



Engaging Consumer Senses: The Role of Interactive Brand Experiences in Brand Building

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Received: 13 October 2023

Accepted: 03 February 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32479/irmm.15541>

ABSTRACT

Successful brands are investing in creating exceptional interactive brand experiences and fostering emotional connections to build brand love. This dual approach contributes to long-term customer relationships and is an effective way for companies to create hedonic value thereby gaining a competitive advantage. The purpose of the study is to investigate how interactive brand experiences (i.e., sensory, emotional, behavioural, and intellectual) influence brand love in the energy drinks category amongst young adults in South Africa. Data were collected from energy drink young adults through physical surveys. The study applied partial least-square-based structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The results revealed that the various interactive brand experiences dimensions influence brand love. Although the brand experience dimensions are supported, they don't seem to equally influence brand love, as the sensory experience dimension (i.e., taste, smell, sight, touch, and sound), had the strongest influence on brand love. Consumers desire something that touches their heart and engages their senses. Marketers can therefore focus on building brand related stimuli in order to influence consumer behaviour. By focusing on these alternative marketing approaches to brand building, marketers can attract and retain young adults. This research contributes to understanding how brand experiences influence brand love in the energy drinks beverage category.

Keywords: Brand Experience, Sensory marketing, Consumer behaviour, Beverages, Energy Drinks Category

JEL Classifications: M30, M31, M37, L66

1. INTRODUCTION

Companies that add brand experience both online and offline can establish more vivid connections with their consumers (Wörfel et al., 2022). Brand experience refers to the consumers' "subjective, internal (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments" (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53). As noted by Schmitt (1999), brand experiences provide sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and relational values that replace functional values. A brand experience that stimulates multiple senses simultaneously enhances individual value creation and thereby consumer responses (Wörfel et al., 2022). Brand experiences can generate customer loyalty (Akoglu and Özbek, 2022). According to Smilansky (2017), brand experiences

drive brand differentiation, brand equity and business results. The use of brand experience in building brands stems from the fact that consumers look for brands that provide them with unique, attractive, and memorable experiences (Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010; Schmitt, 2009). The use of sensory marketing has been used to generate customer value and experiences, as a result, different sensory impressions have impacted customer behaviour. Marketers are increasingly implementing sensorial strategies such as sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Hultén (2011) argues that sight strategy has been viewed as the most effective, as it is believed that eyes do 70% of the buying. When consumers consistently have positive interactions with a brand, it can lead to a deeper emotional connection (Shahid et al., 2022). Brand love, in turn, reinforces brand loyalty, as consumers who love a brand are more likely to become repeat consumers and advocates.

1.1. Research Problem and Purpose of the Study

Brand experience profoundly impacts consumer cognition and behaviour (Wörfel et al., 2022). It is a critically important driver of emotional connection, as emotionally connected consumers are more than twice as valuable as highly satisfied consumers. Magids et al. (2015) proposed that a company's gains increase when it connects with consumers' emotions, this was also echoed by Eachempati et al. (2022) who found that customer sentiment is a major driver of investor sentiments, which in turn influences the stock market and the firm value. Brand experiences are therefore central to the long-term marketing strategy of any brand (Smilansky, 2017). By focusing on creating positive and memorable interactions, brands can build a strong foundation for sustained growth and relevance in the marketplace.

Despite its clear advantages, research on brand experience is scarce (Brakus et al., 2014; Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2013), relatively little is known about the effects of brand experience on brand love (Joshi and Garg, 2021). Consumers have started to hold certain brands, such as Apple, close to their hearts (Huang, 2017). In fact, today, 65% of consumers are influenced by positive experiences throughout their purchase journey (eMarketer, 2020). Numerous scholars have established that brand experiences encourage the development of the affective and cognitive bond between self and the brand (Dolbec and Chebat, 2013). A Generation Y study steered by Riiivits-Arkonsuo and Leppiman (2015), demonstrated that if the informants were enabled to discuss their favourite, most preferred and loved brand, they often chose technology brands; the study revealed that a strong, meaningful emotional bond between a brand and a consumer forms if common consumption experiences turn into meaningful experiences. As noted by Rodrigues, Ferreira and Rodrigues (2015), the overall brand experience influences brand love; their study was based on a survey to 560 consumers of a major retail fashion brand, their study revealed that brand experience influences brand love. According to Garg et al. (2015), a gap exists in understanding the link between brand experience and love. They propose a conceptual model where respect, brand experience, and brand reputation have been identified as factors driving brand love and affective commitment, consumer citizenship behaviour, repurchase intention, consumer forgiveness, and attitude toward the extension as outcomes of brand love. Their findings indicated brand reputation, brand experience, and respect as the factors driving brand love and affective commitment, repurchase intention, consumer forgiveness, and attitude toward the extension as outcomes of brand love in the context of India. Furthermore, they confirmed that brand experience has an influence on brand love. As stated by Sarkar and Sarkar (2020), favourable brand experiences are likely to stimulate brand love.

