


Article

Building Brand Equity: The Impact of Brand Experience, Brand Love, and Brand Engagement—A Case Study of Customers' Perception of the Apple Brand in China

Muhammad Sohaib , Jacob Mlynarski * and Rui Wu *

School of Business Administration, Xi'an Eurasia University, Xi'an 710065, China

* Correspondence: jacob.mlynarski@outlook.com (J.M.); wurui@eurasia.edu (R.W.)

Abstract: Regardless of a customer's social status, wealth, or country of origin, Apple products have been notorious for establishing trends in regard to electronic devices. As of 2019, China accounted for 17% percent of all Apple sales. This has been made possible in large part due to Chinese customers' favorable image of the Apple brand and the positive experience with Apple products. This study aimed to examine the impact of brand experience, brand love, and brand engagement on brand equity. The brand-love mediation role between brand experience and brand engagement/brand equity was also explored. The conceptual framework was supported by social exchange and attribution theories. According to the analysis of 339 respondents from China, brand experience, brand love, and brand engagement significantly positively affects Apple's brand equity. Additionally, it was discovered that brand love demonstrates a significant mediating role between brand experience and brand engagement/brand equity. These findings can aid other manufacturers offering similar electronic products in China to adapt their marketing and competitive strategies in order to boost their brand equity and as a result sales revenue.

Keywords: social exchange theory; attribution theory; brand experience; brand engagement; brand love; brand equity; Apple brand; China



Citation: Sohaib, M.; Mlynarski, J.; Wu, R. Building Brand Equity: The Impact of Brand Experience, Brand Love, and Brand Engagement—A Case Study of Customers' Perception of the Apple Brand in China. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 746. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15010746>

Academic Editor: Hong-Youl Ha

Received: 28 November 2022

Revised: 20 December 2022

Accepted: 26 December 2022

Published: 31 December 2022



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Much has been said about the potential of the relationship between the customers and the brands they engage with. Companies consistently implement strategies aiming at ensuring that their brand is considered the first choice in the process of selection to consequently gain the loyalty of the customer in the form of further purchases. Further to that, marketers are focusing on developing effective communication strategies that target customer markets and aim at increasing brand awareness [1,2]. As studies show, retail brands have already shifted from focusing on utilitarian aspects of the services and products that they offer towards the brand experience that is memorable and valuable to a customer [3]. This new paradigm in retail and sales enable brands to develop an emotional bond based on positive customer experience. In other words, this shift in approach to retail and increase in awareness of the new trends in marketing approaches has raised interest in how a brand may turn its strong corporate image and customer-brand relationship into profit.

A large body of literature has particularly focused on the psychological processes governing and leading to a given perception of brands by customers resulting from the customers' satisfaction with the product [4]. Pina et al. [5] refer to all those cognitive procedures of developing a relationship with a brand as brand love (B.LOV). It is typically shaped by the quality of products and services, emotions, and passion for the brand [6]. The literature, however, mentions other affective dimensions that play a vital role in how a brand is viewed by customers. While brand love refers to developing an affective emotion for the brand, brand engagement (B.ENG) stands for learning the brand [5]. Kumar and Nayak [7] explored the concept of brand engagement, which they define as a "deeper and

more meaningful connection between the company and the customer". Hollebeek [8] proposed a multi-dimensional construct of customer-brand engagement which includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Brakus et al. [3] expanded on this idea by introducing an additional sensorial antecedent that measures how consumers engage with the brand through their senses. All of those are said to be linked to the overall image and brand perception by customers, also known as brand equity (B.EQU). This is particularly significant as numerous researchers have emphasized the impact of brand equity on overall brand success, and consequently on sales [9–11].

Globalization and the emergence of consumer culture have had a profound effect on how certain brands are viewed, especially in countries considered developing [12]. Brand equity (BEQ) is particularly important in cultures where the need for uniqueness is reflected in the need for expressing differences from other consumers. For consumers from countries such as China or India, this particular sentiment toward American and European luxury brands is a way of asserting their individuality or social status [13]. At the same time, researchers indicate the contradictory connection between the significance of collectivist values in those cultures and the need, rather than the willingness, to engage with the brand to appear unique or to maintain face [14].

A brand that has fully and effectively utilized to its benefit those collectivist values is certainly Apple. Sun et al. [12] report that as of 2019, the Chinese market accounted for 17% of Apple's global sales amounting to 43.7 billion dollars, up from 2.8 billion dollars (4% globally) in 2010. This astounding growth is mainly attributed to iPhone sales. However, previous studies have rarely reflected on the growing popularity of other apple products such as the iPad, iWatch, MacBook, iMac, and others, which despite a price much higher than other brands' devices offering similar capabilities, still enjoy high sales in Mainland China. Many studies focused on the consumption of hedonic products from the perspective of customers' affective relationship with the brands. Those that focused on customer-brand relationships discussed larger segments of a causal relationship [11] or focused on its narrow aspects such as social media marketing activities [15–17], electronic word of mouth [18–20], hospitality industry [21], or retail [22]. Further to that, other studies investigating the Apple brand did not include both brand love and brand engagement as antecedents of brand equity [23–25]. Also, some studies focused on specific generations i.e., gen Z [23], creating a viable gap in research that includes brand experience and brand engagement as antecedents of brand equity. The gap additionally included brand love as a mediating factor in how brand experience and brand engagement impact brand equity. On top of that, previous studies involving the Apple brand in China focused solely on iPhone [26,27] as the object of their research, often times neglecting other products offered by Apple.

The purpose of this study was to measure the general framework of building B.EQU via the utilization of B.EXP, B.LOV, and B. ENG by the using example of the Apple brand in China. To address the hypotheses, the study cross-validated the given data against the proposed conceptual framework. The hypotheses primarily focused on how B.EXP (and its antecedents: sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual) and B.ENG (cognitive processing, engagement, and activation) influence B.EQU through the mediating effect of B.LOV. To support the study with a strong theoretical foundation, this paper adopts two theories, namely the social exchange theory and the attribution theory. The interaction between the customer and the brand can easily be explained by both theories, as they fit the context of customer experience with the brand reflected in the related cognitive processes leading to eventual purchase and satisfaction with the brand.

This study will contribute to the existing theories by positioning the given variables, i.e., B.EXP, B.LOV, B.ENG, and B.EQU, within the framework of social exchange and attribution theories. This study also aims to confirm the mediating role of B.LOV as a predictor of B.ENG and B.EQU. Furthermore, understanding the mechanisms governing customers' perception of B.EQU can help other companies operating in Mainland China to potentially adjust their marketing strategies and objectives to increase the perceived B.EQU

among Chinese customers. The study objectives lead to the addressing of the following research questions.

RQ1. What is the impact B.EXP has on the B.ENG, B.LOV, and B.EQU of the Apple brand in Mainland China?

RQ2. What are the outcomes of B.LOV's direct effects and their mediating role between B.EXP and B.ENG/B.EQU?

RQ3. How does B.ENG influence the B.EQU of the Apple brand?

RQ4. What are the extended roles of social exchange and attribution theories in the proposed theoretical model?

The paper first reviews previous literature regarding B.EQU, B.EXP, B.LOV, and B.ENG, followed by the theoretical framework. Next, the methodology and findings are given, followed by the findings of the study with respect to the hypotheses. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing the theoretical and managerial implications, suggesting possible future directions in research related to the topic.

2. Theoretical Background

Cropanzano and Mitchell [28] describe the relationship between an individual and the enterprise in the context of purchase by using social exchange theory. They point toward a mutual causative relationship where one party's action may inevitably result in a response from the other, and vice versa [29]. That eventually leads to a set of exchanges that aim to maintain balance [30]. This could therefore be observed in, for example, the situation where the popularity of a certain product or its functionality might result in a company response, leading to further investments and developments in that area. This might trigger another response from the customers, ultimately leading to another round of marketing or development processes being initiated. Given the nature of this study and how social exchange theory explains the relationship between the consumer and the company, social exchange theory was therefore adopted in this study.

