



**BRAND LOVE AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN ONLINE BRAND EXPERIENCE AND
LOYALTY: EVIDENCE FROM INDIA'S ONLINE RETAIL SECTOR**

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Abstract

This study examined how brand love mediates the relationship between online brand experience and brand loyalty in Jammu and Kashmir's online retail sector. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (EFA and CFA) were used to evaluate the measurement model using data collected from the students of higher education. Path analysis supported all hypotheses by showing substantial correlations between online brand experience, brand love, and brand loyalty. The findings emphasize the need of great brand experiences to build consumer loyalty through emotional ties. The study showed Indian online businesses how emotional interaction builds long-term customer relationships. These findings strengthen digital brand management knowledge and help strategists increase consumer retention through brand love.

Keywords: brand experience, brand loyalty, brand love, online retail sector



INTRODUCTION

Fostering and maintaining brand loyalty has become a crucial objective for enterprises in the fast-changing digital marketplace, particularly in the fiercely competitive realm of online shopping. The emergence of e-commerce has greatly revolutionized the way consumers engage with brands, offering both prospects and obstacles for firms seeking to establish substantial and long-lasting client affiliations. Traditional methodologies, which focused on transactional interactions and functional characteristics like product quality and pricing, are no longer adequate. Companies are increasingly prioritizing emotional bonds, recognizing that factors beyond logical deliberations influence customer decision-making. Emotional branding is a fundamental aspect of modern marketing programs that seeks to establish connection between customers and businesses by addressing their emotional needs and ambitions (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005).

A fundamental principle in emotional branding is brand love, which denotes a profound emotional affinity that customers form for a brand. According to Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi (2012), brand love extends beyond simple gratification to include a deep and long-lasting emotional bond, marked by passion, devotion, and dedication. Actions such as repetitive purchases, favorable word-of-mouth, and brand advocacy demonstrate the importance of establishing this emotional connection in cultivating brand loyalty (Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). The prioritization of brand love highlights the importance of emotional elements in establishing and sustaining customer loyalty, particularly in the era of digitalization.

The expansion of e-commerce has led to the emergence of the notion of online brand experience as a crucial determinant of brand loyalty. The online brand experience refers to the sensory, emotional, and cognitive reactions of customers when engaging with a brand via digital platforms such as websites, mobile applications, social media, and customer service interfaces (Rose, Clark, Samouel, & Hair, 2012). Optimal online brand experiences, distinguished by user-friendly website navigation, tailored content, and prompt customer support, may greatly augment brand loyalty (Kim, Lee, & Park, 2019). Conversely, adverse experiences such as sluggish website performance or insufficient customer service can erode client confidence and allegiance.



Empirical evidence suggests that emotional branding techniques are essential for distinguishing businesses in a saturated market in the current digital era. Individualized interactions and engaging online experiences facilitate the development of more profound emotional bonds with customers, resulting in increased levels of brand loyalty (Verhoef et al., 2009). These tactics prove to be especially efficient when they correspond with the individual interests and values of customers, therefore establishing a unified and captivating online experience.

Empirical evidence indicates that brand love serves as an intermediary in the connection between online brand experience and brand loyalty. According to Albert and Merunka (2013), a high-quality online brand experience has the potential to elicit emotions of brand love, which subsequently promotes loyalty. Digital platforms predominantly conduct consumer contacts, making the mediating function of brand love particularly pertinent in online retail settings. Elevated levels of brand affection are linked to favorable word-of-mouth and heightened intentions to make repeat purchases (Wallace, Giese, & Johnson, 2004), emphasizing the significance of emotional involvement in fostering loyalty.