Keeping in view of the above literature, there is a gap in assessing the influence of brand experiences such as sensory, emotional, behavioural, and intellectual on brand love.

1.2. Research Question

To what extent does sensory, emotional, behavioural, and intellectual experiences influence brand love of energy drinks amongst young adults in South Africa?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section looks at an overview of the energy drinks category, the theoretical underpinning of the study, the conceptual model, and hypotheses.

2.1. Energy Drinks Category

2.1.1. Energy drinks overview

Consumption of soft drinks is declining in many countries, yet Energy drinks sales continue to increase, particularly amongst young adults (Visram et al., 2017), yet little is currently known about the drivers behind these trends. The global energy drinks market, worth \$60.78 billion, is projected to register a CAGR of 8.51% over the next 5 years (Mordor Intelligence, 2023). Energy drinks are increasingly popular amongst young adults (Visram et al., 2017). Exposure to digital marketing enhances interest in energy drinks among young adults, especially the Gen Z population (Mordor Intelligence, 2023).

Energy drinks market size in Africa is valued at USD 2.11 billion and is expected to register a CAGR of 7.71% over the forecast period (Mordor Intelligence, 2023). South Africa dominates the Energy drinks market in Africa (Mordor Intelligence, 2023). The Energy drinks category is very important in terms of its monetary value (Euromonitor, 2023). Energy drinks are commonly believed to be one of the most appealing and profitable beverage categories in the world (Fleener, 2016).

2.1.2. Energy drinks and young adults overview

Energy drink consumption in South Africa is higher among young adults (Mordor Intelligence, 2023). In South Africa, the Energy drinks market leader, Red Bull, has always focused on recruitment of young adults. The sheer size of this cohort, both internationally and in South Africa, renders it an important current and future market segment (Bevan-Dye, 2016). Even with the importance of this generational cohort, their consumer behaviour remains under researched. A key shortcoming in the body of knowledge, namely that the majority of generational research has been conducted in developed countries, raises the question of the generalisability of the findings to developing and non-Western countries. This shows a need to conduct generation cohort research in an emerging country such as South Africa.

2.2. Theoretical Underpinning

The experiential branding theory was the basis for the present study. It is discussed in the following section.

2.2.1. The experiential branding theory

Based on Schmitt's (1999) proposed five experiences (sense, feel, think, act, and relate), researchers such as Brakus et al. (2009), considered the intricacy of brand experience and developed four dimensions of brand experience, namely: Sensory, affective, behavioural and intellectual. As stated by Beckman et al. (2013), the main aim of marketers should be maximising these experiences. Marketing researchers such as Zarantonello and Schmitt (2013), Shamim and Butt (2013), have used the dimensions of brand experience and attested that customer experience of brands represents an important outcome of consumer behaviour. This

study adapted the brand experience model of Brakus et al. (2009). The four dimensions of brand experience (sensory, affective, behavioural and intellectual) are discussed below.