One of the primary assumptions of this paper's theoretical model is that B.EXP directly influences B.ENG, B.LOV, and B.EQU [11,29]. This could be explained by the attribution theory which describes the relationship between consumers and brands from a cognitive perspective. Attribution theory is defined as "a theory that describes the cognitive processes by which people determine the causes of [a given] behavior and events in their world" [31]. In other words, previous experiences would impact subsequent behaviors' [32]. Internal and external causes of behavior might be either attributed to one's identity or the perceptions associated with self-defined attributes that resulted from the cognitive processes. Also, external factors such as the brand's marketing activities or any form of interaction with the customer may result in positive outcomes of behavioral, affective, sensory, and intellectual attributes, enabling customers to develop a deep positive affect towards the brand [11] and possibly impacting B.ENG [25,29,33] as well as B.EQU [11,29].

As the social exchange theory [34] is insufficient in providing a holistic explanation to this study, attribution theory [32] was incorporated to extend the investigation into customers' purchasing motivation. The study aims to incorporate the theories advocating the impact of B.EXP and its antecedents on B.ENG [33] and B.EQU [11,29,35] which, according to studies, forms a tangible positive relationship. Both theories will also be extended by including the B.ENG variable and its related impact on B.EQU [36]. The framework also conceptualizes the use of B.LOV as a mediating factor that, according to previous studies, mediates B.EXP, B.EQU, and B.ENG [24,37,38]. The proposed study utilizes multiple assumptions and hypotheses from previous studies to develop a holistic framework for measuring customer-brand recognition in the form of brand equity (B.EQU). Figure 1 provides the details.

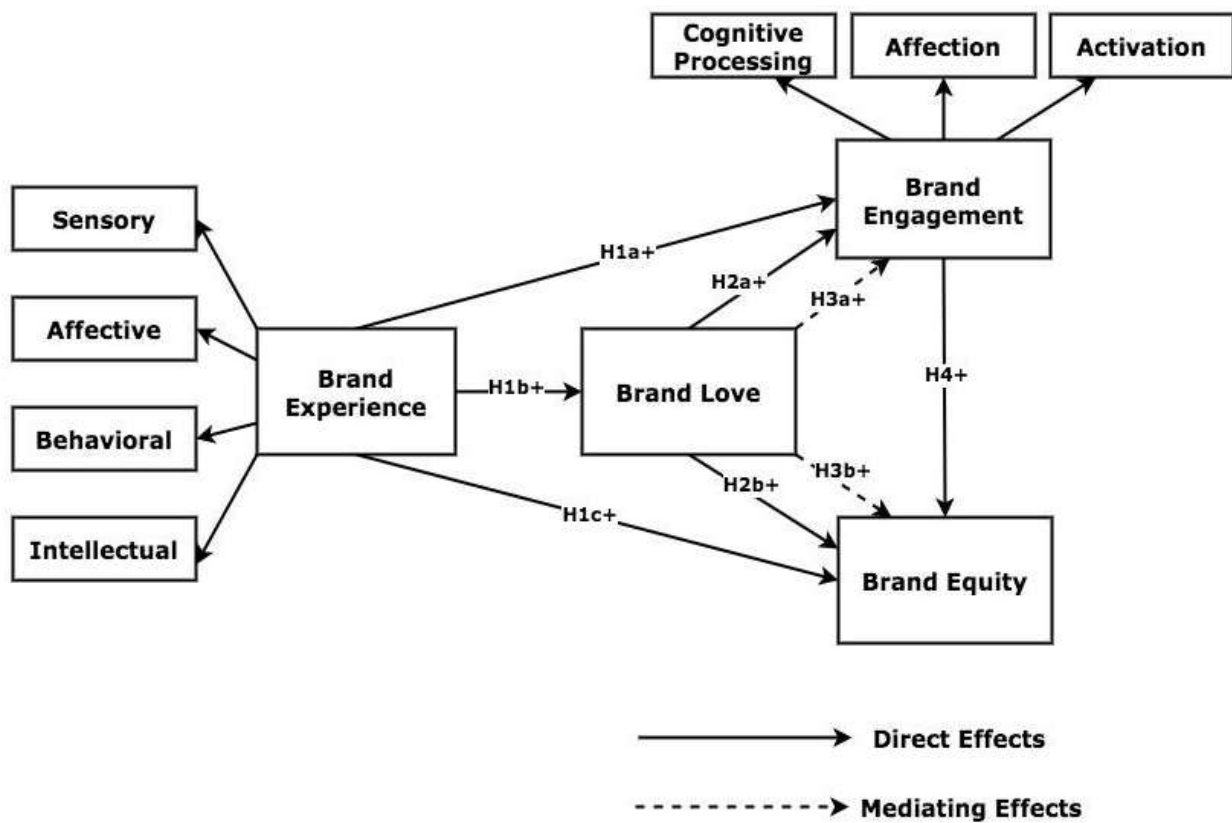


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

3. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

3.1. Brand Equity

From a business perspective, B.EQU appears to be the most important brand management construct and is considered crucial in maintaining a competitive advantage over other brands [39]. It also refers to the overall knowledge a customer has about the brand [40]. In other words, it is the added value associated with a given product or service, based on consumers' cognition or behavior [41]. Some studies [42,43] define brand equity (B.EQU) as the difference in the perception of unbranded and branded products or services that on the surface have the same level of marketing input or product attributes [44]. For consumers who are uncertain about the purchase, B.EQU will often be the decisive factor leading to the purchase of a product. B.EQU consists of four attributes, namely brand awareness, perceived quality, loyalty, and brand associations [44]. Product category is another factor impacting B.EQU. For technology-related products, perceived quality would be the key actor impacting equity [35] due to their shorter life cycle, suggesting a tangible relationship between B.EXP and B.EQU.

3.2. Brand Experience

Holbrook and Hirschman [45] were the first to conceptualize customer experience. Customer B.EXP develops when one enjoys the experiential and functional values of a brand [46]. Khan and Rahman [47] extended the idea, previously limited to purchase and consumption, to the experience with an organization. They also expanded the scope of influence beyond consumers toward the non-consumers, suggesting a tangible form of a brand to a non-consumer relationship. Customers nowadays tend to seek other benefits associated with the brand rather than the pure customer-to-organization relationship [48], and the experience they undergo while consuming the product may impact the selection of the brand in the future [49]. A brand can be experienced at multiple levels, depending on how much the customer is involved in the aesthetic, entertainment, or educational realm [50].

Those general stimuli can be categorized into four dimensions, namely intellectual, behavioral, sensory, and affective. These components can define how a customer feels about the experience with the brand as gained through sensory interaction, i.e., taste, smell, vision, or other senses (sensory). It can also involve sentimental or emotion-charged interactions (affective), actions taken by consumers who experience the product (behavioral), as well as a stream of cognitive thoughts emerging from the overall brand experience (intellectual) [11,29]. Therefore, Brakus et al. [3] define brand experience (B.EXP) as a subjective, internal consumer response to a brand in the form of sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral dimensions. In other words, positive B.EXP creates a causal relationship with B.EQU that further strengthens the relationship between customers and the brand [11,29]. Technology products, due to their frequent use in our daily lives, force consumers to experience new futures as well as the product itself, enhancing their love for the brand [51] and B.ENG [52]. A previous study by Shahzad et al. [53] investigated this tangible relationship between B.EXP and B.EQU and revealed that smartphone users are particularly susceptible to being positively affected by the brand via the product experience.

Several other studies pointed out the positive influence of B.EXP on other elements of a customer-to-company relationship [54–56], with particular emphasis on its positive relationship with B.LOV [11,25,55] and B.EQU [57], particularly in the context of Asian customers [11,29,58]. Additionally, some studies have also found B.EXP to have a positive impact on B.ENG [33], specifically in the context of hedonic brands. Hence, based on the previous studies, we theorize that brand experience has the following influence on other factors.