The peculiarities of India's online retail industry offer a distinctive setting for empirical investigation. Due to its swift digital integration and increased internet access, India has emerged as one of the most rapidly expanding e-commerce marketplaces worldwide (Grewal, Ahlbom, Beitelspacher, Noble, & Nordfält, 2018). Factors such as enhanced logistics, cost-effective smart phones, and favorable government policies drive the expansion of the market (IBEF, 2023). Nevertheless, the very competitive Indian e-commerce industry poses difficulties for online enterprises aiming to establish and maintain customer loyalty towards their brands. Emotional elements, such as trust and affection, are crucial in influencing loyalty in this particular industry (Bandyopadhyay & Martell, 2007).

The motivation for this study stems from the need to understand the role of online brand experiences in fostering brand love and, as a result, brand loyalty within India's fast-growing online retail industry. Although prior studies have examined the connections among brand experience, brand love, and loyalty, there is a lack of knowledge on how these dynamics particularly relate to the digital retail landscape in developing economies. This paper intends



to offer significant insights for online merchants in India who want to improve consumer engagement and loyalty through emotional branding tactics by analyzing the mediating function of brand love.

CONCEPTUAL MODAL AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Holbrook and Hirschman first introduced the concept of brand experience in 1982. The authors discovered novel consumption behaviors that are associated with the multisensory, imaginative, and affective elements of product usage. By comparison, conventional marketing saw purchasers as logical decision-makers who primarily consider practical aspects while making purchasing decisions. The conventional marketing perspective views buying as a necessary action to obtain the desired commodities. Experiential marketing acknowledges the emotional motivation of customers and their desire for sensory and enjoyable experiences (Cleff et al., 2014). Brand-related stimuli, such as the brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and settings, trigger consumers' subjective and internal reactions (such as sensations, feelings, and thoughts) and their behavioral responses, as defined by Brakus et al. (2009).

An experience should have elements of personal significance, novelty, surprise, learning, and engagement, as stated by Poulsson and Kale in 2004. Researchers believe that the sensory aspects of an experience significantly influence customer preferences more than the characteristics of a product or service (Zaltmann, 2003; Luo et al., 2011). Brand experience has the ability to establish an emotional bond with the brand by engaging customers' senses and emotions, resulting in an enhanced brand image and increased brand loyalty (Schmitt, 1999; and Brakus et al., 2009).

Online brand experience

Brands use their internet presence as a point of contact with their clients. The internet and its diverse platforms, including websites, blogs, social media, chat rooms, interactive graphics, and virtual communities, have become indispensable in an integrated marketing communication effort. Companies communicate, exchange, and collaborate with brands online (Pralhalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; and Simon et al., 2013). According to Van Noort et



al. (2012), consumers are increasingly seeing brand websites as the primary channel for seeking and finding information. Furthermore, businesses have established online shopping platforms that exhibit a substantial number of customers and transaction volumes. As the virtual marketplace grows, academics become interested in the issue, leading to the emergence of online brand experience as a new area of study in the early 2000s. Online brand experience is connected to several related concepts, including online customer experience, customer experience in online environments, web experience, brand experience on the web, consumers' online flow experience, virtual experiential marketing, and online purchase experience. The fundamental nature of all notions stays unchanged. Engaging in online activities fully immerses users in an experience that encompasses both cognitive and emotive aspects (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). It integrates cognitive reactions, which include the usability and functioning of a website, with emotive experiences, which are pleasurable and enjoyable experiences. Unlike brand experience, which directly stimulates the senses, virtual experiential marketing utilizes interfaces as substitutes for real-world encounters (Luo et al., 2011).

The extent of online brand experience might differ. Some researchers view it as a means of promoting online firms that exclusively operate over the internet, such as merchants and search engines (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013). On the other hand, one could view it as a comprehensive concept that integrates experiential marketing into websites. This would encompass brands who possess both a physical establishment (a brick-and-mortar store) as well as an online platform. The absence of shop atmospheres and sensory cues, particularly touch, taste, and smell, poses a greater barrier for online firms in creating a brand experience compared to offline brands (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013). Thus, online companies must utilize visual elements such as color, graphics, layout, design, and animations, as well as aural cues, in order to evoke emotional reactions (Lou et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, several writers have contended that, in the case of exclusively online firms, the ongoing active connection and its reciprocal interaction with the user provide supplementary opportunities for interactivity and consumer engagement that are not available to physical brands (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013).



