

TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS A WARM AND COMPETENT LEADERSHIP

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Annotation. Competence and warmth, the two essential dimensions of social judgment postulated by the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), are considered to be features of leadership. A hypothesis is posed that warm and competent leaders generate more committed and loyal employees. To test our hypotheses, a cross-sectional study was performed, examining the shop workers (N = 792) of a low-cost fashion retailer. The results show that warmth has almost three times more influence on employee experience than competence. Beyond salary and other perks, employees need to feel valued by their organisations and leaders via significant interactions —albeit not necessarily in person— and not only in terms of transactions. By failing to understand what their employees are fleeing from and how to connect with them, company leaders are putting their businesses at risk. Leaders must be humble and show interest in people; it is also necessary to implement strategies destined to develop employee talent.

Keywords: leader's perceived competence, leader's perceived warmth, organisational engagement, employee experience, stereotype content model.

JEL classification: M12, M54.

Introduction

Since Pine and Gilmore introduced the concept of Experience Economy (Pine, Gilmore, 1999) to demonstrate the importance of Customer Experience in the new economy, many studies have endorsed the idea that Customer Experience and Employee Experience are two sides of the same coin, suggesting that better employee experience directly impacts on improved customer experience (Pine, 2020). During the last decade, the field of marketing has changed its strategy from inside-out (what can we offer our customers?) to outside-in (the customer always stands at the centre of the organisation). This philosophy borrows from the Human Resources (HR) concept the idea that workers are central to the organisation, which looks for ways to make their experience as satisfactory as possible (Plaskoff, 2017). Thus, for

example, technology such as artificial intelligence is helping workers by doing some of their work so that they can be more productive, have access to more information, improve their own satisfaction, and better serve their customers. At the same time, this technology provides both workers and customers with an improved experience, e.g. at customer service centres (Snedeker, 2018). Employee experience depends on personal, social, and cultural factors that allow the employee to achieve well-being functionally (career development, salary, lifestyle), emotionally (positive feelings achieved at work), hedonically (happiness derived from the pleasure felt at work), and eudaemonically (self-realisation or the feeling of a job well done) (Batat, 2022). Therefore, it constitutes a holistic experience.

Employee experience is built upon an employee's relationship with the company, from the very first contact —prior to joining it— to the voluntary or involuntary dissociation from the enterprise, throughout the various moments of truth (Carlzon, Peters, 1987; Monroe, 2007; Plaskoff, 2017). A positive employee experience leads to higher levels of satisfaction, engagement, and recommendation. Hence the relevance of loyalty to the company and its prescription (eNPS, employee Net Promoter Score; Legerstee, 2013) as two key indicators of employee experience, the same as with customer experience (Maylett, Wride, 2017).

Despite the efforts of Human Resources Departments to improve employee conditions with attractive value proposals in terms of salary, social benefits, and facilities, among other aspects, these notions relate to a greater extent to employee satisfaction. When speaking about engagement, we are dealing with a more difficult concept, since it is a “complex nomological network which comprises feature, state, and constructions of behaviour” (Macey, Schneider, 2008). Thus, engagement goes beyond labour conditions and depends both on aspects of a relational nature and on the perception about the employer company, all of which determine the experience lived by employees —in turn influenced by their leaders' quality (Kaufman *et al.*, 2013; Haider *et al.*, 2022). This has been demonstrated, year after year, by the research and consultancy firm Gallup in its report *State of the Global Workplace*, according to which, 75% of resignations are due to reasons directly or indirectly involving direct managers or supervisors. Leaders may influence employees' degree of engagement, not only through an improvement of working conditions but also by inspiring, connecting, and empowering their subordinates (Schaufeli, 2015); and employee experience impacts on job satisfaction variables (Soni *et al.*, 2017). This justifies our decision to link Employee Experience, and its impact on loyalty, with Leadership Style, in terms of warmth and competence.

The literature devoted to different leadership styles is very extensive, with many studies focusing on showing how leadership theories influence employee retention. Without a doubt, leadership not only plays a determining role when it comes to employees' satisfaction, engagement, and productivity (Rad, Yarmohammadian, 2006) but is also clearly decisive in organisational performance (Chaithanapat *et al.*, 2022).

Despite leaders traditionally being powerful individuals, in terms of both physical strength and social influence (Van Vugt, 2006; Boehm, 1999; Price, Van Vugt, 2013; Von Rueden *et al.*, 2011), the 21st century is witnessing an evolution of Leadership, abandoning managerial styles mainly focused on tasks and productivity to embrace more relational styles that revolve around individuals and relationships (Dima *et al.*, 2023; Snyder *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, we can see the emergence of: Ethical Leadership (Brown, Treviño, 2006; Cheng *et al.*, 2014; Chughtai, 2014; Rothausen, 2023; Maity, Roy, Chakravarty, 2024), focused on respect for ethical beliefs and values as well as on the dignity and rights of others; Transformational Leadership, concentrated on how leaders influence their followers through their

charisma and their inspiration, how they intellectually stimulate their followers or how they (individually) care for each person —thousands of articles have been devoted to this leadership style in recent years (Greimel *et al.*, 2023; Bonsu, Twum-Danso, 2018; Vincent-Höper, Muser, Janneck, 2012; Bennouri *et al.*, 2024; Baluti *et al.*, 2024, Cao, Le, 2024.); Transactional Leadership (Moss, 2019), which establishes positive or negative incentives according to whether or not employees achieve the expected results; Entrepreneurial Leadership (Malibari Bajaba, 2022), where followers are encouraged to behave entrepreneurially, to be able to recognise and exploit opportunities; Innovative Leadership (Aman-Ullah *et al.*, 2022), aimed at promoting innovation through a climate of openness, trust, risk tolerance, and collaboration (Kassa, Getnet Mirete, 2022; Oeij *et al.*, 2017; Soleas, 2020); Inclusive Leadership (Moss, 2019), which recognises diversity among workers, seeks equality, and welcomes the exchange of ideas with no prejudice whatsoever against different perspectives; Authentic Leadership (Malik *et al.*, 2021), which entails being consistent with your own values and honest enough to gain followers' trust; Kind Leadership, an approach developed by Karyn Ross (2021) and concerned with how people are, what they like, what motivates and inspires them; and Responsible Leadership (Haider *et al.*; 2022), where leaders are not only expected to fulfil their obligations but are also held accountable for their actions. All of them share notions such as ethics, altruism, exemplariness, and integrity.

The effectiveness of the aforementioned leadership styles includes, among other benefits, a positive impact on work engagement and the incorporation of large doses of warmth in people management through the behaviour of leaders. By way of example, research has related a leader's perceived effectiveness to the opinions about their honesty, integrity, and reliability (Den Hartog *et al.*, 1999; Kirkpatrick, Locke, 1991; Kouzes, Posner, 1993; Posner, Schmidt, 1992). All the above provides us with theoretical reasons to include the features related to warmth within the evaluations of leaders, as with the assessment of other social relationships/categories.

Consequently, it does not suffice to simply give value to employees in order to improve their experience; the warmth and competence perceived through leadership also affects the way in which employees feel and behave in their day-to-day work. Simon Sinek (2019) referred to this in his book "The Infinite Game" using his Trust vs. Performance matrix, where high performance and low trust determine a toxic leadership. In addition, several academic studies analyse toxic leadership as being focused on results, but lacking warmth and trust (Reyhanoglu, Akin, 2022; Thoroughgood *et al.*, 2018; Cheang, Appelbaum, 2015a; Cheang, Appelbaum, 2015b).

Finding themselves right in the middle of a digital transformation, organisations face challenges in talent attraction and retention (Tagscherer, Carbon, 2023; Mikalauskienė *et al.*, 2023) as well as in worker engagement and performance (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2023), especially when it comes to knowledge workers. We live in the time of the Great Resignation, in which business owners in most sectors complain about staff shortages and about workers leaving their jobs in search of better conditions, dignity of labour and even to improve or maintain their physical and mental health (Montaudon-Tomas *et al.*, 2023; Tessema *et al.*, 2022). In this sense, it seems obvious that only a sustainable Employee Experience can retain workers and consolidate a profitable Customer Experience. In fact, in the same way as the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) impacts on Customer Experience (Kervyn *et al.*, 2012), we seek to demonstrate that it likewise applies to the experience of employees when they "judge" their direct managers in terms of recommendation and loyalty.