Hypothesis 1a: *B.EXP positively influences B.ENG.*

Hypothesis 1b: *B.EXP positively influences B.LOV.*

Hypothesis 1c: *B.EXP positively influences B.EQU.*

3.3. Brand Love

Brand love (B.LOV) is often defined as a form of emotional attachment to a particular brand name [59]. It involves a range of positive emotions such as the passion or excitement experienced by the consumer while being exposed to the brand. B.LOV also describes the emotional bond that a consumer develops towards a specific object that represents a given brand, and the distress a separation thereof may cause [60]. Those emotions can vary from weak to intense, as defined by the social exchange theory put forward by Blau [34]; understanding how they emerge might be crucial in influencing customers' purchasing decisions. Wallace et al. [6] list specific dimensions that affect B.LOV, namely the quality and passion for the brand, or brand loyalty [10,23,61,62], which Park and Namkung [38] claim to be one of B.EQU's dimensions. Roy et al. [63], however, provide a more specific list of criteria affecting B.LOV, i.e., romanticism, consumer delight, self-congruity, and satisfaction—listing them as the most essential components of B.LOV and word-of-mouth. Some studies also theorize how brand happiness and positive emotions influence customer behavior [64]. Another interesting finding reveals that love marks, i.e., love and respect for a particular brand, strengthens the relationship between a customer and the brand [65]. In other words, B.LOV develops in the minds of customers that feel that their preferences and individual needs are being met by the brand [11]. Most researchers agree that B.LOV is the result of B.ENG [24,66]. However, this study assumed B.LOV to be an antecedent of B.ENG in accordance with a relatively recent study conducted by Voorveld et al. [67] in which B.ENG resulted from the customers' emotions towards the brand. As B.LOV is a relatively new concept, research on its effects on customer purchasing decisions is still to be explored.

Hypothesis 2a: *B.LOV positively influences B.ENG.*

Hypothesis 2b: *B.LOV positively influences B.EQU.*

3.4. Brand Love as a Mediator

Numerous researchers reported B.LOV to have an overlaying influence on the overall relationship between the customer and the brand [24,68–70]. It was pointed out that B.LOV, as an affective emotion, contributes to how an individual perceives himself [71] as well as the actions surrounding the use of the brand's product. This connection at the psychological level leads to intense consumer response, possibly influencing other consumer-related associations through its mediation [55]. Studies have reported the impact of B.LOV on improving B.ENG via maintaining loyalty intentions among customers of luxury brands [23–25]. This is particularly valid in the context of this study if we consider Asian consumers and their engagement with Apple products. Also, a body of literature has reported the mediating effect of B.LOV on B.ENG, B.EQU, and B.ENG, specifically in the context of Chinese consumers [24,37,38] and Asian consumers of smartphones [72].

Hypothesis 3a: *B.LOV positively mediates the association between B.EXP and B.ENG.*

Hypothesis 3b: *B.LOV positively mediates the association between B.EXP and B.EQU.*

3.5. Brand Engagement

Customer engagement is referred to in marketing literature as a combination of affective, cognitive, and behavioral factors affecting the association with the brand [8,73–75]. According to the social exchange theory [34], B.ENG is a multidimensional construct [76] and refers to a holistic post-purchase customer experience [77]. B.ENG is a psychological process that defines the components required for the repeated purchases of products by customers [74,75,78]. Van Doorn et al. [79] refer to B.ENG as a behavioral manifestation of a customer's focus on the brand beyond the sole act or purchase. Other definitions relate strictly to the intensity of the customer's participation in the organization's events or the activities initiated by the brand [74]. A higher level of engagement will result in a stronger emotional bond between the customer and the brand that will subsequently result in a stronger intention to maintain this relationship, and as a result, repeat the purchase of the product [25,80]. In other words, positive B.ENG manifests itself in an increased brand influence and brand knowledge [81]. This is particularly visible in the case of mobile phones which, due to the nature of their functions, require users to constantly engage with the products. In this case, engagement with the product through apps such as social media or communicators exposes the consumers to the brand. Research so far has focused mostly on customer-related factors [82,83] affecting B.ENG, with little empirical evidence on the firm-based aspects of that influence and how they potentially impact B.EQU. Khan et al. [83] acknowledged B.ENG as an influencing factor of B.EXP. However, their study focused mostly on the banking service industry. In terms of technology-based brands, Xi and Hamari [36] revealed that B.ENG directly influences B.EQU in the case of the online game industry. Those studies align with the previous studies on B.ENG and its impact on technology-related brands such as Apple.

Hypothesis 4: *B.ENG positively influences B.EQU.*

4. Methodology

4.1. Sampling and Data Collection

This study used the deductive approach to meet the research objectives and develop an understanding of the proposed associations. In social sciences, a deductive method is used to improve previously established theories [84,85]. Particularly, our study's conceptual model is investigated in the context of the Apple brand in China. The choice of the brand is based on the following motivations. First, Apple is one of the leading global brands with a 947.06 billion dollar value, which took first position as a global leading brand in 2022, beating the three global tech giants Google, Amazon, and Microsoft [86]. Second, the Chinese market is most lucrative for the Apple brand, as the working age between 16 to 59 years accounted for 63.4% of the total population size in 2020 [87]. Third, Apple's

products, i.e., the smartphone, took third position overall with 16% of the market share in China during 2021, and year-on-year unit sales increased up to 47% [88]. Finally, an affluent consumer base in China is a crucial driver for Apple's brand revenue and growth. Particularly, the urban population of over 75% in China will fall into the middle-income class by 2022. In 2025, Chinese consumers' spending is projected to reach up to 40% of the global spending on luxury brands [89]. Hence, it is essential that Apple's brand choice to be studied from the perception of China's intriguing market.

In the first quarter of 2022, the most popular online platform (<https://www.wjx.cn>) was used to conduct surveys in China. Given the popularity of this platform, it was used to facilitate collection from the local population. The QR code and survey links were promoted through the most popular social media platforms in China, i.e., WeChat and QQ. The survey form provided instructions about the study objectives, and the online survey form applied the restrictions for individuals who had never used Apple products. A convenience sampling technique was used to collect the data from Apple brand users in China. Non-probability convenience sampling is one of the most common sampling techniques used in social sciences and marketing-related studies [25,90] because it is an efficient way of collecting information in a limited time [91]. We received 386 total responses through online data collection. The initial screening was completed by following the stringent criteria to meet the study objectives. According to the straight-line and incomplete survey form methods, 47 records were removed. Finally, 339 records were considered appropriate for further procedures of data analysis. For structural equation modeling (SEM), the 5–10 per item response ratio was suggested [92]. According to Hair Jr et al. [92], a sample size of 300 to 500 is considered reasonable for variance-based SEM. Hence, this study sample size was justifiable for the empirical analysis of the proposed hypotheses. The demographics of participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics information of target sample.

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	201	59.29
Female	138	40.71
Age		
18–24	23	6.78
25–30	106	31.27
31–36	102	30.09
37–42	77	22.71
43 years above	31	9.15
Education		
Undergraduate or Diploma	229	67.55
Postgraduate	84	24.78
Above Postgraduate	26	7.67
Income		
Less than 5000 RMB	74	21.83
5001–10,000 RMB	183	53.98
10001–15,000 RMB	69	20.35
Greater than 15,000 RMB	13	3.84
Brand-EXP-Years		
Below and above one year	40	11.80
3–4 Years	144	42.48
4–5 Years	101	29.79
Above 5 years	54	15.93
Total Sample Size (N)	339	100.0

4.2. Measures

This study used well-established constructs from previous studies. The seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) was used to measure the adopted

items (see Appendix A). A total of twelve items measured the multidimensional B.EXP construct. The B.EXP was operationalized as a reflective-formative construct (Type II) which constitutes four first-order constructs, namely sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual, with each construct consisting of three measurement items adopted from Brakus et al. [3]. The construct B.LOV is measured with four items adopted from Wang et al. [93]. A total of ten items measured the B.ENG dimensions. B.ENG is also modeled as a reflective-formative construct (Type II) based on three first-order constructs, namely cognitive processing (three items), affection (four items), and activation (three items) adopted from Hollebeek et al. [94]. Regarding B.EQU, four items were adopted from Yoo and Donthu [44] and Kumar [95].

