inquérito foi desenvolvido no âmbito de uma tese de mestrado e destina-se a recolher informação exclusivamente para esse fim. O estudo tem como objetivo estudar a experiência do cliente na Clínica Estética Onodera e é realizado por Julia Tavares (Julia\_Dorneles@iscte-iul.pt), que poderá contactar caso deseje colocar uma dúvida ou partilhar algum comentário.

Caso tenha 18 ou mais anos, a sua participação, que será muito valorizada, consiste em responder a um questionário e poderá durar cerca de 10 minutos. A participação neste estudo é estritamente voluntária: pode escolher participar ou não participar.

Se escolher participar, pode interromper a participação em qualquer momento sem ter de prestar qualquer justificação. Para além de voluntária, a participação é também anónima e confidencial. Os dados destinam-se apenas a tratamento estatístico e nenhuma resposta será analisada ou reportada individualmente. Em nenhum momento do estudo precisa de se identificar. O preenchimento do questionário presume que compreendeu e que aceita as condições do presente estudo, consentindo participar.

#### **Bloco Introdução**

**Tem 18 anos ou mais? \***

- Sim
- Não

**Visitou uma Clínica de Estética Onodera nos últimos 6 meses? \***

- Sim
- Não

**Qual a Clínica Onodera onde foi atendida/o na última consulta que teve? \***

- Lisboa
- Porto
- Braga

### Bloco CX - Brand Experience

Por favor indique numa escala de 7 pontos, em que 1= "Discordo Totalmente" e 7= "Concordo Totalmente", qual o seu grau de concordância em relação a cada uma das afirmações seguintes.

Escala	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Não sei / Não Respondo
A Clínica Estética Onodera tem boa reputação.								
Sinto confiança nas competências médico-estéticas dos elementos da Clínica Estética Onodera.								
A Clínica Estética Onodera aconselha-me de forma isenta sobre os produtos/serviços que melhor se adequam às minhas necessidades.								
Escolho a Clínica Estética Onodera por outros motivos para além do preço.								
As pessoas que trabalham na Clínica Estética Onodera são bons representantes da marca.								
Os serviços oferecidos pela Clínica Estética Onodera têm a melhor qualidade.								
A oferta de serviços da Clínica Estética Onodera é de qualidade superior.								

### Bloco CX - Service Provider Experience

Por favor indique numa escala de 7 pontos, em que 1= "Discordo Totalmente" e 7= "Concordo Totalmente", qual o seu grau de concordância em relação a cada uma das afirmações seguintes.

Escala	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Não sei / Não Respondo
A Clínica Estética Onodera aconselha-me ao longo de todo processo.								
Lidar com a Clínica Estética Onodera é fácil.								
A Clínica Estética Onodera mantém-me informado.								
A Clínica Estética Onodera demonstra ser flexível quando lida comigo.								
Na Clínica Estética Onodera lido sempre com as mesmas pessoas e os mesmos formulários.								
Os colaboradores da Clínica Estética Onodera compreendem e identificam-se com os meus desejos e preocupações.								
As pessoas com quem lido na Clínica Estética Onodera são afáveis e atenciosas.								
A Clínica Estética Onodera presta um bom serviço ao cliente.								
Construí uma relação pessoal com as pessoas da Clínica Estética Onodera.								
As instalações da Clínica Estética Onodera estão melhor organizadas para responder às minhas necessidades do que as da concorrência.								
As instalações físicas da Clínica Estética Onodera estão organizadas de forma a serem o mais eficientes possível (para mim).								

### Bloco CX - Post-Purchase Experience

Por favor indique numa escala de 7 pontos, em que 1= "Discordo Totalmente" e 7= "Concordo Totalmente", qual o seu grau de concordância em relação a cada uma das afirmações seguintes.

Escala	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Não sei / Não Respondo
Escolho a Clínica Estética Onodera porque me conhecem.								
A Clínica Estética Onodera sabe exatamente o que eu quero.								
A Clínica Estética Onodera mantém-me informado(a) sobre as novidades dos seus serviços.								
A Clínica Estética Onodera vai continuar a cuidar de mim por muito tempo.								
A Clínica Estética Onodera lida/lidou corretamente comigo quando algo corre ou correu menos bem.								
Estou satisfeito com os serviços prestados pela Clínica Estética Onodera.								
Ser cliente da Clínica Estética Onodera faz-me ser bem-visto pelos outros.								