- i. **Sensory Experience** - Firstly, sensorial experience refers to the marketing efforts made to appeal to the five human senses (i.e., smell, sound, sight, taste and touch) (Brakus et al., 2009) and is related to Schmitt's (1999) "sense" experience. Machado et al. (2014) highlight that this could be the look and feel of an Apple product from a sight and touch perspective. Another example is the Garg et al. (2015) study which included sub-themes that were collated from the sensory experience theme (i.e., pleasant aroma, aesthetic appeal, tastes nice, sophisticated musical background and great ambiance). Barnes et al. (2014) examined brand experience for destination brands and found that the sensory dimension was the most important one.
- ii. **Affective Experience** - Secondly, affective experience refers to customer's inner feelings and emotions (Brakus et al. 2009) and is related to Schmitt's (1999) "feel" experience. Machado et al. (2014) highlight that through certain behaviour (i.e., the purchase of an iPhone), certain outcomes could manifest through the consumers' feelings or thoughts (i.e., the love of the iPhone after using it for a couple of days). Garg et al.'s (2015) affective sub-themes included: feel thrilled, make my mood, help in reducing stress, therapy for me, as well as make me happy.
- iii. **Behavioural Experience** - Thirdly, behavioural experience refers to motor actions and behavioural experiences (Brakus et al. 2009) and is related to Schmitt's (1999) "act" experience. Machado et al. (2014) highlight that the behavioural dimension should aim to enrich consumers' lives by targeting their physical experiences by showing them alternative ways of doing things (i.e., highlighting the benefits of Apple products as compared to its competition). Garg et al.'s (2015) behavioural sub-themes included: make me go out, as well as help in exploring new places.
- iv. **Intellectual Experience** - Lastly, intellectual experience refers to convergent/analytical and divergent/imaginative thinking (Brakus et al. 2009) and is related to Schmitt's (1999) "think" experience. Machado et al. (2014) highlight that companies could also appeal to the consumer's intellect through creativity and innovativeness (i.e., the constant renewal of the Apple iOS operating system). Garg et al.'s (2015) intellectual sub-themes included: upgrade My knowledge, make me think, and create curiosity.

2.3. Brand Love

A consumer can love a brand (Sarkar and Sarkar, 2020). Brand love refers to "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81). Several authors consider love as a basic emotion (Langner et al., 2015; Batra et al., 2012). Brand love has been studied as both an emotion and a relationship, where the emotion has been asserted to be short-term and episodic and relationship is seen to be more long-term. Batra et al., (2012) asserted that it is important to acknowledge the distinction. There is considerable evidence that shows that brand love has a major influence on repurchase intention (Hsu, 2023; Ismail, 2022). Brand love has also been proven to have an impact on consumer forgiveness and attitude towards an extension. Consumers who are emotionally

attached to a brand are most likely to continue purchasing the brand (Garg et al., 2015).

2.4. Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

2.4.1. Brand Experience on Brand Love

Consumers desire something that touches their heart and engages their senses. As such, consumers who are satisfied with the brand experience will increase their love for the brand (Bae and Kim, 2023). Garg et al. (2015) proposed a conceptual model where respect, brand experience, and brand reputation have been identified as factors driving brand love and affective commitment, consumer citizenship behaviour, repurchase intention, consumer forgiveness, and attitude toward the extension as outcomes of brand love. They indicated that consumers in love with a brand prefer to repurchase the loved brand. Previous researchers suggested that brand love influences consumer's purchase intention (Batra et al., 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). As pointed out by Whang et al., (2004), commitment or behavioural loyalty can be an outcome of romantic brand love. A positive experience with the brand encourages the consumer to sacrifice money for a loved brand (Loureiro, 2011). Results from Singh et al., (2021) show that brand experience affects brand love, as has been noted in other contexts. Providing extraordinary positive sensory experiences is an effective way to facilitate brand love (Lv and Wu, 2021). A study by Maduretno and Junaedi (2022) also confirmed that sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioural experience affects brand love. Based on this theoretical and empirical background, the following are hypothesised:

H1 There is a positive relationship between sensory experience and brand love of energy drinks amongst young adults in South Africa.

H2 There is a positive relationship between affective experience and brand love of energy drinks amongst young adults in South Africa.

H3 There is a positive relationship between behavioural experience and brand love of energy drinks amongst young adults in South Africa.

H4 There is a positive relationship between intellectual experience and brand love of energy drinks amongst young adults in South Africa.

3. METHODOLOGY

To test the proposed model, a quantitative survey research design was utilised through which participants evaluated their past experiences with their favourite Energy drink brand. Study participants were asked to think about their favourite Energy drink brand when completing the survey. The target population was Energy drink young adults between the ages of 18 years and 25 years in South Africa.

3.1. Measures

Items of the study constructs were adapted from prior studies. Brand experience was measured with the scale developed by Brakus et al. (2009). This scale consists of 12 items assessing participants' sensory (three-item scale), affective (three-item scale), behavioural (three-

item scale) and intellectual (three-item scale) experiences. Brand love was measured using Ragoth and Spinelli (2012) seven-item scale.