5. Results

The empirical model was measured by partial least square-SEM (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS v.3.2.8. The PLS-SEM technique provides the flexibility to gauge the multifaceted complex structural models and does not require strictly following the data normality assumptions [96] particularly appropriate in the marketing context [97]. The data were analyzed in two stages, assessing the measurement (outer) model and structural (inner) model.

5.1. Measurement Model

To assess the model recommended, a two-stage approach was used [98]. The outer model's internal consistency was measured with Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and factor loading values. Initially, we found that the B.EXP dimension's sensory item 2, affective item 3, behavioral item 3, and intellectual item 2 values were <0.35, <0.43, <0.28, and <0.52, respectively, which were below the threshold value. Hence, these items were dropped to achieve the recommended factor loading value, and the analysis was carried out again. The results revealed that the loadings of all constructs achieved the minimum recommended level of 0.70 [96]. In addition, adequate levels of internal consistency were attained for Cronbach's alpha and CR, with respective values >0.705 and >0.828. In order to estimate the model's convergent validity, average variance extracted (AVE) was used. All the AVE constructs' values were higher than the 0.50 threshold value. Therefore, the convergent validity of the model was achieved. Table 2 illustrates the results of Cronbach's alpha, CR, and AVE.

Table 2. Measurement (outer) model outcomes.

Constructs	Indicators	Loading	Alpha	CR	AVE
B.EXP	Sensory	0.717	0.776	0.856	0.598
	Affective	0.772			
	Behavioral	0.809			
	Intellectual	0.793			
B.LOV	Apple products are fantastic.	0.735	0.725	0.829	0.548
	Apple products help to make me happy.	0.736			
	I am passionate to get Apple products.	0.741			
	I have an excellent attachment to the quality of Apple products.	0.747			
B.ENG	Cognitive processing	0.781	0.705	0.836	0.629
	Affection	0.826			
	Activation	0.772			
B.EQU	It makes sense to use these Apple products instead of any other similar brand.	0.738	0.724	0.828	0.547
	Even if another brand's products offer the same features as Apple, I would still use Apple products.	0.735			
	If there were other brands as good as this Apple, I would still use Apple products.	0.737			
	If other brands did not differ from Apple in any way, I would still use Apple products.	0.747			

The common method bias (CMB) concept was measured using the full collinearity evaluation technique [99]. For this purpose, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was calculated

to detect the collinearity issues in the data. All values of VIF show less than 3.0, which revealed no collinearity and CMB potential issues in the data. According to Hair Jr et al. [92], VIF values less than 3.0 reveal no biasing issues in the data and support the research results.

B.EXP and B.ENG were considered second-order reflective constructs [3,70,100]. These constructs were measured with a disjoint two-stage approach. In the first step, the constructs' lower-order scores were saved to proceed with the further process. The second stage used the average scores from the previous stage to measure the second order [101]. Using mode-A, first-order scores of factors including sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual quantified the B.EXP. Similarly, B.ENG was measured based on scores of first-order components, which are cognitive processing, affection, and activation.

Discriminant validity was determined using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. The HTMT ratio is a frequently employed method to assess discriminant validity [102]. This study's findings met the recommended criteria, i.e., a value lower than 0.90. Accordingly, discriminant validity was established using the HTMT criterion. Table 3 provides the HTMT results in detail.

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio: Discriminant validity.

	B.ENG	B.EQU	B.EXP	B.LOV
B.ENG				
B.EQU	0.777			
B.EXP	0.856	0.843		
B.LOV	0.694	0.705	0.890	

5.2. Structural Model

The structural model was measured with t-value, beta values, coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and the SRMR value for model fitness. To determine the empirical model's explanatory power, the R^2 values were checked with the recommended benchmark, i.e., $R^2 > 0.10$ [103]. R^2 values of the model were the following: B.ENG = 0.416, B.LOV = 0.446, and B.EQU = 0.451. This indicated that exogenous variables sufficiently predicted the endogenous variables in the structural model. We also measured the predictive relevance (Q^2) of the structural model [104]. The results showed that the Q^2 values of B.ENG = 0.256, B.LOV = 0.241, and B.EQU = 0.240 surpassed the recommended Q^2 value which is zero. This supported the predictive relevance of the empirical model. The SRMR outcome value of 0.071 was less than the recommended standard value of 0.08 [105], which proved that the structural model was sufficiently adjusted. The measurement results of the structural (inner) model met up with the threshold recommended values and overall showed the best model fit to meet this research's predictive aims.

To test the proposed hypotheses, a commonly applied 5000 sub-samples bootstrapping method was used with bias-corrected and accelerated function [106,107]. The bootstrapping was run in a two-tailed mode at a 0.05 significance level. The results supported the H1a–H1c, H2a–H2b, H3a–H3b, and H4, and the details can be found in Figure 2 and Table 4. The B.EXP had a strong and positive impact on the B.ENG (H1a: $\beta = 0.549$, $p = 0.000$), B.LOV (H2b: $\beta = 0.668$, $p = 0.000$), and B.EQU (H3c: $\beta = 0.392$, $p = 0.000$). Previous studies' findings validate that the interactive B.EXP of functional and hedonic brands both lead to engagement [33]. In contrast, a study found that customers' B.ENG positively influences the B.EXP of online banking [108]. An empirical study reported that B.EXP develops a positive perception towards a particular brand, which in turn promotes B.LOV in the minds of consumers [11,25]. A few previous studies discovered that B.EXP dimensions, i.e., sensory, intellectual, affective, and behavioral, positively enhance B.LOV [11,29]. Moreover, B.EXP impacts the B.EQU dimensions, i.e., brand awareness (B.AWA) and brand image (B.IMG). It has a larger positive impact on B.IMG than on B.AWA [46] and strengthens B.EQU [53]. The findings of other studies also revealed that B.EXP benefits lead customers toward the selection of a particular brand [49]. Hence, it recognizes that B.EXP has a causal relationship with B.EQU, which develops a relationship between customer and brand [49,109,110]. The

above discussions strengthen the results of this study. The previous studies' B.EXP findings were scattered and applied in different contexts, for example, in coffee brands, smartphone brands, and online stores [46,53], in contrast to our study results. Particularly, this study's outcomes revealed that in Chinese customers of Apple, B.EXP positively enhances B.ENG, increases the B.LOV, and develops the B.EQU. Therefore, H1a–H1c were accepted.

