



Brand Experience as a Catalyst: Enhancing Brand Love from Brand Image and Perceived Quality

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ABSTRACT

Senior tourism plays an important role in China's total economy development. This study explores the influence of perceived quality and Brand image on senior tourists' Brand love through the mediating role of Brand experience. Stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) model is used to develop a theoretical framework. A questionnaire of 384 respondents collected data on demographics and constructs. This study utilized partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to assess the hypotheses and mediation effect. The findings reveal that both perceived quality and brand image positively influence brand love, with brand experience acting as a significant mediator. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the importance of brand experience in enhancing brand love among senior tourists, a demographic that is increasingly significant in the tourism industry. The findings have practical implications for tourism businesses and policymakers, suggesting the need for specialized marketing strategies and services based on senior tourists' preferences.

Keywords: Senior Tourism, Brand Love, Perceived Quality, Brand Image, Brand Experience

JEL Classifications: M370, M31

1. INTRODUCTION

The global demographic landscape is experiencing a significant and fundamental change characterised by an unprecedented increase in the ageing population (Fang et al., 2023). The statistics given by the United Nations are catastrophic, showing that by 2050, the global population of individuals aged 60 and above is projected to double, reaching 2.1 billion (compared to 962 million in 2017) (Berhanu and Raj, 2020). In China, due to the one-child policy of the past and healthcare advancements that enable the elderly to live longer, China's ageing population is growing rapidly (World Health Organization, 2024). The United Nations (UN) also forecasts that China's population aged 60 and above will be nearly 39% in 2050, which dramatically rises from 16.2% in 2017 (Chang and Lin, 2022). This emerging trend has high potential in the tourism industry due to the fact that the ageing societies' financial capability, free time and love to experience the otherness. This demographic change is creating a niche sector in

the tourism market that requires strategic decisions to meet its special requirements and tastes (Kumar and Hsieh, 2024).

In addition, the economic contributions of ageing societies remain undeniable (Elbaz et al., 2018). This senior group is usually wealthy and leads a life of luxury with plenty of free time, which has turned them into a distinguishable part of both the domestic and international tourist markets (Zhao et al., 2022; Abbasi et al., 2023). According to the China Tourist Academy (2022), senior travellers have a substantial impact on tourist earnings and contribute to the development of off-season tourism, which helps to stabilise variations in demand throughout the year. American Association of Retired Persons (AAR) also reported that the majority of people who are over 50 years old love to travel in order to rest their minds (Varela-Neira et al., 2023) and prefer to travel during the off-peak season (Husain et al., 2022). Therefore, tourism revenue can be spread throughout the year.

However, the rise of senior tourism poses some challenges. Senior tourists, who are generally thought of as people over 60, have different travel behaviours and preferences, which affect many areas of the industry, from how services are designed to marketing strategies (Dai et al., 2015). For example, senior tourists urgently require specialised infrastructure and services, including more accessible transport, elderly-friendly lodgings, and healthcare services at points of travel (Gazi et al., 2024). Thus, tour operators and travel agencies should create and personalise their travel packages and programs that suit the interest and activity levels of seniors. Senior tourists enjoy comfort, quality, and enriching experiences more than monetary value, which is mostly related to educational and cultural enrichment travel (Amaral et al., 2020). Ragab (2022) avowed that this group of travellers is known for choosing longer stays and off-peak, which means that they are able to get to know a place very well and bypass the chaos of the peak season.

Despite the growing importance of senior tourism, there is a research gap in understanding how branding strategies, particularly perceived quality and brand image, influence senior tourists' brand love, and the role of brand experience as a mediator in this relationship. While previous studies have explored these constructs in various contexts, they have not adequately addressed the unique needs and preferences of senior tourists. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the influence of perceived quality and brand image on brand love among senior tourists, with a focus on the mediating role of brand experience. By doing so, it contributes to the literature on branding in tourism and provides actionable insights for tourism businesses and policymakers targeting this increasingly significant market segment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Theoretical Underpinning: S-O-R

The theoretical underpinning of the study on senior tourists' brand love and the influence of social media is deeply rooted in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, a pivotal framework in environmental psychology (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). This model provides critical insights into consumer behaviour by explaining how external stimuli trigger internal cognitive and emotional processes, leading to observable responses. The S-O-R model, as initially conceptualized, posits that a stimulus (S) evokes psychological and emotional processes within an organism (O), culminating in a response (R) (Solomon, 2016). In the context of tourism marketing, particularly for senior tourists, this model offers an invaluable lens through which to analyse how perceived quality and brand image influence brand love.