Brand loyalty

For many years, brand loyalty has been a crucial subject in marketing research, acknowledged as a basic factor in achieving sustained commercial success. Brand loyalty, as defined by Jacoby and Chestnut in 1978, refers to a customer's ongoing preference for a particular brand over its competitors. This loyalty contributes to a durable competitive advantage for firms. Customer retention, favorable word-of-mouth, and recurring purchases are all manifestations of this phenomenon (Oliver, 1999). Initially, research concentrated on the behavioral components of loyalty, namely investigating the frequency at which consumers repurchase. Yet, this method has limitations in comprehending the emotional and cognitive elements that influence brand loyalty (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). Oliver (1999) added cognitive, affective, conative, and action loyalty to this idea, which describe different levels of loyalty based on how much information a consumer processes, how emotionally connected they are, how committed they are, and how they act in the end.

In recent years, the role of emotional and psychological factors in influencing brand loyalty has become increasingly significant. Current research recognizes brand love, a profound emotional attachment to a brand, as a significant determinant of loyalty (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). This strong emotional connection frequently goes beyond simple customer pleasure and drives loyalty in terms of attitudes and behaviors (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Bergkvist & Bech-Larsen, 2010). With the advent of digital technology, emotional branding has become a crucial tactic for companies seeking to provide customized, immersive experiences that cultivate more robust customer connections (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005).

The expansion of electronic commerce has emphasized the significance of online brand experience, which encompasses the sensory, emotional, and cognitive reactions of consumers when interacting with businesses through digital platforms (Rose, Clark, Samouel, & Hair, 2012). Evidence indicates that favorable online experiences, such as user-friendly website navigation, prompt customer support, and captivating content, strengthen customer loyalty towards a business (Kim, Lee, & Park, 2019). Given the changing demands of consumers,



tailored and engaging online experiences play a crucial role in fostering loyalty (Verhoef et al., 2009).

Furthermore, in the e-retail industry, brand love serves as a mediator in the connection between online brand experience and brand loyalty (Albert & Merunka, 2013). High-quality online experiences that surpass customer expectations cultivate brand love, resulting in increased loyalty (Bairrada, Coelho, & Coelho, 2018). This phenomenon is particularly pertinent in developing economies like India, where the widespread use of the internet and the expansion of digital shopping provide companies the chance to distinguish themselves by eliciting emotional responses (Grewal et al., 2018). Trust and emotional resonance are crucial factors in establishing brand loyalty in these markets (Bandyopadhyay & Martell, 2007).

Brand love

Brand love refers to the emotional connection pleased consumers have with a certain brand (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; Kalyoncuoğlu, 2017). Emotional and passionate consumer sentiments often serve as an assessment tool for consumer and brand interactions. According to Bergkvist and Larsen (2010), consumer preferences are a topic of interest for scholars and practitioners. Kevin Roberts' (2004) book 'Lovemarks: The Future beyond Brands' stimulated academic research on brand love. According to Bauer, Heinrich, and Albrecht (2009), consumers often overlook brand failures. Consumers evaluate brands against rivals to choose the best and generate loyalty (Keller, 2003; Belaid & Temessek Behi, 2011; Junaid et al., 2019). Numerous studies describe brand love as a strong emotional bond that drives customer cognition (Patwardhan & Balasubramanian, 2011; Cho & Hwang, 2020).