As will be seen below, the various behaviours which make up the Leadership Framework for Employee Experience (LFEE) are applied exactly like social perceptions. The added value of the SCM over others lies

in the fact that it integrates both dimensions (warmth and competence) and the two aspects of employee experience —their loyalty to the company and the extent to which they recommend their leader— and that it supplies a complete model based on the strengths of each dimension and a separate analysis of each type of behaviour.

This paper presents a well-established approach to social perception, the SCM, and explores its usefulness to predict how employees perceive, feel, and behave in their companies according to leadership. Therefore, the study aims to determine how leadership directly or indirectly affects the experience of employees and, consequently, their level of recommendation as well as their loyalty to the enterprise.

The SCM has been used in studies of various types, as we will see in the next section, to analyse political leaders, commercial brands, female workers, to assess companies' employer branding, etc. However, until now it has not been used to research managers and their influence on the employee experience; this is the gap we intend to cover. The novelty introduced by this proposal consists in its utilisation of the SCM as a widely proven social perception approach to create an LFEE —mainly focused on middle managers— based on the relationships that they have with their co-workers and their impact on employee experience. In short, correlating the impact of human social interaction relationships within the corporate world, through interactions between leaders and teams, for the purpose of detecting among leaders those behaviours and competences which improve employee experience, in terms of loyalty and recommendation. Such findings will prove useful to identify and approach the leadership model in companies.

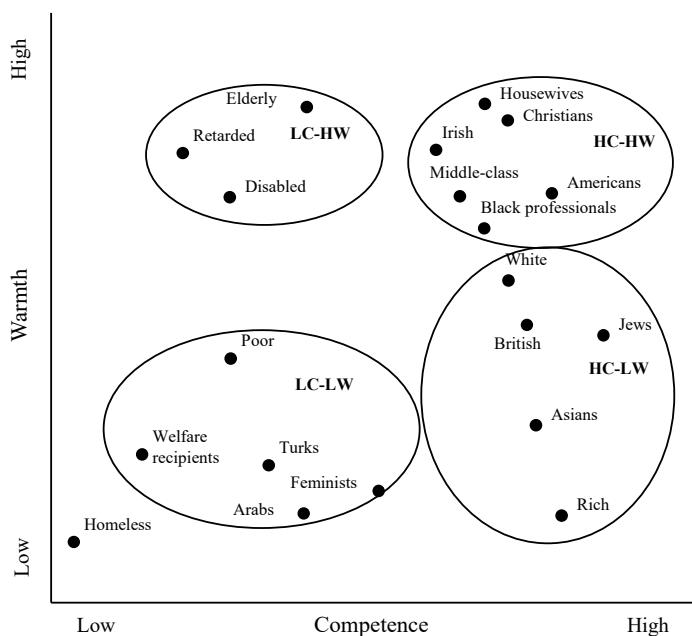
This study pursues the objective of investigating if the perception that employees have about their immediate supervisor, from the two fundamental dimensions of social judgement (SCM; Fiske *et al.*, 2002), is associated with their experience as employees. We also explore the hypothesis that a higher recommendation of the leader results in greater loyalty to the company.

This research focuses its empirical study on the low-cost fashion retail sector, analysing the feelings of store employees towards their leaders and their organisations. The European low-cost fashion industry nicely exemplifies a large market, supplying high-variety, high-margin, and short-lived products in a global context (Masson *et al.*, 2007). This sector is coming under intense scrutiny: from a manufacturing point of view, it has been accused of being environmentally unsustainable, maintaining difficult working conditions and even allowing child labour; and concerning store distribution, it comes under criticism for both low salaries and terrible working conditions (Fares *et al.*, 2024; Stringer *et al.*, 2022). Currently, the low-cost fashion retail industry is undergoing major challenges, such as the evident importance of e-commerce (Yu, Kim, 2019) or the incipient orientation towards the circular economy, in response to more sustainable consumption decisions (D'Adamo *et al.*, 2022).

In the rest of the article, we carry out a review of the literature on the SCM, which serves as a template for our LFEE, applied to leadership and employee experience indicators, after which the hypotheses of our model will be established. The subsequent empirical part of our work shows how the theory is implemented by means of a cross-sectional study, analysing the opinions that the employees of a low-cost fashion retailer have about their leaders. Our results and conclusions will derive therefrom.

1. The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) and its Applications

Over the last two decades, social psychologists (Asbrock, 2010; Caprariello, Cuddy, Fiske, 2009; Cuddy *et al.*, 2007; Cuddy *et al.*, 2009; Fiske *et al.*, 2002; Russell, Fiske, 2008) have proposed, tested, and validated a social perception framework known as the SCM that defines the way in which people see social groups according to two social perception dimensions—Warmth and Competence—and relies on the assumption that these two dimensions determine how individuals perceive the social world around them. The SCM shows that people carry out a quick assessment of the warmth and confidence dimensions to orient their decisions about interactions with other individuals and social groups. In a nutshell, the perception of warmth answers the question “What are your intentions towards me?” While people or human groups with positive and cooperative intentions are seen as warm, when they transmit intentions that are negative, competitive, or based on convenience, the perception about them becomes cold. The second question is: “Do you have the ability to fulfil your intentions?” If the answer is yes, the individual or social group in question will be perceived as competent; conversely, if one thinks that they are unlikely to fulfil them, those people will be considered incompetent. In other words, warmth comprises kindness, sincerity, collaboration, and trustworthiness, whereas competence includes efficiency, intelligence, meticulousness, and skill.



Source: Cuddy *et al.* (2007).

Figure 1. Competence and Warmth by Social Groups

In the first set of studies, Fiske *et al.* (2002) initially asked a group of interviewees to list “the types of people that, in their view, the current society classifies by segments”, and 23 of them were identified by at least 15% of interviewees. Then, these 23 groups were presented to different samples of interviewees (including middle-aged people and a selection of seniors) who had to assess each group according to several competence-based categories (competent, self-assured, capable, efficient, smart, skilful) and in relation to various features associated with warmth (kind, well-meaning, trustworthy, warm, caring, sincere). The main outcome of these studies was the provision of evidence that the representative social

groups spread across the space generated by the crossing of both dimensions. Within that two-dimension matrix, the various segments were more frequently placed in four groups, depending on the quadrants defined by warmth and competence, namely: warm and competent; warm and incompetent; cold and competent; and cold and incompetent.

During a subsequent research work which replicated and extended the one undertaken by Fiske *et al.* (2002) with a representative US sample, Cuddy *et al.* (2007) compiled the warmth and competence scores of 20 social groups. In the results, a cluster analysis revealed that these 20 segments were organised into four groups corresponding to four quadrants obtained by crossing the warmth and competence dimensions (*Figure 1*). One cluster contained the groups categorised as warm and competent, which Fiske *et al.* (2002) designated as the reference group (Americans, middle-class). A second cluster comprised those perceived as cold and incompetent, the most underprivileged segments (welfare recipients, poor people). The third included the groups seen as warm and incompetent, the paternalised segments (elderly people, the disabled). The remaining cluster contained the groups regarded as competent and cold, the envied ones (Asians, the rich). These findings consequently suggested not only that negative stereotypes may present significant conceptual differences but also that the stereotypes focused on segments that tend to be discriminated against are not always completely negative; actually, they often combine positive and negative concepts.

The difference between the warm-competent and cold-incompetent quadrants becomes obvious; a clear distinction regarding assessment separates both dimensions. Mainly, a totally favourable assessment of the groups characterises the warm-competent segment, as opposed to the fully unfavourable assessment which is typical of the cold-incompetent segment. An innovation of the model consists in identifying the two quadrants that reflect mixed impressions, namely: the paternalised and the envied.

In fact, the difference between the two mixed-impressions quadrants is more subtle because each of them contains positive and negative impressions which coexist; however, the two overall impressions differ to a large extent. For example, paternalised groups such as the elderly are despised due to their perception as well-meaning but unable to enact such intentions. On the contrary, the envied segments, among which stand out the rich, are believed not only to have negative intentions but also to possess the ability to reach their goals. Thus, the two fundamental dimensions of social perception provide the different impressions about these four quadrants with meaning. These ambivalent quadrants were later developed in their application to organisations and the perceptions about their leaders (Cuddy *et al.*, 2011).