3.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) technique. The measurement model quality was validated, then the proposed model was examined to test hypotheses. To examine the reliability of the data, Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability were utilised. For convergent validity, standardized factor loading, and AVE were used. For discriminant validity, Hetero-Trait-Mono-Trait (HTMT) criteria and Fornell and Larcker's correlation coefficient above square root AVE was used. The results also show the estimation $R^2 = 0.334$ for brand love, the effect sizes are within threshold (>0.350) (Hossain et al., 2021).

4. PRESENTATION OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Respondent Profile

In total, 700 respondents attempted to fill up the questionnaire, however only 689 responses (response rate 98.4%) were retained for data analysis. The respondents were predominantly males 413 (59.9%), with 260 (37.7%) female, and 16 (2.3%) preferred not to say. A study conducted in South Africa had indicated that the consumption of energy drinks is higher among males than females (Stacey et al., 2017). Bulut (2015) indicated that males consumed more Energy drinks than females. In addition, the results indicate that 320 (46.4%) of participants were between the ages of 18 and 20, with 291 (42.2%) between 21 and 23. Only 78 (11.3%) were between the ages of 24 and 25 years of age. Attila and Çakir's (2011) study indicated that consumption of energy drinks is common amongst college students, specifically those between the 18 and 24 age group. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Attila and Çakir (2011). Approximately 336 (48.8%) of respondents indicated that their Energy drink consumption frequency is irregular routine, while 170 (24.7%) indicated their Energy drink consumption frequency as 1-3 times a month, 70 (10.2%) indicated more than once per week, 80 (12.0%) indicated once per week and 30 (4.0%) of the respondents indicated that they consumed energy drinks daily. These findings are consistent with those of Aljaloud (2016), whose results indicated that the mean Energy drink usage among university students was two to five Energy drinks per week.

4.2. Measurement Model Assessment

The PLS algorithm confirms the reliability of the model constructs. All the construct item loadings exceed the threshold value of 0.70. All constructs had Cronbach's alpha >0.7 ranged from 0.826 (sensory) to 0.922 (brand love). While composite reliability >0.7 ranged from 0.831 to 0.924 and AVE >0.5 ranged from 0.684 to 0.82. The AVE (average variance extracted) tests the divergent validity and requires a value higher than 0.5 to prove that the factors explain more than half of the variance from their factors (Henseler et al., 2015). The results are presented in Table 1. VIF values are between 1,654 and 3,320 meeting the criteria of ≤ 3 . Discriminant validity achieved HTMT ratio of correlations <0.85 as reported in

Table 2. Fornell-Larcker correlation coefficient is above square root of AVE as reported in Table 3. Discriminant validity of the study is confirmed as per the thresholds (Henseler et al., 2015).

4.3. Structural Model

Using 5000 sub-samples in bootstrapping, a nonparametric procedure shows the results of all the hypothetical connections (Figure 1). Hypothesis 1 predicted that sensory experience would be positively associated with brand love ($\beta = 0.285$, $P < 0.001$). Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Lv and Wu, 2021), the hypothesis was supported *** suggesting that the connection between sensory experience and brand love is significant (Table 4). Hypothesis 2 predicted that emotional experience would be positively linked to brand love ($\beta = 0.269$, $P < 0.001$). Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Maduretno & Junaedi, 2022), the hypothesis was supported, suggesting that emotional experience is related to brand love (Table 4). Hypothesis 3 predicted that behavioural experience would be positively linked to brand love ($\beta = 0.107$, $P < 0.001$). Consistent with previous literature (e.g., Brakus et al., 2009), the hypothesis was supported, suggesting that behavioural experience is related to brand love (Table 4). Hypothesis 4 predicted that intellectual experience would be positively linked to brand love ($\beta = 0.077$, $P < 0.001$). The hypothesis was supported but insignificant, suggesting that intellectual experience is related to brand love but not significant (Table 4).

5. DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of brand experience (i.e., sensory, emotional, behavioural, and intellectual) on brand love in the energy drinks category among young adults. The study found a positive relationship between sensory, emotional, behavioural, intellectual experience and brand love. Sensory experience was the strongest. Marketers should therefore focus on delivering unique experience by stimulating the five

Table 1: Construct reliability

Construct	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Sensory Experience (SE)	SE1	0.819	0.826	0.831	0.742
	SE2	0.881			
	SE3	0.883			
Emotional Experience (EM)	EE1	0.821	0.835	0.855	0.751
	EE2	0.908			
	EE3	0.868			
Behavioural Experience (BE)	BE1	0.874	0.849	0.849	0.768
	BE2	0.879			
	BE3	0.875			
Intellectual Experience (IN)	IE1	0.904	0.896	0.899	0.827
	IE2	0.924			
	IN3	0.901			
Brand Love (BL)	BL1	0.790	0.922	0.924	0.684
	BL2	0.842			
	BL3	0.858			
	BL4	0.850			
	BL5	0.860			
	BL6	0.846			
	BL7	0.733			

CR: Composite reliability, AVE: Average variance extracted
Source: Authors' own calculation using PLS-SEM

Table 2: Fornell-Larcker criterion - Correlations and Sq. Rt. of AVEs^a

	Behavioural experience	Brand Love	Emotional experience	Intellectual experience	Sensory experience
Behavioural Experience	0.876 ^a				
Brand Love	0.397	0.827 ^a			
Emotional Experience	0.520	0.485	0.867 ^a		
Intellectual Experience	0.569	0.377	0.544	0.910 ^a	
Sensory Experience	0.372	0.462	0.417	0.326	0.861 ^a

^aSquare root of AVE on the diagonals

Source: Authors' own calculation using PLS-SEM

Table 3: Discriminant validity-HTMT ratios

	Behavioural experience	Brand love	Emotional experience	Intellectual experience	Sensory experience
Behavioural Experience					
Brand Love	0.446				
Emotional Experience	0.621	0.545			
Intellectual Experience	0.653	0.412	0.626		
Sensory Experience	0.445	0.529	0.502	0.378	

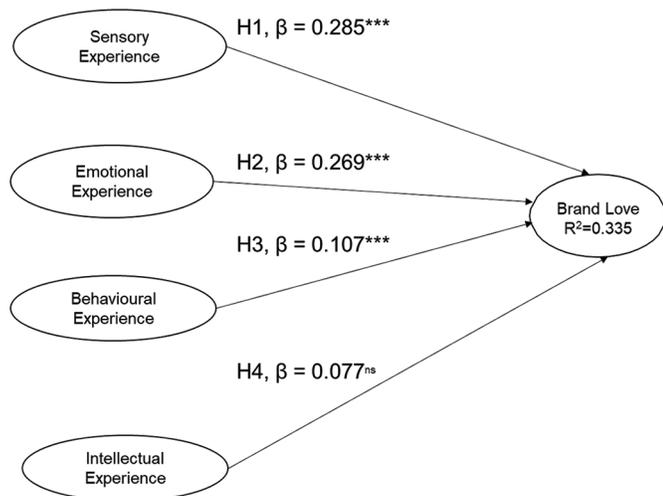
Source: Authors' own calculation using PLS-SEM

Table 4: Results of hypotheses testing

Hypothesis	Relationship(s)	Path coefficient	Result	ρ
H1	Sensory Experience -> Brand Love	0.285***	Supported	0.096
H2	Emotional Experience -> Brand Love	0.269***	Supported	0.065
H3	Behavioural Experience -> Brand Love	0.107***	Supported	0.010
H4	Intellectual Experience -> Brand Love	0.077ns	Supported, but not significant	0.005

***P<0.001, ns=Not significant

Source: Authors' own calculation using PLS-SEM

Figure 1: Structural model

***P<0.001, ns=Not significant

Source: Authors' own construction

human senses (vision, smell, sound, taste, and touch). For vision (sight)-Energy drink marketers should use colours, lighting, logos, slogans, names, packages, product design, and visual graphics. Through the use of atmospheric (smell) Energy drink marketers should focus on scent. Marketers should use sound such as music or jingles for auditory (hearing). For tactile (touch), marketers should create opportunities for consumers to physically touch the product, although online can be different from physical touch.

Through gustative (taste), marketers of energy drinks should focus on product quality, sampling activities, innovative flavours or communicating the “taste” message. These five human sense experiences need to genuinely resonate with consumers.

The study was only conducted in the Energy drinks category. Future studies should examine different beverage categories such as soft drinks, juices, to see how the variables may operate differently in these contexts. Another limitation is that all study participants were in or from South Africa. Future research should examine brand experience in different countries to test whether those experiences vary across cultures. Future research should consider qualitative methods to explore the brand experience component. Future research should use experimental design method with different multisensory (i.e., taste, smell, sight, touch, and sound) stimuli cues to understand the precise effect on brand love.

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