This concept highlights the cognitive and emotional aspects of brand love among customers. Thomson Both MacInnis and Park (2005) and Albert, Merunka, and Valette-Florence (2008) investigated brand love structures. Batra et al. (2012) identified seven brand love dimensions: 1. Passion-driven behavior; 2. self-brand integration; 3. positive emotional connection; 4. anticipated separation suffering; 5. attitude valence; 6. attitude strength; 7. long-term relationship. Additional factors include passion-driven behavior, self-brand integration, positive emotional connection, anticipated separation anguish, attitude valence, strength, and



long-term relationships. Several studies examined brand love and customer behavior. Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen (2010), Roy et al. (2013), and Aydın (2017) examined how brand love affects self-image congruence, brand commitment, awareness, and consumer trust. Aşkın & İpek (2016) examined how brand love mediates the relationship between brand experience and loyalty. Several studies indicate that brand love leads to brand loyalty (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Albert and Merunka, 2013; Aro et al., 2018). Research suggests that brand love may lead to good word-of-mouth and brand loyalty among loyal consumers (Fournier (1998), Carroll, and Ahuvia (2006)).

The conceptual model for the investigation is predicated on an understanding of the connections between brand loyalty, brand love, and brand experience. Brand experience is the consumer's comprehensive perception and interaction with the brand, which includes sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral dimensions. Brand loyalty is the dedication of consumers to continue using or repurchasing a brand, while brand love is a profound emotional bond or affection that a consumer experiences toward a brand. Consumer behavior theories, brand love theory, and brand experience theory provide the theoretical underpinnings of the model. Schmitt's (1999) brand experience theory posits that consumer interactions with the brand through various dimensions influence attitudes and behaviors, including customer loyalty. Carroll and Ahuvia's (2006) brand love theory posits that brand love mediates the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. Consumer behavior theories substantiate the notion that positive experiences foster loyalty and establish emotional bonds.

HYPOTHESES

H₁: Customer loyalty is positively impacted by online brand experience.

H₂: Brand love is positively impacted by brand experience.

H₃: Brand loyalty benefits from brand love.

H₄: The link between brand experience and brand loyalty is mediated by brand love.

Fig 1 Conceptual model



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given the nature of the study quantitative cross sectional research method was implied. A survey questionnaire was developed for data collection. Convenience sampling technique was used. Data was collected from the students of colleges and universities from the UT of Jammu and Kashmir. Two methods are employed to disseminate questionnaires: the first involves approaching personally to the students and requesting that they complete the questionnaire, while the second involves the questionnaire being shared on the Internet. The respondents must be individuals who have purchased products such as clothing, electronics etc within the past three months. The convenient sampling method or non-probability sampling technique is employed to collect the sample.

The total number of questionnaires received was 510, with 240 and 270 being online and direct questionnaires, respectively. The number of acceptable online questionnaires was 158 after the rejection of incorrect forms, such as lacking information, whereas the figure for the direct survey was 250. Consequently, the sample size of this investigation is 408, which accounts for 81.60%. Table 1 provides descriptive statistical information regarding the sample. Quantitative methods, including Cronbach's Alpha coefficient test, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), and Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), were implemented in this study. The reliability and appropriateness of the scale utilized are assessed through Cronbach's Alpha and EFA. The model fit assessment was done by measuring root mean square error and $Q^2_{predict}$. Finally the results were analyzed by path analysis values generated in Smart-PLS.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS: CRONBACH'S ALPHA AND STATISTICAL RELIABILITY

The 17 items have met the statistical reliability requirement, as evidenced by Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.7 and Corrected Item-Total Correlations exceeding 0.5. The Cronbach's Alpha results for all 17 items of this research model are presented in Table 2. The results of the EFA indicate that the KMO coefficient is 0.874 ($0.5 \leq KMO \leq 1$), the Chi-square statistics of Bartlett's test are 5908.80 at Sig = 0.001, and these ratios indicate that all observed variables correlate, thereby confirming the acceptance of EFA. Furthermore, the



average variance extracted (AVE) is 83.01%, which is greater than 50%, and all of the factor loading coefficients are greater than 0.5. This suggests that three independent factors account for 83.01% of the data's variation. The statistical analysis depicted in Table 2 illustrates the reliability and validity of the items employed to assess Brand Experience, Brand Loyalty, and Brand Love. The model is robust for further analysis due to the fact that the constructs are distinct and well-represented by their respective items.