Utilising the results supplied by surveys (Cuddy *et al.*, 2007; Fiske *et al.*, 2002) and experimental data (Caprariello *et al.*, 2009), the researchers identified specific intentions provoked by the four different combinations of warmth and competence. The groups perceived as warm and competent, among them the Middle class, Christians and Americans (for US participants), aroused admiration. The segments considered warm and incompetent, such as elderly people and the disabled, seem pitiful. Those perceived as cold and competent, including the rich, Asians and Jews, provoke envy. And finally, the groups discriminated against which are considered cold and incompetent, e.g. immigrants with no identity papers and social welfare recipients, generate contempt. Thus, the perception of a social segment through the SCM is not a mere combination of low or high warmth and competence; each combination has an emotional consequence, with a specific emotion being provoked for each of the four quadrants in the model.

By way of example, the groups located in the low-low quadrant (the homeless, drug addicts) arouse unease and contempt; people report that they cannot imagine one day in their life and that the likelihood of them interacting with these individuals is low (Harris, Fiske, 2009). Furthermore, the cold and competent groups, who cause envy, are more prone to provoke *Schadenfreude* when facing misfortunes (Cikara, Fiske, 2011). *Schadenfreude* is an emotion felt when one enjoys witnessing the problems of others. The same type of misfortune triggered a subjectively positive emotion (i.e. *Schadenfreude*) when it happened to a member of the group stereotypically perceived as cold and competent (for instance, investment bankers), but not when it was experienced by members of a group typically regarded as warm and competent, warm and incompetent, or cold and incompetent. These emotional reactions associated with the different SCM quadrants find support in research works related to the evaluation of leaders and organisational behaviour (Cuddy *et al.*, 2011).

The SCM has been utilised in studies of diverse kinds, from animals to commercial brands, and especially, the two fundamental dimensions provide a demonstrated social perception model which takes account of different cultures and, most importantly for our current research, this model demonstrably serves a variety of corporate goals. As shown by Cuddy, Glick and Beninger (2011), it is a useful and straightforward method to map the corporate ecosystem, irrespective of what perspective is being analysed: culture, leadership, engagement from the perception of an employee, as an individual, to that of large multinationals, in their capacity as a social group.

It can also focus on a specific segment and identify the content of the stereotype linked to it. For instance, Cuddy *et al.* (2004) used the two dimensions of warmth and competence to evidence the stereotypes held about female workers and how they vary depending on their family situation. In accordance with the SCM, female professionals with children were seen not only as warmer rather than competent but also as warmer and less competent than their childless counterparts, and less likely to be hired, promoted, or trained than the latter. Having children did not cause a harmful effect on the perception of male professionals.

From the employees' point of view, the variables of warmth and competence have proved helpful to assess the company's employer branding and the extent to which it affects their satisfaction and engagement (Davies *et al.*, 2018). The outcomes of the different hypotheses under examination show that warmth is more influential, both in terms of satisfaction and regarding engagement, compared to competence. Previous works of Davies *et al.* (2002) and others framed within the SCM thus confirm that warmth has a stronger impact than competence on individuals (Cuddy *et al.*, 2008). Despite the undeniable and demonstrated importance of both dimensions to predict satisfaction and engagement, evidence was obtained that warmth outplays competence in terms of relevance, a view that also seems compatible with the work on corporate image, where the similar dimension labelled as "Kindness" forecasts a higher correlation with employee satisfaction (Davies *et al.*, 2002).

Applied to leadership, an evaluation of the features of political candidates was carried out according to warmth and competence (Laustsen *et al.*, 2017), showing that warmth is more influential than competence, as shown by social psychology (Brambilla *et al.*, 2011; Goodwin *et al.*, 2014; Wojciszke, 2005). This finding contrasts with the literature devoted to political sciences when it comes to predicting both the assessment of voters and their voting intention. As for the perceptions of leaders inside organisations, the existing stereotypes about warmth and competence were analysed in accordance with their race/ethnic group and gender, additionally paying attention to how such variables affect their perception as far as effectiveness and leadership are concerned (Lee, 2021). Regarding the assessment

of leadership in organisations, Capozza *et al.*, (2017) examined the application of the attribution of warmth and competence within the relationships of managers with their employees in several works, corroborating the link of both perceptions with organisational engagement (Falvo *et al.*, 2016), as well as with well-being and organisational effectiveness, in terms of lesser burnout, lower propensity to turnover and more frequent prosocial behaviours through the mediation of affective organisational engagement (Capozza *et al.*, 2017). Both studies (Capozza *et al.*, 2017; Falvo *et al.*, 2016) found that the perceptions of warmth and competence referred to the leader highly correlate with positive organisational performances.

Attention has recently been paid to how the evaluation of political leaders influences the behaviours and behavioural intentions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating in 35 countries that, the higher the score for warmth and competence of any political leader, the more participants chose to support those leaders and the less they planned to oppose them (Friehs *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the evaluations of high warmth and competence for politicians resulted in pandemic-related behaviours aligned with the leader's prototypical position on that issue.

Finally, the research triggered by the SCM provided findings which can be fruitfully implemented within the field of leadership and, as it is our purpose to show in this study, as a means to achieve an improved employee experience.

2. Leadership Framework for Employee Experience (LFEE)

Based on the SCM (Fiske *et al.*, 1999, 2002), this document presents and tests the LFEE as an employee experience promoter in terms of leader recommendation and loyalty to the company. An increasingly high number of studies have shown the impact that the role of the leader has on the performance of teams and their engagement to enterprises (Schaufeli, 2015; Cuddy *et al.*, 2011; Cuddy *et al.*, 2013; Falvo *et al.*, 2016; Capozza *et al.*, 2017; Malik *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, several leadership styles have been related to the work engagement of employees in longitudinal studies (Biggs *et al.*, 2014; Chughtai *et al.*, 2014; Fletcher, 2016; Li, Liao, 2014; Mehmood *et al.*, 2016).

Employees arguably exploit both social judgment dimensions in their relationship with their managers, exactly as they do in their everyday lives with other people. These two dimensions –warmth and competence– albeit labelled in various ways, boast a rich history in the theory and research about the perception of individuals and groups (Asch, 1946). In the field of organisational leadership, Bales (1950) distinguished socio-emotional from task-oriented leadership, and Stogdill (1974) differentiated “consideration” behaviours, aimed at improving group members’ well-being, and “structure” behaviours, conceived to give orders and define performance standards. Such conclusions were subsequently confirmed by two meta-analytic studies which showed the positive influence of both consideration and structure behaviours on the main aspects of leadership, including labour satisfaction of employees, appreciation of the leader, and team performance (DeRue *et al.*, 2011; Judge *et al.*, 2004).

Along these lines, we claim that the understanding of how employees perceive their leaders can benefit from the social perception models developed within social psychology and, more specifically, from the SCM (Fiske *et al.*, 2002; Fiske *et al.*, 2007), according to which, warmth is determined by the perceived intentions of a social group/person, whereas competence relates to the ability to fulfil such intentions. Expressed differently, for Peeters (2001), warmth is defined by behaviours that favour others, as opposed to competence, which revolves around self-interest.

2.1 Leadership in Terms of Warmth and Competence

The paper entitled *Perceptions of Women in Authority Positions: The Role of Warmth and Competence* (Chalmer, 2021) links warmth with the following qualities: considerate, kind, polite, affectionate, nice, accessible, fair, obliging, and honest; in turn, competence is linked to qualities such as: quick, ready, able, predictable, flexible, and committed. For companies using a performance-based reward system, the leader's competence and warmth can largely determine how the system is evaluated; thus Kong *et al.* (2023) concluded that when the leader is highly competent, this type of reward system often becomes a challenge, which implies greater worker participation and improved performances; conversely, a low level of warmth from the leader results in the system being seen as a threat, which leads to reticence among workers and poorer performances.