2.2. Hypothesis Development

2.2.1. The relationship between perceived quality and brand love
Brand love is much more than consumers' emotional bond with the brand, of which the consumers become emotionally attached to the brand when they constantly receive consistent quality, safety, and comfort (Apria and Parahiyanti, 2023). Tourism has many perceived quality factors like service reliability, staff competence, ease of access, and safety (Sohaib et al., 2022). For instance, Sohaib et al.'s (2022) work stresses the role quality perception

plays as a predictor for consumer attitude and its impact on brand loyal behavior and intent to recommend the brand to others. Junaid et al. (2020) in a study of Senior Tourists in the United States emphasized the importance of perceived service quality and the fact that perceived service quality is the most dominant factor influencing satisfaction and loyalty of senior travellers.

H1: Perceived quality has a positive influence on Brand love.

2.2.2. The relationship between brand image and brand love

Brand love reflects the depth of emotional affinity and attachment that consumers develop toward a brand, and its formation is heavily influenced by a brand's image (Çelik, 2022). According to Eklund (2022), many senior tourists tend to create brand love about tourism brands that seem dependable and customer friendly.

H2: Brand image has a positive influence on Brand love.

2.2.3. The relationship between perceived quality and brand experience

The relationship between perceived quality and brand experience in tourism is essential in understanding how senior tourists evaluate and respond to tourism services. As Wijaya et al. (2024) have noted, the brand experience for seniors is intricately tied to the quality of services provided, as it forms the foundation of their satisfaction and can lead to positive associations with the tourism brand. According to studies, if the senior tourists believe the service quality to be high, they will have more positive impression about the brand, which means higher satisfaction and more chance for brand loyalty (Romiti and Sarti, 2016).

H3: Perceived quality has a positive influence on Brand experience.

2.2.4. The relationship between brand image and brand experience

In tourism brands that target seniors, maintaining consistency between brand image and actual service delivery is essential. Semadi and Ariyanti (2018) hold the opinion that brand image creates a specific expectation that affects tourists' perceptions toward the services they get. For example, if a hotel brand is portrayed to be luxurious, comfortable, and hospitable, then senior guests would expect the same type of service and amenities when they visit such a brand. Kim and Chao (2019) found that when a senior tourist links positive emotionalization such as excitement or comfort with a brand, this leads to his positive experience which facilitates in deeper and positive bonding with the brand and stimulates repeat engagement.

H4: Brand image has a positive influence on Brand experience.

2.2.5. Brand experience mediates the relationship between perceived quality and brand love

Brand experience acts as a mediator by enriching this cognitive evaluation with sensory, affective, and relational elements, creating a holistic brand engagement. According to Prentice et al. (2019), brand experience amplifies the impact of perceived quality by immersing consumers in memorable and positive brand interactions. This immersive quality bridges the cognitive appraisal (perceived quality) with the affective response (brand love). For example, immersive retail environments or personalized brand interactions have been demonstrated to intensify emotional attachment (Safeer et al., 2021). Furthermore, the mediating effect of brand experience has been extensively documented

in different contexts. Ferreira et al. (2022) demonstrated in the fashion retail sector that engaging brand experiences amplify perceived quality's emotional resonance, enhancing brand love. This highlights that brand experience not only translates quality into customer satisfaction but deepens the emotional connection, creating a robust framework for brand loyalty.

H5: Brand experience positively mediates the relationship between Perceived quality and Brand love.