### Bloco - Perceived Value

Por favor indique numa escala de 7 pontos, em que 1= "Discordo Totalmente" e 7= "Concordo Totalmente", qual o seu grau de concordância em relação a cada uma das afirmações seguintes.

Escala	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Não sei / Não Respondo
Os serviços da Clínica Estética Onodera têm qualidade.								
Os serviços da Clínica Estética Onodera são corretamente prestados.								
Gosto dos serviços da Clínica Estética Onodera.								
Os serviços da Clínica Estética Onodera fazem-me sentir bem.								
A Clínica Estética Onodera tem boa relação qualidade-preço.								
Os serviços prestados são bons para o preço que é cobrado.								
Recorrer aos serviços da Clínica Estética Onodera melhora a forma como os outros me veem.								
Recorrer aos serviços desta Clínica causa uma impressão positiva nos outros.								

### Bloco – Satisfaction

Por favor indique numa escala de 7 pontos, em que 1= "Discordo Totalmente" e 7= "Concordo Totalmente", qual o seu grau de concordância em relação a cada uma das afirmações seguintes.

Escala	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Não sei / Não Respondo
Os meus sentimentos em relação à Clínica Estética Onodera são muito positivos.								
Sinto-me bem com a minha decisão de recorrer aos serviços da Clínica Estética Onodera para o tratamento que procuro.								
No geral, estou satisfeito com a Clínica Estética Onodera e com o serviço que prestam.								
O(s) resultado(s) alcançado(s) na Clínica Estética Onodera com o(s) meu(s) tratamento(s) é(ão) satisfatório(s).								
Estou satisfeito(a) porque a Clínica Estética Onodera atinge os melhores resultados possíveis no(s) meu(s) tratamento(s).								

### **Bloco – Word-of-Mouth**

Por favor indique numa escala de 7 pontos, em que 1= "Discordo Totalmente" e 7= "Concordo Totalmente", qual o seu grau de concordância em relação a cada uma das afirmações seguintes.

<b>Escala</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Não sei / Não Respondo</b>
Se um amigo procurasse uma Clínica Estética certamente recomendaria a Clínica Estética Onodera.								
Se estivesse a ajudar o meu filho, filha ou outro parente próximo a tomar uma decisão sobre a Clínica Estética a qual recorrer, certamente recomendaria a Clínica Estética Onodera.								
Menciono a outras pessoas que utilizo os serviços da Clínica Estética Onodera.								
Certifico-me que as outras pessoas sabem que recorro aos serviços da Clínica Estética Onodera.								
Falei positivamente dos colaboradores da Clínica Estética Onodera a outras pessoas.								
Recomendei a Clínica Estética Onodera a familiares.								
Falei positivamente da Clínica Estética Onodera a outras pessoas.								
Recomendei a Clínica Estética Onodera a conhecidos.								
Recomendei a Clínica Estética Onodera a amigos próximos.								

### **Bloco – Sociodemográficos**

**Qual a sua idade?**

**Há quanto tempo é cliente numa Clínica de Estética Onodera em Portugal?**

- Menos de 6 meses
- Entre 6 meses e 1 ano
- Entre 1 e 2 anos
- 2 ou mais anos

**Com que género se identifica?**

- Feminino
- Masculino
- Outro
- Prefiro não responder



**Qual a sua situação conjugal?**

- Solteiro(a)
- Casado(a) / União de facto
- Divorciado(a)
- Separado(a)
- Viúvo(a)
- Não respondo

**Qual o seu conselho de residência habitual?**

- Lisboa
- Porto
- Braga
- Outro
- Não respondo

**Indique o grau de instrução mais elevado que completou?**

- Nenhum
- Ensino Básico
- Ensino Secundário
- Licenciatura
- Mestrado
- Doutoramento
- Não respondo

**Qual a sua situação profissional?**

- Trabalhador(a) por conta de outrem
- Trabalhador(a) por conta própria
- Desempregado(a)
- Reformado(a)
- Estudante
- Trabalhador-estudante
- Não respondo

**Qual o rendimento líquido médio mensal do agregado familiar?**

- Inferior ou igual a 760€
- Entre 761€ e 1000€
- Entre 1001€ e 1500€
- Entre 1501€ e 2000€
- Entre 2001€ e 2500€
- Entre 2501€ e 3000€
- Superior a 3000€
- Não respondo

**Qual o número de pessoas do agregado familiar?**

**English Version:**

This survey was developed as part of a master's thesis and is intended to collect information exclusively for that purpose. The study aims to investigate the customer experience at the Onodera Aesthetic Clinic and is conducted by Julia Tavares (Julia\_Dorneles@iscte-iul.pt), whom you may contact if you have any questions or wish to share any comments.