When analysing the leadership of political candidates by taking their personality features as a reference, Lausten and Bor (2017) described warmth using attributes such as trustworthiness, morality, friendliness, kindness, and sincerity; competence was associated with knowledge, intelligence, trust, skill, foresight, and efficiency. Competence and warmth as features of political leaders have been addressed in various studies. For example, Giacomein *et al.* (2021) used an experiment to analyse the warmth of political leaders' facial features and how it could influence their characterisation as dictators or democratic leaders. Since democracies value justice, openness, and transparency, voters want political leaders with faces that transmit warmth through trust and sympathy. Conversely, dictatorships operate through the subordination of a whole society based on fear and intimidation. Dictators looking hard and cold are more suitable for this government style. A dictator with a warm image might not be taken seriously. Leaders must be increasingly capable of attracting voters, especially in times of political disaffection, when voter absenteeism grows. The examination performed by Ferreira Da Silva and Costa (2019) of the way in which politicians' competence and warmth determine the potential interest of voters showed that, although both characteristics matter to attract votes, warmth does so to a greater extent; therefore, demonstrations of empathy and morality by leaders are necessary to gain voter engagement. Along the same lines, the study of Lausten and Bor (2017), referring to political leaders, revealed that warmth, along with compassion and tenderness, are more important for political candidates than competence or intelligence. This could explain the rise of populism, in which individuals who, despite being incompetent, are highly engaged with the electorate, ultimately succeed in achieving their political aspirations.

Gender has also been analysed in relation to the SCM, women being defined as warmer but less competent than men. This poses a problem for female leadership, insofar as leadership is more often associated with competence rather than warmth (Cuddy *et al.*, 2011). Ni and Hou (2017) concluded that, when a male leader negatively assesses female employees as incompetent or lacking warmth, they tend to believe that the evaluation is negative because men are more demanding, less warm, and more competent as managers, and they consequently restrict women's professional aspirations.

Gender influences how subordinates see their leaders too (Andreu *et al.*, 2024). Mroz *et al.* (2018) related leadership types to the leader's perceived warmth and competence. In the case of participative leadership, the leader considers the pros and cons suggested by different participants at a meeting before making a decision. In contrast, with autocratic leadership, the leader does not feel obliged to consider subordinates' views when making decisions. However, according to Mroz *et al.* (2018), subordinates perceive participative leaders as both more competent and warmer than autocratic ones. Leaders should bear this in mind, since being seen as more competent and warmer could improve the motivation and engagement of their employees. Moreover, male employees give autocratic leaders

higher scores for warmth than their female counterparts. The scores for participative leaders are the same in both groups, though.

Both Transformational Leadership and Social Exchange Theory closely relate to leaders' warmth and competence, as well as to their relationships with employees. Transformational leadership inspires followers to perform above expectations; this type of leadership is a social resource that becomes particularly necessary at stressful moments. Furthermore, it positively influences not only the organisation's results but also the enterprise's commitment, which is why it is key to monitor staff turnover (Chandra *et al.*, 2023). The transformational leader is a charismatic and stimulating one who shows consideration towards followers; in addition to impacting on the innovative behaviours of workers, it connects with the role of benevolence (similar to warmth), which serves as a flexible form of monitorisation; it fosters communication, allows for inclusiveness, and supports employees' creative ideas (Odugbesan *et al.*, 2023; Bennouri *et al.*, 2024).

It must be added to the above that Social Exchange Theory relies on the principle of cost and benefit of individual behaviour, according to which, people try to maximise their benefits during the exchange process. Social exchange relationships are based on close personal ties, on obligations which are far more open than those envisaged in a contract. Therefore, following this approach, the relationships between leader and employees consist in an exchange where the latter will be regarded as belonging to the former's internal group, when they share high-quality exchanges and receive more support, as well as resources, from the leader. Social exchange characteristically involves mutual assessment, trust, and loyalty. It does not rest on a signed contract; instead, trust becomes of paramount importance for organisational coordination and monitoring (Lin *et al.*, 2023). When organisations look after their employees and treat them as valuable group members, social exchanges take place which promote trust-based relationships between both parties (Mehmood *et al.*, 2023). Thus, unless leaders offer something (in terms of competence or warmth), it will be difficult for them to achieve employees' engagement and loyalty to the enterprise.

Lastly, Capozza *et al.* (2016), who measured leadership in terms of warmth and competence, and their impact on collaborators and organisations, concluded that a competent leader supplies knowledge and skills which allow employees to feel volitional and responsible for their job (autonomous), as well as capable of interacting with the working environment effectively. As for warmth, the impression that leaders offer solidarity and availability should satisfy their co-workers' need to feel connected and accepted by others.

This study conceptualises warmth and competence as features that employees utilise to assess their immediate superior. The combination of both perceptions promotes trust as opposed to fear, thus creating safe work environments (Meyer, 2014). We use these two dimensions because they embody a simple, proven, and actionable definition of how employees see their leader.

2.2 Employee Experience in terms of Recommendation and Loyalty

The Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS) index was created in 2003 from its customer related equivalent: Net Promoter Score. A large number of companies have employed it as a starting point to assess and improve employee experience. Examples include the employee satisfaction surveys carried out by JetBlue (crewmember promoter score), Vodafone, Symantec, and many others, not to measure their customers' experience, but rather that of their employees (Davenport *et al.*, 2010) and as a stepping stone to assess and enhance that experience (Amores Gracia *et al.*, 2017).

eNPS is measured via a single question: “How likely are you to recommend this company to a friend or relative as a place to work?”, very often complemented with others such as “what are the chances of you recommending the company’s products or services to a friend?” or “what is the likelihood of you recommending a partner to work for your boss?”. This last one was chosen for our study, since the Global Employee Engagement Index™ supplies evidence that committed employees are more prone to recommend their employer. eNPS can be a particularly effective method to deal with survey results because, in addition to being more familiar to human resources professionals, it is easier to interpret in comparison to average scores and provides as much or even more predictive validity than other methods (Brown, 2020). eNPS additionally makes it possible to align employee experience and customer experience.

Warmth and Recommendation

When it comes to warmth, the impression that leaders can offer solidarity and accessibility meets their collaborators’ need to feel connected and accepted by others (Baumeister, Leary, 1995). In other words, it exerts a favourable, critical influence on generating admiration towards the leader (Cuddy *et al.*, 2007; Fiske *et al.*, 2002; Caprariello *et al.*, 2009). Hence our wish to show its direct impact on the recommendation of a leader, as an employee experience indicator. This first hypothesis makes sense because leaders are the representatives of a company’s culture; they influence the work engagement of employees, and even act as a determining factor for organisational effectiveness. Hence Hypothesis 1 establishes:

H1: The warmth perceived in leaders directly correlates with their likelihood of being recommended.

Competence and Recommendation

Nevertheless, warmth alone would lead us to the SCM’s quadrant of paternalised groups that provoke pity, which is why it does not suffice on its own. The competence of leaders receives the most attention when measuring their performance in companies, and it becomes necessary to legitimise their hierarchy. In fact, the mere role suffices to take competence for granted. Nonetheless, from the point of view of employees, the perception of competence in their immediate supervisor relates to a feeling of independence and effectiveness in their performance. A competent supervisor is one who provides knowledge and skills, allows employees to feel engaged and responsible for their work (autonomous), as well as capable of interacting effectively with the work environment (competent) (Capozza *et al.*, 2016). These perceptions lead workers to judge the leader as more or less competent, and it is our intention to show their positive impact on the recommendation of a leader. As reflected in Hypothesis 2, attention must likewise be paid to the importance or weight of this variable in the recommendation, with respect to warmth, since according to the SCM, an excess of competence is associated with envied groups and arouses feelings of distrust, which would have a negative impact on leader recommendation.

In view of the above, a balance between warmth and competence is therefore seen as critical to generate recommendations. Therein lies the need for Hypothesis 2, which establishes a positive correlation between competence and leader recommendation.

H2: The competence perceived in leaders directly correlates with their likelihood of being recommended.