2.2.6. Brand experience mediates the relationship between brand image and brand love

Brand experience acts as a bridge that deepens the connection between brand image and brand love. Brakus et al. (2009) assert that experiential marketing creates memorable interactions, which, when aligned with a positive brand image, amplify emotional bonds. For instance, Safeer et al. (2021) found that immersive and consistent brand experiences help consumers internalize brand image attributes more effectively, leading to heightened emotional attachment. Several studies have explored the mediating role of brand experience in the brand image-to-brand love pathway. Their research in online environments demonstrated that interactive and personalized experiences significantly enhance the translation of brand image into brand love. Similarly, Bae and Kim (2023) confirmed that brand experience mediates the impact of brand image on brand trust, which subsequently influences brand love. H6: Brand experience positively mediates the relationship between Brand image and Brand love.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the conceptual framework outlines the relationships among brand image, perceived quality, brand experience and brand love

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research Design

In order to accomplish the specific research objectives of investigating the relationships among variables, such as the perceived quality, brand image, brand experience, and brand love of senior tourists at the tourist destination, a quantitative research method was selected. This is an appropriate use of quantitative research as it allows for direct measurement of relationships involved (Black, 1999). Structured approaches in the quantitative research include statistical analysis thus produce considerable evidence of how variables affect one another and how much they are related (Black, 1999).

The questionnaire has two sections. Section A comprises the personal information of the respondents, whereas Section B

evaluates assesses the research variables taken from literature using a five-point Likert scale. The five-point Likert scale assigns the following values: 1 for “strongly disagree,” 2 for “disagree,” 3 for “neutral,” 4 for “agree,” 5 for “strongly agree.” Table 1 presents the Measurement scales of each variable.

3.2. Sample and Sampling

To minimize sampling errors, Krejcie and Morgan (1970) provide a simplified method for determining an appropriate sample size. This method involves utilizing a comprehensive table corresponding to a predetermined population size, showing that the sample size for the population that was greater than one million was 384.

The sampling method employed in this study involves multiple-stage sampling, incorporating convenience sampling, a non-probability technique. Multiple-stage sampling allows for systematic yet flexible selection of participants by dividing the sampling process into stages, improving representativeness while accommodating practical constraints (Saunders et al., 2016). The first stage involves clustering the population into manageable subgroups. Clusters were created geographically and demographically, focusing on seniors aged 60 and above who actively engage on social media platforms. The second stage applies convenience sampling within the clusters. Convenience sampling enables researchers to select respondents based on ease of access, budget constraints, and time limitations (Fink, 2016).

3.3. Data Collection

The administered questionnaire was designed and distributed via Star-questionnaire. The five-point Likert scale which showed the items of constructs was used in the questionnaire for the respondents to select.

3.4. Data Analysis

The research uses PLS-SEM (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling) because it is considered as a flexible and effective tool for creating and predicting statistical models (Osborne et al., 2010; Ringle et al., 2010). PLS-SEM is currently widely used in many fields, such as marketing on consumer behaviour, human resource management (Hair et al, 2019), organisational and brand management (Sosik et al., 2009), and marketing (Kaufmann and Gaeckler, 2015).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Descriptive Information

Descriptive information revealed in Table 2, 47.4% of the respondents were male, while 43.6% were female. The age

Figure 1: Conceptual model

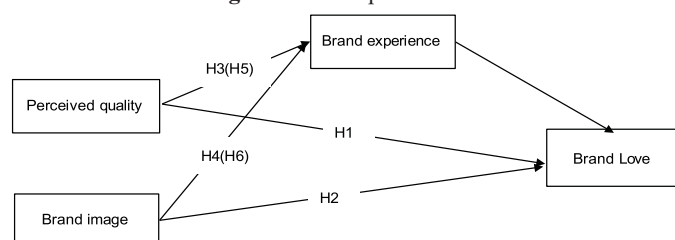


Table 1: Measurement scale

Variable	Number of items	Sources of adoption and adaption
Perceived quality	9	Žabkar et al., (2010)
Brand image	6	Aaker (1996) and Martinez and de Chernatony (2004)
Brand experience	8	Safeer et al., (2021)
Brand love	10	Carroll and Ahuvia, (2006)

distribution showed that 31.25% of the population was aged 65-65 years, while 39.32% aged 66-70 years and 24.48% aged 71-75 years. A minority portion (4.95%) consists of those who are above the age of 75. In terms of education level, The majority of the respondents' Education level is Secondary school or below (34.11) or High school or equivalent (40.36%). With respect to

Employment status, 1.04% respondents are employed full-time job and 36.2% are employed part-time, while 16.67% respondents are unemployed and 46.09% are retired. Additionally, 43.49% of the respondents reported have ¥25,000 - ¥59,999 annual income, but a minority respondents' (9.9%) annual income is higher than ¥100,000.