If you are 18 years of age or older, your participation, which will be highly appreciated, consists of answering a questionnaire and may take about 10 minutes. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary: you can choose to participate or not participate.

If you choose to participate, you may stop participating at any time without having to provide any justification. In addition to being voluntary, participation is also anonymous and confidential. The data is intended solely for statistical analysis, and no response will be analysed or reported individually. At no point during the study do you need to identify yourself.

Completing the questionnaire assumes that you have understood and accepted the conditions of this study, consenting to participate.

**Introduction Block**

**Are you 18 years old or older? \***

- Yes
- No

**Have you visited an Onodera Aesthetic Clinic in the last 6 months? \***

- Yes
- No

**Which Onodera Clinic did you visit for your last appointment? \***

- Lisbon
- Porto
- Braga

**CX Block - Brand Experience**

Please indicate on a 7-point scale, where 1= "Strongly Disagree" and 7= "Strongly Agree," your degree of agreement with each of the following statements.

SCALE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Don't know / No answer
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera has a good reputation.								
I am confident in the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera's expertise.								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera gives independent advice (on which product/service will best suit my needs).								
I choose the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera not because of the price alone.								
The people who work at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera represent the COMPANY brand well.								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera's offerings have the best quality.								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera's offerings are superior.								

**CX Block -- Service Provider Experience**

Please indicate on a 7-point scale, where 1= "Strongly Disagree" and 7= "Strongly Agree," your degree of agreement with each of the following statements.

SCALE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Don't know / No answer
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera advises(d) me throughout the process.								
Dealing with the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera is easy.								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera keeps me informed.								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera demonstrates flexibility in dealing with me.								
At the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera I always deal with the same forms and/or same people.								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera's personnel relate to my wishes and concerns.								
The people I am dealing with at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera have good people skills.								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera delivers a good customer service.								
I have built a personal relationship with the people at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera.								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera's facilities are better designed to fulfill my needs than their competitors.								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera's offline facilities are designed to be as efficient as possible (for me).								

### CX Block – Post-Purchase Experience

Please indicate on a 7-point scale, where 1= "Strongly Disagree" and 7= "Strongly Agree," your degree of agreement with each of the following statements.

SCALE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Don't know / No answer
I choose the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera because they know me.								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera knows exactly what I want.								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera keeps me up-to-date about their products and latest developments								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera will look after me for a long time.								
The Aesthetic Clinic Onodera deal(t) well with me when things go(went) wrong.								
I am happy with the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera as my provider.								
Being a customer of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera gives me social approval.								

### Bloco - Perceived Value

Please indicate on a 7-point scale, where 1= "Strongly Disagree" and 7= "Strongly Agree," your degree of agreement with each of the following statements.

SCALE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Don't know / No answer
The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera have consistent quality.								
The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera are well made.								
The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera are one that I would enjoy.								
The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera would make me feel good.								
The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera offer value for money.								
The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera are a good for the price.								
The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera improve the way I am perceived.								
The services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera make a good impression on other people.								

### Block – Satisfaction

Please indicate on a 7-point scale, where 1= "Strongly Disagree" and 7= "Strongly Agree," your degree of agreement with each of the following statements.

SCALE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Don't know / No answer
My feelings towards the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera are very positive.								
I feel good about coming to the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera for my treatment.								
Overall I am satisfied with the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera and the service it provides.								
I feel satisfied that the results of my treatment at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera are the best that can be achieved.								
The extent to which my treatment has produced the best possible outcome at the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera is satisfying.								

**Block – Word-of-Mouth**

Please indicate on a 7-point scale, where 1= "Strongly Disagree" and 7= "Strongly Agree," your degree of agreement with each of the following statements.