Recommendation and Loyalty

Engagement impacts many of the characteristics related to work, among them loyalty or the intention to stay in the business (Porter *et al.*, 1974; Mathieu, Zajac 1990; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Chew, Chan 2008), absenteeism (Porter *et al.*, 1974, Angle, Perry 1981; Meyer *et al.*, 2002), and satisfaction (Yousef, 2000; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Chughtai, Zafar, 2006).

Employee loyalty is regarded as an individual's capacity to stay in the same enterprise for a long period. However, the loyalty of employees cannot be measured simply by the time they work for the enterprise; it must contemplate aspects such as their interest to continue in the organisation (Solomon, 1992) or their conviction that working for the company is the best option for them (Athar Waqas *et al.*, 2014).

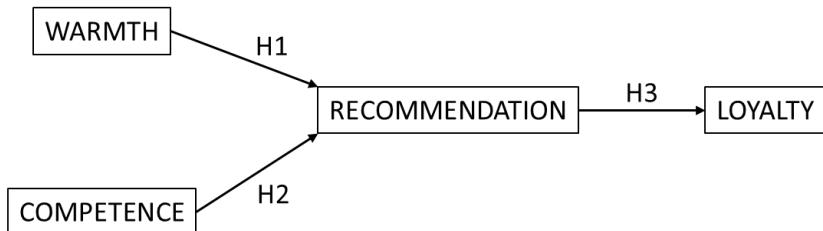
More precisely, loyalty correlates with one of the three psychological factors that make up employees' work engagement according to Porter *et al.* (1974), namely: (1) the acceptance of organisational goals and values (recognition); (2) the predisposition of employees to make significant efforts for the company (finalisation); and (3), a strong desire to stay in the business (faith).

Reichheld (2003) saw loyalty as the willingness of an employee who invests or makes sacrifices for the organisation to strengthen a relationship. Solomon (1992) also described employee loyalty as the interest to stay in touch with the organisation. With the support of the above-mentioned definitions and the research undertaken by Athar Waqas *et al.* (2014), we can state that employees are loyal to their company when they show engagement and believe that working for that organisation represents the best option for them.

Just as marketing uses NPS and customer loyalty to measure Customer Experience, we chose the following two as Employee Experience indicators: eNPS applied to the leader, since it is an index created from its customer related equivalent; Net Promoter Score (Reichheld, 2003); and loyalty, insofar as it stands out as one of the work engagement factors most frequently used in research studies (Yousef, 2000). The loyalty of employees largely depends on their experience based on the relationship with their immediate superior (Gallup, 2013). That is why, through the recommendation of the leader, the model seeks to determine the impact that it has on the employee's intention to stay in the company: loyalty. Hence Hypothesis 3.

H3: The recommendation of their leader directly correlates with employees' loyalty to their company.

Our model aims to demonstrate that, when employees feel that their immediate superiors are warm and competent, they respond with a higher recommendation of the leader and, accordingly, with greater loyalty to the company (Blau, 1964). In our view, a leadership that bases relationships with collaborators on warmth and competence improves the experience of employees and, consequently, generates the recommendation and loyalty of the latter towards the company. This approach enables us to explore how social perception theories and processes can predict co-workers' recommendation and loyalty to a company through its leaders and thus impact on employee experience indicators. Both variables—recommendation and loyalty—shape the Employee Experience indicators selected for this study. Figure 2 depicts the models that we propose to demonstrate LFEE, which this work addresses, via the 3 posed hypotheses.



Source: created by the authors.

Figure 2. Proposed Model

This study will help to understand the link between the perception about warmth and competence of leaders and their recommendation, as well as the relationship between recommendation and employee loyalty. Thus, as argued in previous sections, we can evaluate in terms of warmth and competence how recommendation (eNPS) serves as a valid indicator of employee experience and consequently how loyalty or permanence in the job results from the experience of an employee facilitated by their direct line manager. A cross-sectional study was performed to test the model shown in Figure 2, examining the employees of a low-cost fashion retailer nationwide.

3. Methodological Approach

3.1 Participants and Procedure

To define behaviours associated with the variables of warmth and competence among leaders for the purpose of shaping the questionnaire, we used a mixed-method approach that comprises: firstly, a qualitative study with a semi-structured interview; and secondly, a survey. They were both carried out in the context of a European low-cost fashion retailer.

Firstly, the qualitative type of research focuses on supplying descriptive information on individuals, situations, and pieces of evidence (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). Descriptive research also tends to answer the questions of *who*, *when*, *where*, and *how*, and uses experiments and interviews, along with archive material, as investigation tools (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). The aim sought with this initial research consists in identifying six behaviours for warmth, centred on measuring humility, proximity, respect, and honesty; and another six for competence, related to experience, talent development, commitment to strategy, and orientation towards innovation, based on which, the leader's performance can be assessed. The semi-structured interview served as a research tool to achieve this aim. Data compilation was carried out with ten employees who work for the company (2 HR professionals, 3 shop managers and 5 employees). The interviews were held face to face in the presence of the first author of this paper, seeking to verify the representativeness of the sample, encouraging participants to answer, and offering the possibility to obtain clarifications and explanations. Each interview lasted 1 hour and all ten participants knew about the topic under study beforehand.

This information was used to draft the survey questions for the purpose of assessing the behaviours to be observed according to the literature examined (Durante, 2008; Fiske *et al.*, 2002). Their formulation took into account the idea that each one of the competence attributes had to endow employees with "human capital" and that those related to warmth needed to provide collaborators with "social capital", following the theory developed by Yoon and Lawler (2006). A combination of professional advice (Skarlicki, Folger, 1997) and literature review (Sireci, 1998) was recommended in previous works to ensure content validity throughout the preliminary phases of empirical research (Bobko *et al.*, 2007; Qureshi *et al.*, 2023).

Secondly, the final questionnaire was sent in the first quarter of 2022, via online survey to 1,000 shop employees of the low-cost fashion retailer (located in Spain) who had to evaluate their direct supervisors. 792 of them answered the survey, which represents a response rate of 79.2% and a sampling error of 1.59%, with a confidence interval of 95% ($p=q$). The vast majority of participants were women (85%) (with 12% men and 3% who preferred not to say), between 25 and 34 years of age (53%) (18% of them 18-to-24-year-olds, 23% between 35 and 44 years old, and 6% who were older than 45). 60% had worked less than 4 years in the company (23% between 5 and 10 years, and 17% over 11). They were distributed nationwide in 55 shops; 18 gave us fewer than 10 answers, 31 of them between 11 and 20, and 6 more than 21. They were all informed that their responses would be treated in a completely anonymous way.

3.2 Measurements of Variables

As for the questionnaire's structure, we divided it into three parts, following the advice given in the initial interviews. In the first part, the interviewee assesses leader competence behaviours. The second part focuses on the evaluation of leader warmth behaviours. And finally, the third part evaluates the experience of employees based on their intentions to recommend the leader and their loyalty to the company.

Table 1. Measurements of Variables

References	Variables	Question	Code
Durante (2008)	Warmth	She/he is accessible to listen and attend to the needs, doubts, and opinions of the people in her/his team.	CER
		She/he humbly admits her/his possible mistakes.	HUM
		She/he takes a real interest in those who make up her/his team, not only at a professional level.	INT
		She/he trusts her/his team to perform their tasks and responsibilities autonomously.	TRU
		She/he mediates in conflicts that may arise, always seeking the fairest and most equitable solution.	JUS
		She/he recognises her/his team's work and achievements.	REC
Durante (2008), Fiske <i>et al.</i> (2002)	Competence	She/he anticipates situations and foresees possible consequences and outcomes.	VIS
		She/he defines the strategy of her/his area and makes decisions contemplating the company's mission, vision, and values.	STR
		She/he meets objectives and assumes responsibilities on her/his own initiative.	OBJ
		She/he shares her/his experience and knowledge with her/his team.	EXP
		She/he detects her/his team's development needs and helps them to achieve their personal and professional goals.	TAL
		She/he contributes to achieving better results by means of specific and different actions.	ACT

Table 1 (continuation). Measurements of Variables

References	Variables	Question	Code
Porter <i>et al.</i> (1974)	Loyalty	What is the likelihood of you deciding to stay with this organisation during the next 12 months?	CONS 1
Reichheld (2003)	Recommendation	Should you be asked by a friend, how likely are you to recommend your leader as a desirable person to work with?	CONS 2

Source: created by the authors.