Table 2: Descriptive analysis

Respondents' Profile	Selection	Frequency	%
Age	60-65	120	31.25
	66-70	151	39.32
	71-75	94	24.48
	>75	19	4.95
Gender	Male	182	47.4
	Female	202	52.6
Education level	Secondary school or below	131	34.11
	High school or equivalent	155	40.36
	Some college, no degree	75	19.53
	Bachelor's degree	18	4.69
Employment status	Master's degree and above	5	1.3
	Employed full-time	4	1.04
	Employed part-time	139	36.2
	Unemployed	64	16.67
Annual income	Retired	177	46.09
	<¥25,000	77	20.05
	¥25,000-¥59,999	167	43.49
	¥60,000-¥99,999	102	26.56
Total	≥¥100,000	38	9.9
		384	100

On the basis of Descriptive statistics, this paper applies SmartPLS4.0 software to analyze the data and validate the six research hypotheses. SmartPLS4.0 software adopts the principle of structural equation (SEM), which is a statistical technique used to test the appropriateness of a theoretical model or hypothetical model. SEM is a statistical technique to test the appropriateness of a theoretical or hypothetical model, and it can handle multiple variables in a causal model at the same time (Hair et al, 2019).

4.2. Measurement Model Assessment

The analysis of the validity of a hypothesised model generally includes the questionnaire's reliability and validity test. Reliability mainly refers to the reliability or stability of the questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire is measured by the Composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which are obtained by smartPLS using the PLS Algorithm. CR and Cronbach alpha are used to measure the reliability or stability of the questionnaire. Validity refers to the measurement of accuracy including content validity and construct validity.

Table 3: Variance inflation factor and convergent validity

Variables	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Perceived quality	PQ1	0.814	0.932	0.943	0.647
	PQ2	0.803			
	PQ3	0.82			
	PQ4	0.787			
	PQ5	0.772			
	PQ6	0.796			
	PQ7	0.807			
	PQ8	0.854			
	PQ9	0.779			
Brand image	BI1	0.806	0.876	0.907	0.618
	BI2	0.82			
	BI3	0.826			
	BI4	0.744			
	BI5	0.739			
	BI6	0.777			
Brand experience	BE1	0.861	0.898	0.918	0.585
	BE2	0.789			
	BE3	0.757			
	BE4	0.735			
	BE5	0.724			
	BE6	0.782			
	BE7	0.676			
	BE8	0.782			
Brand love	BL1	0.806	0.925	0.937	0.597
	BL2	0.766			
	BL3	0.791			
	BL4	0.807			
	BL5	0.804			
	BL6	0.725			
	BL7	0.75			
	BL8	0.76			
	BL9	0.774			
	BL10	0.766			

Table 3 shows that the CR values are all above 0.7 and all values of the α coefficient are above 0.7 as well. CR value and an α coefficient of 0.7 indicate good internal consistency reliability (Hair et al, 2021). The AVE values of each factor are also above 0.5, and the Loading value of the convergent validity measure is greater than 0.7, which indicates that there is good convergent validity among the indicators (Hair et al, 2019). Table 2 shows that all the scale indicators in the questionnaire are above 0.7 therefore the measures of the questionnaire have good convergent validity. Therefore, the discriminant validity of the measurement model was also tested.

The model's discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell and Larcker Criteria and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) (refer to Table 4). Initially, the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was compared to construct correlations, indicating that non-diagonal values were much smaller than diagonal (bolded) values, as expected. The HTMT values (Henseler et al., 2016) did not above the 0.90 threshold (Kline, 2023), indicating satisfactory discriminant validity.

4.3. Structural Model Assessment

After the reliability and validity of the measurement model were verified, the study investigated the structural model. In this study, the structural equation modelling software smartPLS was used to test the hypothetical model in the hypothesis about causal relationships between variables. By testing the causal relationship between structural variables, the relationship between structural variables is adjusted and the final choice of structural variables

is determined. The researchers use Smart-PLS bootstrapping in conjunction with a one-tailed test with a 5% significance threshold to determine the validity of the hypotheses and examine the significance of the path coefficients. To determine the significance of these hypotheses, “P-values” and “T-statistics” were employed via the 10,000 resample bootstrapping method (Ramayah et al., 2018).