SCALE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Don't know / No answer
If a friend was looking for an aesthetic clinic, I would recommend the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera.								
If I was helping my son, daughter, or other close relative make a decision on what aesthetic clinic to visit, I would recommend the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera.								
I mentioned to others that I use the services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera.								
I made sure that others know that I use the services of the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera.								
I spoke positively about the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera employee(s) to others.								
I recommended the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera to family members.								
I spoke positively of the the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera to others.								
I recommended the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera to acquaintances.								
I recommended the Aesthetic Clinic Onodera to close personal friends								

**Block - Sociodemographic**

**How old are you?**

**How long have you been a client at an Onodera Aesthetics Clinic in Portugal?**

- Less than 6 months
- Between 6 months and 1 year
- Between 1 and 2 years
- 2 or more years

**Which gender do you identify most with?**

- Female
- Male
- Other
- I prefer not to answer.

**What is your marital status?**

- Single
- Married / Common-law marriage.
- Divorced
- Separated
- Widowed
- I prefer not to answer.

**What is your region of residence?**

- Lisboa
- Porto
- Braga
- Other
- I prefer not to answer.

**What is your highest qualification?**

- None
- Primary education
- Secondary education
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate's degree
- I prefer not to answer.

**What is your current employment status?**

- Employee
- Self-employed
- Unemployed
- Retired
- Student
- Worker-student
- I prefer not to answer.

**Which group does your average net monthly household income fall under?**

- Less than or equal to €760
- Between 761€ and 1000€
- Between 1001€ and 1500€
- Between 1501€ and 2000€
- Between 2001€ and 2500€
- Between 2501€ and 3000€
- More than 3000€
- I prefer not to answer.

**How many people are currently living in your house?**



**Annex B –Test Results from Mediation Model 4**

```

*****
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
SATISF

Model Summary
  R      R-sq    MSE      F      df1      df2      p
,8493  ,7213  ,2947  121,6471  1,0000  47,0000  ,0000

Model
      coeff    se      t      p    LLCI    ULCI
constant ,1741  ,5680  ,3065  ,7606  -,9685  1,3167
EXQ      ,9690  ,0879  11,0294  ,0000  ,7922  1,1457

Standardized coefficients
      coeff
EXQ    ,8493
  
```

```

*****
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
PV

Model Summary
  R      R-sq    MSE      F      df1      df2      p
,8801  ,7746  ,1830  161,5428  1,0000  47,0000  ,0000

Model
      coeff    se      t      p    LLCI    ULCI
constant ,6220  ,4476  1,3898  ,1712  -,2784  1,5225
EXQ      ,8800  ,0692  12,7099  ,0000  ,7407  1,0193

Standardized coefficients
      coeff
EXQ    ,8801
  
```

\*\*\*\*\*  
 OUTCOME VARIABLE:  
 WOM

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
,8736	,7632	,4144	48,3468	3,0000	45,0000	,0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	-1,9998	,6891	-2,9022	,0057	-3,3876	-,6119
EXQ	,9605	,2325	4,1316	,0002	,4923	1,4287
SATISF	-,1808	,2042	-,8854	,3807	-,5921	,2305
PV	,5138	,2591	1,9829	,0535	-,0081	1,0357

Standardized coefficients

	coeff
EXQ	,6687
SATISF	-,1436
PV	,3577

However, considering a 90% Confidence Interval we can consider H3 validated.

\*\*\*\*\*  
 OUTCOME VARIABLE:  
 WOM

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
,8736	,7632	,4144	48,3468	3,0000	45,0000	,0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	-1,9998	,6891	-2,9022	,0057	-3,1570	-,8426
EXQ	,9605	,2325	4,1316	,0002	,5701	1,3509
PV	,5138	,2591	1,9829	,0535	,0786	,9490
SATISF	-,1808	,2042	-,8854	,3807	-,5237	,1621

Standardized coefficients

	coeff
EXQ	,6687
PV	,3577
SATISF	-,1436

\*\*\*\*\* TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y \*\*\*\*\*

Total effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	c_cs
1,2375	,1064	11,6357	,0000	1,0235	1,4514	,8616

Direct effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	c'_cs
,9605	,2325	4,1316	,0002	,4923	1,4287	,6687

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
TOTAL	,2770	,4120	-,4972	1,1446
SATISF	-,1752	,3470	-,8376	,5653
PV	,4521	,4275	-,3936	1,2974

Completely standardized indirect effect(s) of X on Y:

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
TOTAL	,1928	,2927	-,3652	,8070
SATISF	-,1220	,2510	-,6404	,3720
PV	,3148	,3131	-,2708	,9609