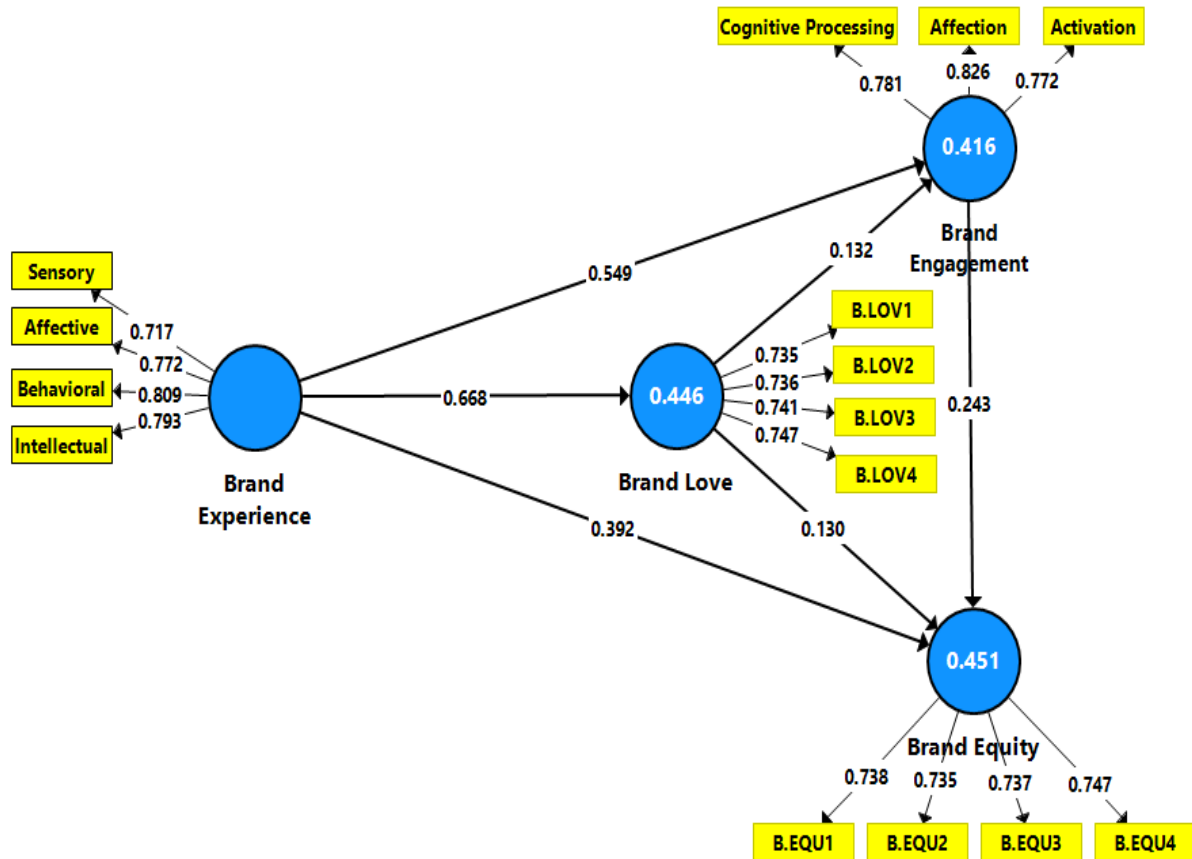


Figure 2. Structural model output.

Table 4. Hypotheses and structural results.

Direct Effects	Beta Value	t-Value	CI (2.5%)	CI (97.5%)	p Values	Support
Brand Engagement (R² = 0.416)						
H1a: B.EXP -> B.ENG	0.549 ***	9.914	0.436	0.652	0.000	Yes
H1b: B.EXP -> B.LOV	0.668 ***	18.518	0.594	0.737	0.000	Yes
H1c: B.EXP -> B.EQU	0.392 ***	6.122	0.266	0.515	0.000	Yes
Brand Love (R² = 0.446)						
H2a: B.LOV -> B.ENG	0.132 *	2.185	0.016	0.253	0.029	Yes
H2b: B.LOV -> B.EQU	0.130 *	2.336	0.026	0.245	0.020	Yes
Brand Equity (R² = 0.451)						
H4: B.ENG -> B.EQU	0.243 ***	4.317	0.134	0.353	0.000	Yes
Mediation effects						
	Indirect	Direct	CI (2.5%)	CI (97.5%)	p Values	Support
H3a: B.EXP -> B.LOV -> B.ENG	0.088	0.549	0.010	0.175	0.036	Partial
H3b: B.EXP -> B.LOV -> B.EQU	0.087	0.392	0.017	0.170	0.025	Partial

Note(s): "(t > 1.96 at * p < 0.05); (t > 3.29 at *** p < 0.001); (two-tailed)"; B.EXP = Brand Experience, B.ENG = Brand Engagement, B.LOV = Brand Love, B.EQU = Brand Equity.

B.LOV had a strongly positive effect on B.ENG (H2a: $\beta = 0.132, p = 0.029$) and B.EQU (H2b: $\beta = 0.130, p = 0.020$), supporting H2a–H2b. Our study results also explained that B.LOV, as a mediator, significantly impacts the associations of B.EXP and B.ENG/B.EQU. Hence, H3a–H3b were also supported. The outcomes revealed that B.LOV partially me-

diates the relationship between B.EXP and B.ENG. Similarly, B.LOV partially mediates the association between B.EXP and B.EQU. The mediation result's details are provided in Table 4. An individual's engagement with certain brands develops a strong psychological connection [75]. This connection between the customer and the brand leads to repurchase behavior, enduring attachment to the brand [74,75], and brand loyalty [25]. B.ENG has been frequently linked to B.LOV [24,66]; however, only a few studies have revealed that B.ENG is an outcome of B.LOV [67,72]. Few researchers have explored that brand loyalty is the outcome of B.LOV [10,23,61,62], which is one of the dimensions of B.EQU [38]. Hence, a study found that B.LOV positively increases the B.ENG of Facebook users [24]. In addition, several studies found the mediating role of B.LOV [24,70]. It is confirmed that previous literature supports this study's results. Importantly, our study highlighted the vital role of B.LOV for the Apple brand in China, which played a significant role in promoting the B.ENG and B.EQU of the Apple brand. In addition, B.ENG significantly improves B.EQU (H4: $\beta = 0.243$, $p = 0.000$), thus supporting H4. In recent studies, B.EQU was found to be a precursor of B.ENG [24]. However, in contrast, a study result revealed a positive impact of B.ENG on B.EQU in the context of online gamification brand communities [36]. These studies' findings are primarily aligned with our study and result in the development of a better understating of B.ENG, which significantly positively impacts the B.EQU of the Apple brand in China.

6. Discussion

This research broadens the academicians' understanding of B.EXP (affective, behavioral, intellectual, and sensory), B.LOV, B.ENG (cognitive processing, affection, activation), and B.EQU in the context of the Apple brand in China. First, the study outcomes reveal that the Apple B.EXP of Chinese customers positively increases B.ENG, B.LOV, and B.EQU. Interestingly, Chinese customers' B.EXP with Apple has a stronger impact on B.LOV, followed by B.ENG and B.EQU. In the past, few studies considered the B.EXP dimension's impact on brand loyalty from the perspective of Asian countries. For example, sensory and affective experiences were found to have a significant and positive impact on B.LOV [11,29,58], and cognitive engagement [21]. Furthermore, behavioral and intellectual experiences positively influence cognitive and behavioral engagements in the hospitality industry [21]. In an Indian hyper-brand market context, B.EXP was explored and revealed its positive and significant impact on B.LOV [58]. In any case, retail B.EXP also positively increased B.LOV from the viewpoint of Ikea customers in Europe [22]. Another study conducted in the airline industry found that passengers' B.EXP positively enhanced B.LOV and B.ENG [70]. The background knowledge of B.EXP is closely aligned with the arguments extracted from recent studies. Our in-depth study's results shed light on the behavior of Chinese Apple brand users; Chinese users with a rich experience of Apple products show deeper love for their beloved brand and are involved with brand-related activities such as recommending them to others (e.g., friends and colleagues), which shows their affection to the Apple brand. Most likely, Chinese users of Apple products are deeply touched by the quality, innovation, product design, and status quo. These users are willing to own other Apple products as well, as compared to the Android users who stick to a particular product. The Apple brand is regarded as one of the topnotch organizations in China with the highest B.EQU. Nevertheless, Apple's specific marketing strategies' influences cannot be void; as John Sculley said in 1997 to the Guardian, "People talk about technology, but Apple was a marketing company. It was the marketing company of the decade".

Second, this study found that the B.LOV of Apple brand users positively improves B.ENG and B.EQU in the settings of China. According to our understanding, B.LOV's role in B.ENG within the setting of the Apple brand was rarely found in the literature, and limited studies were aligned with our study results. Few scholars discussed how B.LOV improves the B.ENG and loyalty intentions of Gen Z for fashion apparel brands [23–25]. B.LOV and brand attachment are the dimensions of B.EQU that positively enhance B.EQU [24,37,38]. In particular to our study context, brand-loving Chinese customers of Apple products actively

engage with the brand and take part in the co-creation activities that lead to the strengthening of Apple's B.EQU.