The results of the direct and indirect effects for the proposed hypotheses are presented in Table 5. The study's findings demonstrated a robust association that substantiates the initial hypothesis (H1), positing a link between Perceived quality and Brand love. The statistical analysis revealed a strong positive relationship, with a t-value of 4.849, and a significance level below 0.01. The analysis also showed the positive relationship between Perceived quality and Brand experience (H3), with a t value of 4.867, and a significance level below 0.01. Testing outcomes showed that Brand image significantly correlated with both Brand love ($t = 3.839$, $P < 0.01$) and Brand experience ($t = 7.527$, $P < 0.01$), thereby supporting H2 and H4. According to Hypothesis 5 (H5), Brand experience may serve as a mediator between

Table 4: Discriminant validity

Fornell and Larcker criteria					HTMT			
Construct	BL	BE	BI	PQ	BL	BE	BI	PQ
BL	0.773							
BE	0.552	0.765			0.602			
BI	0.537	0.551	0.786		0.593	0.62		
PQ	0.542	0.475	0.497	0.804	0.578	0.515	0.546	

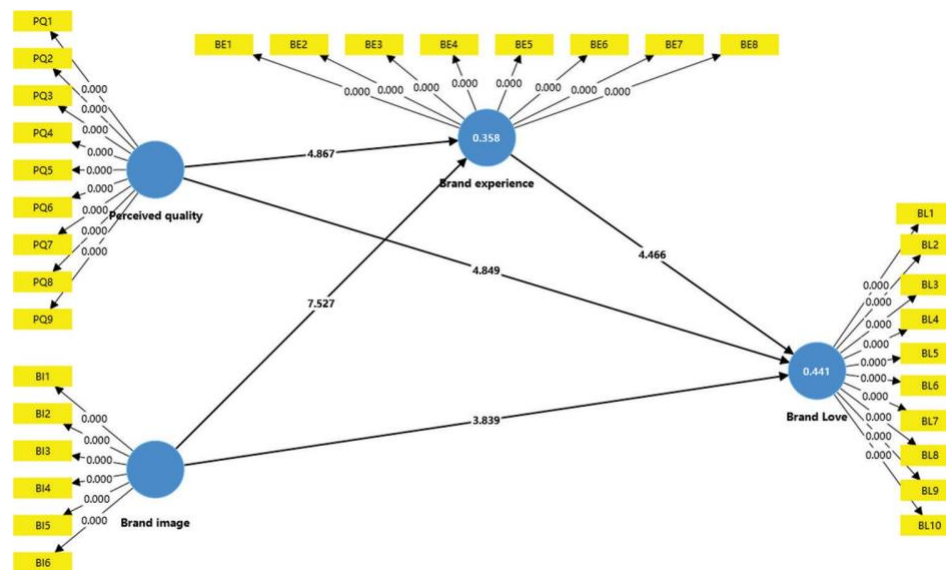


Table 5: Results of the hypotheses testing (direct and indirect effects)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Original sample (O)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics ((O/STDEV))	P-values	Result
H1	Perceived quality > Brand Love	0.290	0.060	4.849	0.000	Supported
H2	Brand image > Brand Love	0.236	0.061	3.839	0.000	Supported
H3	Perceived quality > Brand experience	0.267	0.055	4.867	0.000	Supported
H4	Brand image > Brand experience	0.418	0.056	7.527	0.000	Supported
H5	Perceived quality > Brand experience > Brand Love	0.076	0.022	3.445	0.000	Supported
H6	Brand image > Brand experience > Brand Love	0.119	0.033	3.603	0.000	Supported

Perceived quality and Brand love. With a $P < 0.01$, a t-value of 3.445, the investigation verified the existence of a substantial mediation effect. The results support this theory by showing that Brand experience mediates the relationship between Perceived quality and Brand love. Hypothesis 6 (H6) proposes that Brand experience can act as a mediator between Brand image and Brand love. The study found a substantial mediation effect ($t = 3.603$, $P < 0.01$). The results support the idea that Brand experience functions as a mediator between Brand image and Brand love.

5. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This study was designed to explore the mediating roles of Brand experience in the relationship between Perceived quality, Brand image and Brand love. Research has demonstrated that perceived quality has a significant effect on senior tourists' Brand love (Sohaib et al. 2022). Research has indicated that Brand image has a significant effect on senior tourists' Brand love (Satria and Hidayat, 2018). This study identified a significant positive association between perceived quality and Brand experience, which echoes the findings of other researchers (Coelho et al., 2020). This study identified a significant positive association between Brand image and Brand experience, aligns with studies by Eslami (2020) and Kim and Chao (2019). The study also investigated how Brand experience act as mediators between Perceived quality, Brand image and Brand love. According to Prentice et al. (2019), brand experience amplifies the impact of perceived quality by immersing consumers in memorable and positive brand interactions. Safeer et al. (2021) found that immersive and consistent brand experiences help consumers internalize brand image attributes more effectively, leading to heightened emotional attachment.

The results of the study highlight how important brand experience is in fostering brand love among senior travelers, an age group that is changing the travel landscape. This study's integration of the S-O-R model shows that brand experience emerges as a crucial mediator, with perceived quality and brand image having an important effect on brand love. By providing a detailed view of senior visitors' brand love, these insights fill a significant gap in the research. According to the findings, improving brand experiences should be a top priority for tourism marketers and legislators in order to build stronger emotional bonds with this expanding consumer category. This study concludes by highlighting the significance of matching marketing strategies to the particular requirements and preferences of senior travelers and promoting a more individualized and quality-driven approach to meet their travel needs. This strategic approach not only promotes brand love but also contributes to the sustainable expansion of the tourism industry, highlighting the economic and social relevance of senior travelers.

This study is important in two dimensions, namely, for both theoretical contributions and practical implications. This study examines how perceived quality and brand image affect brand love in senior travel, with brand experience as a mediator. While these factors have been studied individually in various contexts, their combined effect on senior tourists' brand love remains

underexplored. This research also discusses the contribution of brand experience as a mediator in influencing the stimulus antecedence variables to produce strong support for senior tourists' brand love. In addition, this research helps bridge a significant gap in the literature by addressing the senior tourist segment of Jiangsu Province, a segment that has been neglected in the literature because historically, scholars tend to focus on the preferences and behaviour of younger or general tourists.

From a practical point of view, the output of this study is valuable to the industry stakeholders, including tour operators, marketers, policymakers, and local authorities. The research also provides a basis for designing specialised marketing strategies and products for them by knowing the preferences and characteristics of senior tourists in Jiangsu. In fact, according to Huang and Liu (2021), tourism businesses can use these experiences to boost the senior tourist's customer satisfaction and brand love. Additionally, the study's findings may also be useful for policymakers, local authorities, and tour operators who may devise policies and promote infrastructure to lure the seniors for tourism. This could include creating accessible tourism sites, exposing service providers to cater for the needs of senior travelers, and promotion of age suitable tourism programmes. In addition, improved senior touring practices will contribute to the overall development and sustainability of tourism (Otoo and Kim, 2020). The findings of the study will also be applicable to more general discussions about ageing and social participation and offer scientific suggestions about how tourism could promote active ageing and social inclusion. Research on senior tourists can emphasize economic and social relevance and thereby make the role of senior tourists known in tourism and in other fields, which can have a positive effect on both industry and government policy. This study is important in more ways than just an academic one because its commentary shows the possible changes, comprehensiveness, and sustainability to the tourism industry.

This study has some limitations in exploring the effects of Brand image and Perceived quality on Brand love and the mediating role of Brand experience. First, the study sample was mainly from Chinese consumers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings as consumers from different cultures may respond differently to Brand image and Perceived quality. In addition, although we considered brand experience as a mediating variable, there may be other unincorporated mediating variables, such as consumers' personality traits and affective states, which may also influence the relationship between Brand image, Perceived quality and Brand love. Finally, the study relied heavily on questionnaires, which may have led to common methodological biases and affected the accuracy of the results. Future research could further validate and extend the findings of this study by expanding the sample size, adopting a longitudinal research design, and incorporating qualitative research methods.

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