MODEL FIT ASSESSMENT

The Root Mean Square Error (RMSE), Mean Absolute Error (MAE), and Q^2_{predict} values for Brand Experience, Brand Love, and Brand Loyalty are displayed in the table 3. The Q^2_{predict} values for Brand Experience, Brand Love, and Brand Loyalty are noticeably high—0.861, 0.913, and 0.752, are > 0.50 respectively—indicating great predictive accuracy (Wold, 1994). According to Handman and Koehler (2006), the model's prediction errors are generally low and consistent throughout the constructs, as indicated by the RMSE values, which range from 0.969 to 1.025, and the MAE values, which range from 0.535 to 0.56 suggesting that the model is a good fit for forecasting results associated with these constructs (Stone, 1974).

HYPOTHESES TESTING RESULTS

The correlation between online brand experience and consumer loyalty is statistically significant, with a coefficient of 0.094 and a T-statistic of 4.805 ($p = 0.000$) shown in the table 4. These findings indicate that the online brand experience has a valuable and substantial effect on client loyalty. The present discovery is consistent with previous research that has demonstrated a direct relationship between customer experience and loyalty in online environments (Rose, Clark, Samouel, & Hair, 2012). The relationship between brand experience and brand love is statistically significant, shown by a coefficient of 0.094 and a T-statistic of 3.473 ($p = 0.001$). Such evidence suggests that an enhanced brand experience cultivates more profound brand affection.

This study supports the notion that favorable brand experiences strengthen emotional attachments to the brand, resulting in brand love (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). A robust correlation exists between brand love and brand loyalty, as indicated by a coefficient of 0.128 and a T-statistic of 5.868 ($p = 0.000$). This noteworthy discovery validates that brand love



plays a vital role in fostering brand loyalty, therefore reinforcing the current body of research that highlights the importance of emotional connection in sustaining enduring consumer loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). The coefficient of 0.012, T-statistic of 0.004, and P-value of 0.021 provide evidence for the mediation effect of brand love between brand experience and brand loyalty.

While the coefficient is modest, the statistically significant P-value indicates that brand love plays a partial mediating role in the connection between brand experience and brand loyalty. Consistent with the mediation models offered in consumer behavior research (Albert & Merunka, 2013); this underscores the significance of emotional elements in converting favorable brand experiences into loyalty.

CONCLUSION

The quantitative research method is employed in this study to investigate the correlation between brand loyalty, brand affection, and brand experience in the context of online purchasing platforms. The model devised by Brakus et al. (2009), which demonstrates the relationship between brand experience, brand love, and brand loyalty, has been adopted in the online retail sector of India, as confirmed by research findings. References from the UT of Jammu and Kashmir are provided. This investigation offers additional insights regarding customer loyalty by examining two critical variables: Brand Experience and Brand Love. In India, the Brand Experience factor is a relatively novel concept that is not given the same level of attention by brand managers and marketing executives. The findings of this study indicate that brand loyalty is not solely determined by brand experience, but also by brand affection. The results also verify that brand experience is an essential component of marketing research. Brand loyalty is further influenced by brand experience, which directly affects brand affection. Additionally, brand loyalty is indirectly influenced by brand experience through brand affection. This research also focuses on the examination of the impact of emotion and human sensibilities on the brand experience. In general, this paper contributes to the existing body of literature regarding brand loyalty, brand affection, and brand experience.



RECOMMENDATION

In order to enhance customer loyalty through the use of online retail outlets, a company must initially assist customers in experiencing or utilizing the applications and websites. This is because the opportunity to use the platform will enable them to comprehend the emotional value, acquire additional knowledge, and identify and memorize the company's products. In order to execute this concept, organizations may implement promotions that involve providing discounts are allowed to provide feedback regarding their experiences with the purchases, and companies can acquire additional information regarding the quality of the products, customer satisfaction, and brand appeal. When customers provide positive feedback, it indicates that the products have made a positive impression on them. Consequently, customers may develop a purchase intention in the future, and their loyalty will ultimately increase. Factors such as design, model, and style are essential in order to entice consumers to purchase and utilize products from a particular online retail brand.