Third, the Apple B.LOV of Chinese customers also plays a significant mediating role among B.EXP and B.ENG/B.EQU. A research study found that the association between value perception and its results is mediated through B.LOV [71]. Another study explored the mediation role of B.LOV between consumption experience and customer engagement in the context of Pakistani smart phone users [72]. Our study results get certain support from the literature. Particularly, this study has taken the case of the Apple brand in China to explore the B.LOV of Chinese users. Apple customers in China show their deep love for Apple products (e.g., iPhone, iWatch, MacBook). The continuous love for the Apple brand among Chinese customers leads to active B.ENG through the posting and sharing of positive B.EXP in popular Chinese social media (e.g., WeChat, Sina Weibo, etc.), which ultimately increases the Apple B.EQU.

Finally, the B.ENG of Chinese customers positively develops Apple B.EQU. These outcomes got some support from previous studies. However, these studies are scattered and too scarce to further explain the concepts in depth. Algharabat et al. [111] found that the B.ENG dimension known as cognitive processing positively influences brand loyalty, which is a facet of B.EQU. Another finding endorsed the positive impact of B.ENG on B.EQU [36]. According to the literature, brand loyalty is part of B.EQU. Hence, the Apple brand retains its brand-loving Chinese customers to gain a sustained comparative advantage over other competitors (e.g., Huawei, Oppo, Vivo, Xiaomi, Samsung, etc.) by maintaining their healthy relationship with loyal customers. The Apple brand also drives brand loyalty by leveraging social bonding, personal fortitude (the in-depth involvement and interest of individuals), and product superiority. Importantly, Apple is a most popular global brand that provides rich positive experiential benefits to its customers in the local market of China, resulting in a B.EQU—a great way to shape comparative advantage. Overall, this study provided very unique findings that underlined the particular roles of Apple customers' B.EXP, B.LOV, B.ENG, and B.EQU from the perspective of China.

7. Conclusions

This study provides thoughtful insights into Apple's B.EQU. The outcomes revealed that B.EXP, B.LOV, and B.ENG positively enhance the B.EQU of Apple brand products in the setting of China. In addition, social exchange and attribution theories are extended. Overall, this research article makes significant theoretical contributions and has managerial implications that should be taken into account.

7.1. Theoretical Implications

This study provides several contributions to the existing marketing literature. First, the outcomes reveal that B.EXP strengthens B.LOV and B.ENG and also improves the B.EQU of Apple products in the Chinese context. According to the attribution theory, people explain the causes of their behaviors/acts and the occurrence of an event in the world using their cognitive ability [31]. Certain behaviors might take place based on internal (e.g., perceptions) or external (e.g., previous experience) factors [11]. Hence, the previous experience (external factors) of brands might impact behavioral, affective, sensory, and intellectual attributes, which can subsequently influence B.ENG, B.LOV, and B.EQU.

Second, this study contributes to B.LOV by proposing its mediating role as a predictor of B.ENG and B.EQU to understand the Apple brand customers' love in China. Previously, a study explored the role of B.LOV as an outcome of its antecedents [29], and several have found that WOM, customer engagement, and loyalty are outcomes of B.LOV [112,113]; however, few results have contrasted from previous research showing that B.ENG leads to B.LOV [67]. In addition, B.LOV is considered to be essential to build a strong relationship between the customer and the brand [4,114], and this emotional bonding develops when customers have only positive B.EXP [115]. Most previous studies explored the B.LOV antecedents and outcomes [112], and the mediating role of B.LOV remains scarce [24];

furthermore, B.LOV's role needs to be explored [25]. Hence, our study provides particular B.LOV insights and expands the marketing literature by further investigating its role of increasing the customer's B.ENG and B.EQU under the settings of the Apple brand with distinctive demographics of customers in China.

Lastly, social exchange and attribution theories are extended by investigating B.EXP, B.LOV, B.ENG, and B.EQU concepts. The social exchange theory [34] fundamentals build on the following: (a) the exchange process of norms and rules, (b) the exchange of resources between two or more entities, and (c) the nature of relationships formed with exchange [28]. A cost-benefit analysis leads to a consistent relationship between entities (e.g., customer and brand/firm) as long as they have more benefits than costs, which refers to positive equity resulting from that relationship [116]. The cost-benefit analysis perspective of social exchange theory increases the active engagement of customers, which compares and contrasts the investment and expected returns on engagement constitutes on three dimensions, i.e., emotional, cognitive, and behavioral [117,118]. A research study emphasized the further exploration of customer engagement through the lens of social exchange theory for an in-depth study of other related constructs [28]. Hence, we studied B.ENG resulting in a positive B.EQU of the Apple brand in China through the lens of social exchange theory. In addition, we found that Chinese customers' positive Apple B.EXP and B.LOV triggered the active B.ENG. Our study expanded the social exchange theory from the perspective of the customer-brand mutual relationship of a particular global brand in China, i.e., Apple. However, past studies have mostly focused on the different aspects of customer B.ENG in online brand communities (e.g., Facebook) without taking the case of a particular global brand in the developing countries of Asia [24,119]. Moreover, the social exchange theory itself is not enough to explain all constructs of this study. Therefore, we proposed attribution theory [32] and extended the work through the investigation of positive Apple B.EXP (event), which motivates the Chinese customers to develop their strong customer-brand relationship and actively engage with the brand (reaction) resulting in B.EQU (subsequent effects of reactions, i.e., B.ENG and B.LOV).

7.2. Managerial Implications

This study provides very unique managerial guidelines for brand managers to enhance the B.EXP that fosters B.ENG and B.LOV, hence increasing B.EQU. Particularly, the constructs were measured in the context of Apple products in China. However, managerial guidelines are not only limited to the Apple brand. Samsung, Huawei, or Xiaomi can also carefully get specific insights from this study. First, outcomes reveal that B.EXP positively influenced B.ENG, B.LOV, and B.EQU. B.EXP is an entire process that thoroughly entices customer decision-making. This can occur at any stage of decision-making when customers search for products/brands or services to buy, use, or consume. B.EXP provides an authentic foundation for a brand's overall evaluation and builds a long-term relationship between the customer and the brand. Yang et al. [120] also explained that B.EXP is a factor responsible for setting a solid foundation for a consumer-brand relationship. It is also associated with the B.EQU dimensions (i.e., psychological, emotional, behavioral, and interactive). Hence, brand managers should carefully consider brand visuals (e.g., design, color, entertainment, and emerging technology features), emotional interactions, and cognitive thoughts for a brand marketing strategy that enhances B.EQU. These marketing strategies can be promoted by using social media platforms such as brand pages on WeChat, Sina Weibo, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

Additionally, this study revealed that B.LOV significantly strengthens B.ENG and B.EQU of the Apple brand from the perspective of Chinese customers. Marketing managers should understand that the foundation of B.LOV is developed over a specific period of consumption. Hence, providing experiential benefits to the customers becomes vital in the formation of B.LOV. It ultimately increases B.ENG and B.EQU. In any case, B.LOV also plays an important mediating role. Brand managers who want to position their brand to increase B.ENG and B.EQU should focus on B.LOV. Managers should consider how B.LOV

develops a strong emotional bond with its customers, which can prevent the deterioration of customer-brand bonding. This results in customers' strong love for the brand and the exhibiting of positive behaviors like B.ENG and the contribution to B.EQU.

Finally, Chinese customers' Apple B.ENG positively enhances B.EQU. Managers should understand the notion that a higher engagement with brands results in a stronger association between customers and brands. Particularly, effective experiential marketing can lead to the development of B.ENG. It can increase B.ENG using affective, behavioral, intellectual, and sensory experiences. This develops B.ENG, which in turn increases B.EQU. Furthermore, social media platforms might also play an important role in shaping B.EQU by involving customers in the co-creation activities of online brand pages or online brand communities.