Table 1 lists the questions used in the surveys to measure the variables.

Warmth and Competence

In accordance with the conceptual model, the survey included 12 leader behaviours and 6 main measurements for each construct. The answers were supplied on a Likert-type scale between 1 (does not describe it at all) and 7 (describes it extremely well), as a tool to measure the effect of independent variables on the dependent variable.

Warmth. *Perceived leader warmth* was assessed according to the following six features: nice, friendly, kind, upright, sociable, and warm—partly taken from Durante (2008).

Competence. *Perceived leader competence* took these six features into account: (Durante, 2008; Fiske *et al.*, 2002): capable, competent, efficient, intelligent, self-assured, and skilful.

Employee Experience

Finally, the behaviour intention on which Employee Experience relies, assessed in terms of loyalty and recommendation, was measured with a single question each (Table 1):

Loyalty. The first, referring to the likelihood of choosing to stay in this organisation during the next 12 months, was measured with a scale ranging from 1 (I will definitely not choose to stay) to 7 (I will definitely choose to stay). The intention to continue is one of the three psychological factors (alongside the acceptance of organisational goals and values, as well as the employees' predisposition to make significant efforts for the enterprise) which characterise work engagement according to Porter *et al.* (1974).

Recommendation. The second—"how likely are you to recommend your leader to your colleagues and friends as a desirable person to work with?"—was measured taking Reichheld (2003) as a reference, using a scale from 1 (I would definitely not recommend her/him) to 7 (I would definitely recommend her/him).

3.3 Data Analysis Method

After having performed the descriptive analysis of the sample and explained the procedure to obtain data for the study, we proceed by examining the proposed model. Data analysis was undertaken using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) technique (Calvo-Mora *et al.*, 2020) to estimate the Structural Equations Model (SEM). This data analysis procedure relies on variances to carry out the structural model.

The variance-based-structural-equations method makes it possible to estimate the proposed measurement model, taking into account the dependent and independent variables (Hilkenmeier *et al.*, 2021), and additionally allows us to statistically verify the hypotheses underlying the study model.

(Martínez-Navalon *et al.*, 2019). It likewise offers the possibility to obtain the size of the indirect and direct effects on the relationship between variables (Del-Castillo-Feito *et al.*, 2020). Its use is also common when analysing compound models, allowing us to both estimate latent variables and measure the structural model (Hair *et al.*, 2018). Such models may include reflexive as well as formative variables, since PLS-SEM can not only perform analyses with both in the same model (Gelashvili *et al.*, 2021) but also decide on whether or not to impose the direction and sign of the hypotheses established in the model (Hair *et al.*, 2011).

In addition to being an excellent option to carry out analytical work in social science studies (Cachón-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2021), this methodology finds support in research works published in areas such as economics, sociology, and business, to mention but three (Schnelbächer, Heidenreich, 2020). This not only demonstrates the exponential increase in the use of PLS-SEM in research papers but also its introduction as one of the most important methods of analysis in books devoted to statistical analysis (Cepeda-Carrión *et al.*, 2022). Concerning innovative studies, Hair *et al.* (2019) advocated the utilisation of PLS-SEM, since this sort of examination allows for a more sensitive study of these experimental relationships. Sarstedt *et al.* (2020) pointed out that the requirements for PLS-SEM are currently becoming increasingly complex and rigorous, thus confirming the key importance of the methods of analysis implemented within this approach, and demonstrating their robustness to an even greater extent. What is more, PLS stands out for being one of the analytical procedures most often used in social science studies (Martínez-Navalon *et al.*, 2020; Reinartz *et al.*, 2009).

In order to examine this study, we used the software SmartPLS, of proven reliability and very frequently applied in most of the works that implement the PLS-SEM methodology (Stolze, Sailer, 2022).

4. Results

4.1 Goodness of Fit

We can firstly verify goodness of fit. Goodness of fit indicates that the empirical matrix and the correlation matrix of the model do not differ significantly and, therefore, the data do not contain more information than the model (Henseler *et al.*, 2016).

Table 2. Goodness of Fit

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.024	0.026
NFI	0.972	0.971

Source: own calculations.

The model proposed has a good fit, as can be seen in *Table 2*. The evaluation of the Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) offers a satisfactory score of 0.024, below the 0.08 suggested by Hu and Bentler (1998) as a goodness of fit measure. Finally, the Normalised Fit Index (NFI) (Bentler, Bonett, 1980) measures the proportional reduction in the fit function when one moves from the null model to the proposed one. The range of variation of this index lies between 0 and 1, values exceeding 0.90—as in our case—being advisable; therefore, the results allow us to state that the model has an overall good fit.

4.2 Measurement Model

All the compounds in our model are estimated in mode B (formative); that is why we can proceed to examine the potential multicollinearity so as to ensure that the variables are correctly measured. We

therefore calculate VIF (Variance Inflation Index), our findings showing it to be below 5 in every case, which in turn illustrates the non-existence of multicollinearity (Hair *et al.*, 2011). Only one indicator did not fit within the suggested model (REC: Recognition) due to its high level of multicollinearity and was consequently removed from the study.

Construct validity analysis takes as its reference the weights of indicators, most of which—as seen in *Table 3*—are significant (Petter *et al.*, 2007) and accordingly provide evidence of construct validity. Finally, the loadings of indicators serve to examine Reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2009); all of them exceed 0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2014), being likewise statistically significant with $p < .001$, which ensures indicator reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2012). We thus validated the resulting measurement model, in accordance with the data supplied in *Table 3*.

Table 3. Multicollinearity, Weights, and Loadings

Variables		VIF	Weights	Loadings	P Value Weights	P Value Loadings
Warmth	CER	3.068	0.095	0.844	0.083	.000
	HUM	3.703	0.377	0.937	0.000	.000
	INT	3.880	0.228	0.911	0.000	.000
	TRU	2.693	0.197	0.847	0.002	.000
	JUS	3.414	0.214	0.897	0.000	.000
Competence	VIS	3.252	0.152	0.869	0.020	.000
	STR	3.318	0.055	0.825	0.417	.000
	OBJ	3.767	0.124	0.863	0.090	.000
	EXP	3.224	0.128	0.867	0.036	.000
	TAL	3.617	0.402	0.939	0.000	.000
Employee Experience	ACT	3.832	0.251	0.905	0.001	.000
	CONS1	1.000	1.000	1		.000
	CONS2	1.000	1.000	1		.000

Source: own calculations.

The examination of the indicators with the highest weight reveals that, when it comes to warmth, they are HUM (referring to “She/He admits her/his possible mistakes humbly”) and INT (which corresponds to “She/He has a real interest in the people who make up her/his team and not only at a professional level”). As far as competence is concerned, TAL (corresponding to “She/He detects the team’s development needs and helps them to reach their personal and professional goals”) exhibits the most weight, followed by ACT (“She/He contributes with specific and different actions to achieve better results”).

4.3 Structural Model Analysis

VIF values below 5 are accepted in structural analysis—a requirement fulfilled in this model. All the path coefficients of the model (B) are positive. The bootstrapping technique was implemented, with 5,000 replacements to calculate the t statistic, which measures path coefficient significance (*Table 4*).

R^2 scores exceed 0.1 and lie within the 0-1 range; following the criterion established by Falk and Miller (1992) and showing the quality of this model’s results. Furthermore, the R^2 for Recommendation is very high, which means that leaders’ competence and warmth influence to a highly decisive extent their chances of being recommended.

The statistic F^2 , designed by Cohen (2013), serves to assess effect size, or the degree to which an exogenous construct helps to explain an endogenous one. We can see that the hypothesis on the relationship between Warmth and Competence has a medium F^2 —following Cohen's terminology—since it is lower than .35. Along these same lines, the link between competence and recommendation has a small effect, insofar as the score is below .15. And lastly, the relationship between recommendation and loyalty has a big effect, exceeding .35.

Table 4. Structural Model

	VIF	B	t (Pvalue)	R ²	F ²	Hypotheses
Warmth	4.911					
Competence	4.911					
Recommendation	1			0.714		
Loyalty	1			0.269		
Warmth → Recommendation		.642	10.9(.000)		.294	Yes
Competence → Recommendation		.221	3.7(.000)		.035	Yes
Recommendation → Loyalty		.519	14.4(.000)		.369	Yes

Source: own calculations.