Consequently, it is imperative that organizations allocate a sufficient amount of resources to the design phase in order to effectively communicate their brand loyalty and subsequently implement promotional campaigns that align with the prevailing trends. For example, other online platforms like face book, integral etc are designed for youthful consumers must be contemporary and diversified, and their style should convey enthusiasm, creativity, and activity hence enhancing customer engagement.

Simultaneously, the design of applications and websites must evoke a sense of luxury and elegance through the use of delicate hues, while the simplicity of the models still allows for the expression of the consumers' own reflections.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

There are a number of limitations associated with this study, including platform specificity, sector-specific focus, sample limits, and geographic specificity. In further research, these limitations should be addressed by broadening the geographic area of the study, integrating a sample that is more diverse, studying other antecedents, contrasting offline and online experiences, and undertaking longitudinal investigations. The use of these techniques will make it easier to gain a more comprehensive and generalizable understanding of the links that exist between brand love, brand loyalty, and brand experience.



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Table no. 1 descriptive statistical information

Demographic profile of respondents

Characteristics	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	244	59.80
	Female	164	40.20
	<i>total</i>	<i>408</i>	<i>100</i>
Age	15-25	160	39.22
	25-35	155	37.99
	35-45	93	22.79
	<i>total</i>	<i>408</i>	<i>100</i>
Income	less than 5000	101	24.75
	5000-10000	158	38.73
	10000-15000	95	23.28
	more than 15000	54	13.24
	<i>total</i>	<i>408</i>	<i>100</i>
Occupation	UG-Student	178	43.63
	PG-Student	98	24.02
	Scholars	75	18.38
	Other	57	13.97
	<i>total</i>	<i>408</i>	<i>100</i>
Preferred Online Platform	Amazon	110	26.96
	Flipkart	95	23.28
	Myntra	87	21.32
	Snapdeal	80	19.61
	Other	36	8.82
<i>Total</i>		<i>408</i>	<i>100</i>



Table 2 exploratory factor analysis results

EFA and Cronbach's Alpha

Items	BE*	BL**	BLO***	Cronbach's Alpha
BE1	0.798			0.815
BE2	0.829			0.717
BE3	0.841			0.906
BE4	0.842			0.837
BE5	0.825			0.755
BL1		0.845		0.861
BL2		0.837		0.863
BL3		0.834		0.830
BL4		0.842		0.806
BL5		0.846		0.851
BL6		0.864		0.756
BL7		0.832		0.687
BL8		0.841		0.869
BL9		0.821		0.960
BLO1			0.808	0.854
BLO2			0.823	0.745
BLO3			0.886	0.790
Eigen values	2.101	2.301	1.113	
KMO = 0.874 > 0.5, Barlett's test and $\chi^2 = 5908.80$, sig = 0.001 ≤ 0.05 and AVE = 83.01				

*brand experience, **brand love ***brand loyalty

Table 3 Results of model fit assessment

Variables	RMSE	MAE	Q ² _predict
Brand Experience	0.969	0.561	0.861
Brand Love	1.008	0.535	0.913
Brand Loyalty	1.025	0.549	0.752



Table no. 4 Results of hypotheses

Variables	r^*	σ^{**}	T Statistics	P Values
Customer loyalty is positively impacted by online brand experience.	0.094	0.019	4.805	0.000
Brand love is positively impacted by brand experience.	0.094	0.027	3.473	0.001
Brand loyalty benefits from brand love.	0.128	0.022	5.868	0.000
The link between brand experience and brand loyalty is mediated by brand love.	0.012	0.013	0.004	0.021

r^* correlation coefficient, σ^{**} standard deviation

Fig 1 Conceptual model