7.3. Limitations and Future Work

Since no study is perfect, the study's flaws help to provide the basis for potential future research. First, this empirical study explored the roles of Apple B.EXP, B.LOV, B.ENG, and B.EQU in the context of China, which can limit the study's generalizability to other similar brands and countries. Future research may consider the B.EXP of other global and local brands from the perspective of Asian and European customers. This study investigated the Apple brand from the perspective of Chinese customers that represent a very strong collectivist culture. Therefore, future research studies might consider Hofstede's cultural dimensions which could provide distinct outcomes from the perspective of collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Second, this research only considered the effects of B.EXP and B.ENG as reflective second-order constructs. To better understand the individual impacts of B.EXP dimensions (i.e., sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual) and B.ENG dimensions (i.e., cognitive processing, affection, and activation) future research may hypothesize multi-dimensional influences on subsequent constructs in the view of our research. Third, our study investigated the B.EXP without categorizing it into hedonic and utilitarian experiences. Prospective studies in the future can bring in-depth insights from the viewpoint of the hedonic and utilitarian brand experiences of different industries (e.g., fashion, retail, and services) in the settings of schema theory [121]. In addition, hedonic and utilitarian values' direct and indirect effects in the context of our study will open new avenues for future research. Particularly, mediating roles of hedonic and utilitarian values can be explored between B.EXP and B.LOV. Finally, this study did not investigate the moderating impact and post-experience effects on subsequent constructs, which might be interesting points that grab the attention of researchers. Future research studies may explore the moderating effect of price fairness [90] and the relationship of quality's direct and indirect effects [85]. Academicians can also look at how repurchase intentions, brand loyalty, and brand evangelism are driven by B.EXP.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.S.; methodology, M.S. and R.W.; software, M.S.; validation, M.S. and R.W.; formal analysis, M.S.; investigation, M.S.; resources, R.W.; data curation, M.S.; writing—original draft preparation, M.S. and J.M.; writing—review and editing, M.S. and J.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The author(s) disclose receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: this work was supported by Xi'an Eurasia University.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: All original findings are included in the study. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Constructs (Apple Brand—Likert Scale-7)

Brand Experience—Source: Brakus et al. [3]

Sensory

In my opinion, Apple products positively impact my visual senses.
In my view, Apple products do not appeal to my senses (r).
According to my perception, Apple products are exciting.

Affective

Apple products impact my feelings.
Apple products are appealing emotionally.
I do not have a strong emotion for Apple products (r).

Behavioral

I engage in physical actions and behaviors (such as working out, jogging, or other actions) when I use Apple products.
The outcome of using Apple products is a physical experience.
Apple products are not action-oriented (r).

Intellectual

I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter Apple products.
Apple products do not make me think (r).
Apple products arouse my curiosity.

Brand Love—Source: Wang et al. [93]

Apple products are fantastic
Apple products help to make me happy
I am passionate to get Apple products
I have an excellent attachment to the quality of Apple products

Brand Engagement—Source: Hollebeek et al. [94]

Cognitive Processing

Using Apple products gets me to think about the Apple brand.
I think about the Apple brand a lot when I'm using Apple products.
Using Apple products stimulates my interest to learn more about the Apple brand.

Affection

I feel very positive when I use Apple products.
Using Apple products makes me happy.
I feel good when I use Apple products.
I'm proud to use Apple products.

Activation

I spend a lot of time using Apple products, compared to other electronic products.
Whenever I'm using electronic products (such as phones, tablets, or music-related products), I usually use the Apple brand.
Apple is one of the brands I usually use when I use electronic products (such as phones, tablets, or music-related products).

Brand Equity—Source: Yoo and Donthu [44] and Kumar [95]

It makes sense to use this Apple product instead of any other similar brand.
Even if another brand's products offer the same features as Apple, I would still use Apple products.
If there were other brands as good as this Apple, I would still use Apple products.
If other brands did not differ from Apple in any way, I would still use Apple products.

References

- Kamboj, S.; Yadav, M.; Rahman, Z. Impact of Social Media and Customer-Centric Technology on Performance Outcomes: The Mediating Role of Social CRM Capabilities. *Int. J. Electron. Mark. Retail.* **2018**, *9*, 109–125. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Yadav, M.; Rahman, Z. The Influence of Social Media Marketing Activities on Customer Loyalty: A Study of e-Commerce Industry. *Benchmarking Int. J.* **2018**, *25*, 3882–3905. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Brakus, J.J.; Schmitt, B.H.; Zarantonello, L. Brand Experience: What Is It? How Is It Measured? Does It Affect Loyalty? *J. Mark.* **2009**, *73*, 52–68. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Albert, N.; Merunka, D.; Valette-Florence, P. The Feeling of Love toward a Brand: Concept and Measurement. *ACR N. Am. Adv.* **2009**, *36*, 300–307.
- Pina, L.S.; Loureiro, S.M.C.; Rita, P.; Sarmiento, E.M.; Bilro, R.G.; Guerreiro, J. Analysing Consumer-Brand Engagement through Appreciative Listening on Social Network Platforms. *J. Promot. Manag.* **2019**, *25*, 304–313. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Wallace, E.; Buil, I.; De Chernatony, L. Consumer Engagement with Self-Expressive Brands: Brand Love and WOM Outcomes. *J. Prod. Brand Manag.* **2014**, *23*, 33–42. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kumar, J.; Nayak, J.K. Brand Engagement without Brand Ownership: A Case of Non-Brand Owner Community Members. *J. Prod. Brand Manag.* **2019**, *28*, 216–230. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hollebeek, L.D. Demystifying Customer Brand Engagement: Exploring the Loyalty Nexus. *J. Mark. Manag.* **2011**, *27*, 785–807. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Altaf, M.; Iqbal, N.; Mokhtar, S.S.M.; Sial, M.H. Managing Consumer-Based Brand Equity through Brand Experience in Islamic Banking. *J. Islam. Mark.* **2017**, *8*, 218–242. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Biçakcıoğlu, N.; İpek, İ.; Bayraktaroğlu, G. Antecedents and Outcomes of Brand Love: The Mediating Role of Brand Loyalty. *J. Mark. Commun.* **2018**, *24*, 863–877. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Huang, C.-C. The impacts of brand experiences on brand loyalty: Mediators of brand love and trust. *Manag. Decis.* **2017**, *55*, 915–934. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Sun, G.; Li, J.; Cheng, Z.; D’Alessandro, S.; Johnson, L. Consumer Personality Factors and iPhone Consumption in China. *J. Consum. Behav.* **2021**, *20*, 862–870. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kumar, A.; Lee, H.-J.; Kim, Y.-K. Indian Consumers’ Purchase Intention toward a United States versus Local Brand. *J. Bus. Res.* **2009**, *62*, 521–527. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Zhang, X.; Cao, Q.; Grigoriou, N. Consciousness of Social Face: The Development and Validation of a Scale Measuring Desire to Gain Face versus Fear of Losing Face. *J. Soc. Psychol.* **2011**, *151*, 129–149. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Algharabat, R.S. Linking Social Media Marketing Activities with Brand Love: The Mediating Role of Self-Expressive Brands. *Kybernetes* **2017**, *46*, 1801–1819. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Baena, V. Online and Mobile Marketing Strategies as Drivers of Brand Love in Sports Teams: Findings from Real Madrid. *Int. J. Sport. Mark. Spons.* **2016**, *17*, 202–218. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Sikandar, M.D.I.; Ahmed, Q.M. Impact of Social Media Marketing on Brand Love: Promoting Loyalty in the Restaurant Landscape of Pakistan. *Online J. Commun. Media Technol.* **2019**, *9*, e201927.
- Chakraborty, U. The Impact of Source Credible Online Reviews on Purchase Intention: The Mediating Roles of Brand Equity Dimensions. *J. Res. Interact. Mark.* **2019**, *13*, 142–161. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kumari, J.; Verma, R. E-WOM (Word of Mouth): A Technical Communication Tool. *SAMRIDDHI A J. Phys. Sci. Eng. Technol.* **2018**, *10*, 16–24.
- Sohaib, M.; Akram, U.; Hui, P.; Rasool, H.; Razzaq, Z.; Khan, M.K. Electronic word-of-mouth generation and regulatory focus. *Asia Pac. J. Mark. Logist.* **2019**, *32*, 23–45. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ahn, J.; Back, K.-J. Antecedents and Consequences of Customer Brand Engagement in Integrated Resorts. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2018**, *75*, 144–152. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Rodrigues, C.; Brandão, A. Measuring the Effects of Retail Brand Experiences and Brand Love on Word of Mouth: A Cross-Country Study of IKEA Brand. *Int. Rev. Retail Distrib. Consum. Res.* **2021**, *31*, 78–105. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Unal, S.; Aydın, H. An Investigation on the Evaluation of the Factors Affecting Brand Love. *Procedia-Soc. Behav. Sci.* **2013**, *92*, 76–85. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Machado, J.C.; Vacas-de-Carvalho, L.; Azar, S.L.; André, A.R.; Dos Santos, B.P. Brand Gender and Consumer-Based Brand Equity on Facebook: The Mediating Role of Consumer-Brand Engagement and Brand Love. *J. Bus. Res.* **2019**, *96*, 376–385. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Joshi, R.; Garg, P. Role of Brand Experience in Shaping Brand Love. *Int. J. Consum. Stud.* **2021**, *45*, 259–272. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Filieri, R.; Lin, Z.; D’Antone, S.; Chatzopoulou, E. A Cultural Approach to Brand Equity: The Role of Brand Mianzi and Brand Popularity in China. *J. Brand Manag.* **2019**, *26*, 376–394. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Luo, S.; Hamlin, R. A Cross Cultural Comparison of Brand Love in Consumer Brand Relationships: Is ‘Transmissive Brand Love’ a Potential Platform for Developing Brand Equity? *J. Brand Manag.* **2022**, *29*, 484–497. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Cropanzano, R.; Mitchell, M.S. Social Exchange Theory: An Interdisciplinary Review. *J. Manag.* **2005**, *31*, 874–900. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Safeer, A.A.; He, Y.; Abrar, M. The influence of brand experience on brand authenticity and brand love: An empirical study from Asian consumers’ perspective. *Asia Pac. J. Mark. Logist.* **2020**, *33*, 1123–1138. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Tekleab, A.G.; Chiaburu, D.S. Social Exchange: Empirical Examination of Form and Focus. *J. Bus. Res.* **2011**, *64*, 460–466. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