We obtained confirmation that the 3 formulated hypotheses are fulfilled. This means that Warmth and Competence contribute to the employee's Recommendation with respect to his or her employer, and in turn that Recommendation implies Loyalty of the employee towards the company. Furthermore, it is necessary to highlight the importance of Warmth, since it influences employee Recommendation three times as much as Competence.

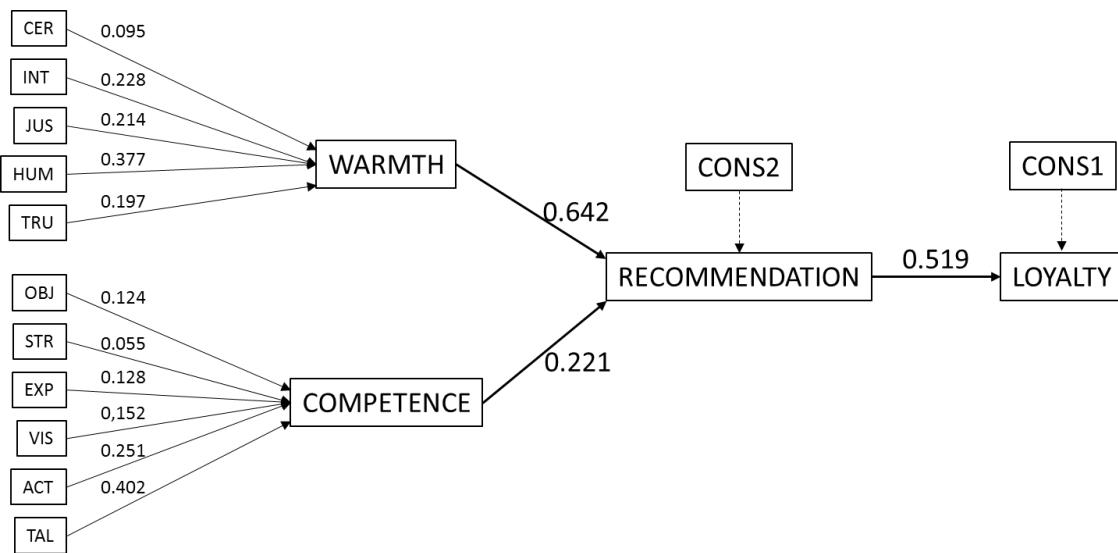
4.4 Predictive Capacity of the Model

Table 5 shows the model's ability to generate predictions about new observations in the future. We calculated it using the PLS predict algorithm (Shmueli *et al.*, 2016). Predictive relevance (Q^2) will enable us to know the model's predictive power. Both loyalty and recommendation show a high predictive relevance, that of recommendations being higher.

Table 5. Predictive relevance (Q^2)

	SSO	SSE	Q^2 (=1-SSE/SSO)
Warmth	3960	3960	
Competence	4752	4752	
Loyalty	792	581.724	0.265
Recommendation	792	238.93	0.698

Source: own calculations.



Source: own calculations.

Figure 3. Structural Model Results

In the light of the results, we can not only determine the importance of leadership in the employee's experience but also establish a model for relationships inside companies based on warmth and competence that is able to consolidate a more humane management culture (Figure 3).

5. Discussion

The opinion of employees about their managers supports our LFEE. Warmer and more competent leaders are recommended to a greater extent and achieve more loyal employees. Therefore, we have shown that perceptions of warmth (1) and competence (2) serve as positive predictors of recommendation, thus fulfilling Hypotheses 1 and 2. In turn, we have demonstrated that recommendation of their leader directly correlates with employees' loyalty to their company, thus also accomplishing Hypothesis 3. This acquires special relevance because it shows an aggregate value of LFEE to understand and influence the employee's behaviour. Since each dimension has significant predictive power, improvements in the warmth and competence behaviours of leaders, especially those related to warmth, makes it possible to impact on the behaviour of employees, enhancing employee experience indicators in the form of recommendation and loyalty.

The results obtained reinforce our LFEE, with its central statement that leaders strongly influence employee experience and, therefore, that their perceived warmth and competence are important dimensions underlying the recommendation of a leader and the loyalty to a company.

Consequently, the perception of a leader as warm and competent arises as a key corporate resource within an employee's experience. Employees react to warm and competent relationships with a high recommendation of their manager as well as loyalty to the company, our findings being aligned with the theoretical framework devised by Meyer and Maltin (2010), according to which, favourable working conditions (warm and competent leadership in our model) relate to organisational engagement, because they favour meeting basic needs (Ryan, Deci, 2008). Similar results were found by Malik *et al.* (2021), who determined that the positive emotions generated by Authentic Leaders lead to higher levels of employee engagement. Our study addresses the relevance of loyalty in the retail sector, an issue that previous

studies (Chandra *et al.*, 2023) analysed as the “intention to stay”. The examination of turnover in the retail sector can prove interesting at an overall level, owing to common features therein, such as the inappropriate treatment of employees, the low salaries, and the long working hours (Broadbridge, 2003).

It is evident that a solid culture exists in the organisation under analysis with a clear orientation to the employee, reflected in the behaviours of its leaders. We can say that they exert a warm and competent leadership, which justifies the company’s high levels of engagement (*Great Place to Work* for more than 5 years running), an eNPS in its study about employee experience of 38.8% and a turnover of 11.3%, well below the average 20% in its sector. Within the business context examined, warmth ($B= 0.642$) stood out as the most influential leadership dimension, its effect being three times as strong as that of competence ($B= 0.221$). This result is consistent with the idea that, although competence may look like a priority, warmth is currently becoming more and more important in the conceptualisations and practices of good leadership (Cuddy *et al.*, 2011). In fact, *warmth* as a leadership feature resembles the *individual consideration* factor identified in transformational leadership, a leadership style that has gained importance over the years (Greimel *et al.*, 2023). In this study, the leader’s warmth may turn out to be a priority because, in the corporate environment under examination, shop employees do not need to develop complex competencies and do not stand great chances for professional development either. Therefore, their motivation in terms of purpose, mastery, and autonomy (Pink, 2011) can be met by warm managers offering trust and support rather than by competent ones. This strengthens the role played by the leader in the company’s culture (Snyder *et al.*, 2018) and the extent to which it impacts on the experience of employees.

In short, our findings have meaningful implications for both specialists in Human Resources and researchers on Employee Experience. Firstly, our model to evaluate managers in terms of warmth and competence provided results which largely resemble those obtained by the SCM —widely validated in the study of human social perception. The link between recommendation and loyalty acquires special significance because it suggests that employees commit themselves to a greater or lesser extent to their companies depending on how they assess their leaders. It additionally suggests that other human social perception models could also prove valuable to understand and influence the behaviour of employees.

5.1 Academic Implications

Most organisations have made employee experience an integral part of their employee engagement strategy. Those which obtain better results in terms of engagement have in common the focus on their efforts to prepare leaders, managers, and HR departments on the concept of employee experience and exploit the critical elements of the methodology for the design of an employee experience (Trucker, 2020). In this sense, our study shows how the essential dimensions of social judgement, regarded as leadership attributes, connect with crucial variables related to employee experience. The use of competence and warmth proves helpful for theory and research alike, allowing for a thorough universal definition of the way in which leaders impact on employee experience variables —recommendation and loyalty— in order to design employee experience improvement strategies.

Delving deeper into the research on the social perception of leaders can help to explain the phenomenon of the great desertion which is being suffered by companies and the search for alternatives to working for others. If the last two years have taught us anything, it is that employees long to invest in the human aspects of work. Employees are tired and many of them feel upset. They are looking for a renewed sense of purpose in their jobs; they need to generate social as well as interpersonal relationships with their

colleagues and managers, and also to perceive a feeling of shared identity. Beyond the salary and other perks, it is necessary for them to feel valued by their organisations and leaders via significant interactions, albeit not necessarily in person, not only in transactions. By failing to understand what their employees are fleeing from and how to link them, the leaders of companies are putting their businesses at risk. Most organisations are managing the situation in a similar way, being unable to invest in a more satisfactory employee experience and meet the new demands for autonomy and flexibility at work (De Smet *et al.*, 2021). Thus, our findings with respect to the influence and impact of managers' warmth and competence on the intention to recommend the leader as well as the loyalty to the company are relevant because they provide the keys to create bonds with employees by generating meaningful interactions with their leaders.

This study has sought to fill the research gap in the study of the SCM by offering a reference standard to analyse the relationships between leaders and subordinates and their impact on employee experience. In particular, we have shown the importance of warmth in leadership when it comes to achieving employee engagement. Similarly, Cooper-Thomas *et al.* (2018) used a resource-based theory to claim that it is possible to obtain employee engagement by means of resources related to "love". Thus, leaders seeking to improve employee commitment should do so through resources that demonstrate warmth and a caring attitude. It may seem strange to use love as a resource that can be exchanged in the workplace, but consulting firms keep insisting on how to win the hearts and minds of employees, i.e. how to gain their love (although they do not use this term).

5.2 Practical Implications

Traditionally, when studying employee experience, experts in HR observe employees' journeys through the moments of truth during their life cycle with the company, their painful experiences, and the WOW moments, which are considered the main drivers of recommendation (eNPS) and employee loyalty. However, these measurements leave everyday relationships in the background, particularly those with managers, obviating the judgments and stereotypes that often guide decisions and determine relationships. Our data, however, suggest that the perceived warmth of leaders serves as a strong predictor of leader recommendation and directly influences loyalty to the company beyond the competence detected in the manager. Therefore, employees' natural sensitivity to warm behaviours seems to be playing a much more relevant role in the assessment of the manager, and in their employee experience, than what is traditionally measured.

Faced with the growing scepticism and distrust that many employees feel towards large enterprises as employers, our findings imply that managers' efforts to achieve results by focusing on the task rather than on individuals may be deemed by employees as negative and not warm, with an impression that they do not act in the best interest of their employees. Managers are key to creating friendly work environments which help to establish an emotional connection with employees and improve their degree of engagement, recommendation, and loyalty, while simultaneously reducing absenteeism and labour accidents (Lynch, 2022).

From a practical viewpoint, leaders must be encouraged to be humble and show interest in people; a need also exists to implement strategies destined to develop employee talent (Mai *et al.*, 2022). In this sense, our results align themselves with those obtained by Tagscherer and Carbon (2023), who highlighted the importance of leader humility and orientation towards employees, especially in new, more digitalised environments. Evidence has been found that warmth can prove far more important than competence when it comes to enhancing recommendation and loyalty, i.e. leaders need to worry not

only about their training but also about their warmth and humane treatment in the relationships with their teams, as highlighted by Amy J.C. Cuddy in her article “Connect, Then Lead” (2013).

The conclusions of this study acquire special relevance in this era of the Great Resignation characterised by the difficulty to find and/or retain talent. This is also an era when social media can destroy or enhance a firm’s reputation if its employees criticise or praise their Employer Experience on platforms such as Glassdoor (Stamolamprous *et al.*, 2019). Leaders’ Warmth and Competence largely help to retain talent, to enrich Employee Experience, and to improve company reputation, as shown in these pages. Thus, a relevant message sent by LFEE consists of the suggestion to incorporate leader warmth and competence perceptions into the surveys which are habitually utilised to measure the employee experience.

Just as the SCM has proved successful at measuring customer experience and, accordingly, loyalty to brands (Malone, Fiske, 2013), LFEE might serve to place the leadership style of companies in these two dimensions, so that they can improve their talent attraction and loyalty.

Having this leader perception map available would be the first significant step for any HR director to understand how the leadership exerted by their managers impacts on employee experience, to identify the dimensions where improvements are more necessary, and to detect the types of emotions that the leader is likely to provoke among employees when it comes to improving their satisfaction, as well as their recommendation and loyalty, turning the company into an example of quality employee experience and enhancing their employer record.

5.3 Limitations and further Research

One of the limitations of this study relates to the fact that we only evaluated one organisation and a single worker profile. In future research, our model might be extrapolated to participants belonging to a wide range of organisations and holding very different positions. This type of sampling should ensure a high degree of generalisation for findings and increase the validity of statistical analyses. The empirical study is restricted to a sample in Spain, although based on a large sample of 792 employees, so it could be replicated in the future in other countries, as culture can influence the relationships between employees and their leaders.

The study additionally focuses on a specific context (low-cost fashion retail), the potential extension of our results to other business sectors being highly desirable. To that end, a suggestion is made to include a wider range of organisations in future research works, as this would increase the external validity of findings.

Another limitation stems from the reliance of our study on a cross-sectional or transversal paradigm. Studies on this field inescapably need to implement longitudinal or experimental designs to establish the cause-and-effect link between perceptions of warm and competent leadership, employee satisfaction, and organisational engagement.

Finally, this study analyses human feelings and behaviours following a methodology of a positivist nature and using quantitative data (through a survey). However, we should bear in mind that previous studies have similarly resorted to surveys in order to examine the relationships between leaders and subordinates, together with their characteristics (i.e. Cooper-Thomas *et al.*, 2018; Haider *et al.*, 2022; Mai *et al.*, 2022).

Future studies will need to ascertain not only if —according to the context— competence and warmth generate different relationships concerning recommendation of the leader and loyalty to the enterprise, but also the extent to which they directly correlate with the main employee experience variables, e.g. recommendation and loyalty.

What is more, future studies should delve deeper into the implications that Warm and Competent Leadership has for workers and further analyse its influence on employee and organisational performance.

Conclusions

To finish, we consider that the main message of our theoretical and experimental work on LFEE is that employees' perceptions, feelings, and behaviours in companies largely depend on the interactions with their managers —thus mirroring how the way in which we mix with other individuals and social groups affects all of us. To reach this conclusion, we used the SCM to define leader characteristics. The key implication for researchers on Organisational Engagement, specialists in Employee Experience, and HR directors is that, as with human social interactions, the warmth and competence of leaders perceived by employees play a very important role in the behaviour of the latter towards their companies. Nevertheless, warmth and competence are probably not being applied and understood as effectively as they should when trying to build and maintain a long-lasting recommendation of —and loyalty to— the organisation.

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TRANSFORMACIJA Į ŠILTĄ IR KOMPETENTINGĄ VADOVAVIMĄ

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Santrauka. Kompetencija ir emocinė šiluma – du esminiai socialinio vertinimo aspektai, postuluojami stereotipų turinio modelyje (angl. SCM) ir laikomi lyderystės bruožais. Keliamas hipotezė, kad šilti ir kompetentingi lyderiai ugdo labiau įsipareigojusius ir lojalius darbuotojus. Siekiant patikrinti hipotezę, buvo atliktas skerspjūvio tyrimas, buvo tiriami pigių drabužių mažmenininko parduotuvės darbuotojai ($N = 792$). Rezultatai atskleidė, kad šiluma darbuotojų patirtį veikia beveik tris kartus labiau nei kompetencija. Darbuotojai, be atlyginimo ir kitų privilegijų, iš vyraujančio bendravimo klimato turi jausti, kad jų organizacijos ir lyderiai juos vertina. Nesuprasdami, nuo ko bėga jų darbuotojai ir kaip su jais susisiekti, jmonių vadovai rizikuja savo verslu. Lyderiai turi būti nuolankūs ir domėtis žmonėmis; taip pat privalo įgyvendinti strategijas, skirtas darbuotojų talentams ugdyti. Šie rezultatai naudingi tiek žmogiškųjų išteklių specialistams, tiek darbuotojų patirties tyrėjams. Vadovų vertinimo modelis sugeneravo rezultatus, labai panašius į gautus naudojant SCM. Todėl darbuotojai daugiau ar mažiau įsipareigoja savo jmonėms, atsižvelgiant į tai, kaip jie vertina savo vadovus (ALHumeisat, 2023; Odegov ir kt., 2012).

Reikšminiai žodžiai: vadovo suvokiama kompetencija; vadovo suvokiama šiluma; organizacinis įsitrukimas; darbuotojo patirtis; stereotipinio turinio modelis.