31. Mullen, B.; Johnson, C. *The Psychology of Consumer Behavior*; Psychology Press: Mahwah, NJ, USA, 2013; ISBN 0203782003.
32. Heider, F. *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*; John Wiley & Sons: New York, NY, USA, 1958.
33. Merrilees, B. Interactive brand experience pathways to customer-brand engagement and value co-creation. *J. Prod. Brand Manag.* **2016**, *25*, 402–408. [[CrossRef](#)]
34. Blau, P. *Exchange and Power in Social Life*; Wiley: New York, NY, USA, 1964.
35. Šeric, M.; Gil-Saura, I.; Mollá-Descals, A. Can advanced technology affect customer-based brand equity in service firms? An empirical study in upscale hotels. *J. Serv. Theory Pract.* **2016**, *26*, 2–27. [[CrossRef](#)]
36. Xi, N.; Hamari, J. Does Gamification Affect Brand Engagement and Equity? A Study in Online Brand Communities. *J. Bus. Res.* **2020**, *109*, 449–460. [[CrossRef](#)]
37. Souki, G.Q.; Chinelato, F.B.; Filho, C.G. Sharing is entertaining: The impact of consumer values on video sharing and brand equity. *J. Res. Interact. Mark.* **2021**, *16*, 118–136. [[CrossRef](#)]
38. Park, C.-I.; Namkung, Y. The Effects of Instagram Marketing Activities on Customer-Based Brand Equity in the Coffee Industry. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 1657. [[CrossRef](#)]
39. Verma, P. The Effect of Brand Engagement and Brand Love upon Overall Brand Equity and Purchase Intention: A Moderated-Mediated Model. *J. Promot. Manag.* **2021**, *27*, 103–132. [[CrossRef](#)]
40. Keller, K.L.; Lehmann, D.R. Brands and Branding: Research Findings and Future Priorities. *Mark. Sci.* **2006**, *25*, 740–759. [[CrossRef](#)]
41. Leone, R.P.; Rao, V.R.; Keller, K.L.; Luo, A.M.; McAlister, L.; Srivastava, R. Linking Brand Equity to Customer Equity. *J. Serv. Res.* **2006**, *9*, 125–138. [[CrossRef](#)]
42. Ailawadi, K.L.; Lehmann, D.R.; Neslin, S.A. Revenue Premium as an Outcome Measure of Brand Equity. *J. Mark.* **2003**, *67*, 1–17. [[CrossRef](#)]
43. Keller, K.L. Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity. *J. Mark.* **1993**, *57*, 1–22. [[CrossRef](#)]
44. Yoo, B.; Donthu, N. Developing and Validating a Multidimensional Consumer-Based Brand Equity Scale. *J. Bus. Res.* **2001**, *52*, 1–14. [[CrossRef](#)]
45. Holbrook, M.B.; Hirschman, E.C. The Experiential Aspects of Consumption: Consumer Fantasies, Feelings, and Fun. *J. Consum. Res.* **1982**, *9*, 132–140. [[CrossRef](#)]
46. Cleff, T.; Lin, I.C.; Walter, N. Can You Feel It?—The Effect of Brand Experience on Brand Equity. *IUP J. Brand Manag.* **2014**, *11*, 7.
47. Khan, I.; Rahman, Z. Brand Experience Anatomy in Retailing: An Interpretive Structural Modeling Approach. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* **2015**, *24*, 60–69. [[CrossRef](#)]
48. Ong, C.H.; Lee, H.W.; Ramayah, T. Impact of Brand Experience on Loyalty. *J. Hosp. Mark. Manag.* **2018**, *27*, 755–774. [[CrossRef](#)]
49. Zarantonello, L.; Schmitt, B.H. Using the Brand Experience Scale to Profile Consumers and Predict Consumer Behaviour. *J. Brand Manag.* **2010**, *17*, 532–540. [[CrossRef](#)]
50. Pine, B.J.; Gilmore, J.H. Welcome to the Experience Economy. 1998. Available online: <https://hbr.org/1998/07/welcome-to-the-experience-economy> (accessed on 8 October 2022).
51. Palusuk, N.; Koles, B.; Hasan, R. ‘All You Need Is Brand Love’: A Critical Review and Comprehensive Conceptual Framework for Brand Love. *J. Mark. Manag.* **2019**, *35*, 97–129. [[CrossRef](#)]
52. Kang, A. Brand Love—Moving beyond Loyalty an Empirical Investigation of Perceived Brand Love of Indian Consumer. *Arab Econ. Bus. J.* **2015**, *10*, 90–101. [[CrossRef](#)]
53. Shahzad, M.F.; Bilal, M.; Xiao, J.; Yousaf, T. Impact of Smartphone Brand Experience on Brand Equity: With Mediation Effect of Hedonic Emotions, Utilitarian Emotions and Brand Personality. *J. Islam. Mark.* **2018**, *10*, 440–464. [[CrossRef](#)]
54. Das, G.; Agarwal, J.; Malhotra, N.K.; Varshneya, G. Does Brand Experience Translate into Brand Commitment?: A Mediated-Moderation Model of Brand Passion and Perceived Brand Ethicality. *J. Bus. Res.* **2019**, *95*, 479–490. [[CrossRef](#)]
55. Ferreira, P.; Rodrigues, P.; Rodrigues, P. Brand Love as Mediator of the Brand Experience-Satisfaction-Loyalty Relationship in a Retail Fashion Brand. *Chall. Knowl. Soc.* **2019**, *14*, 278–291. [[CrossRef](#)]
56. Keiningham, T.L.; He, Z.; Hillebrand, B.; Jang, J.; Suess, C.; Wu, L. Creating innovation that drives authenticity. *J. Serv. Manag.* **2019**, *30*, 369–391. [[CrossRef](#)]
57. Chen, X.; Qasim, H. Does E-Brand Experience Matter in the Consumer Market? Explaining the Impact of Social Media Marketing Activities on Consumer-based Brand Equity and Love. *J. Consum. Behav.* **2021**, *20*, 1065–1077. [[CrossRef](#)]
58. Singh, D.; Bajpai, N.; Kulshreshtha, K. Brand Experience-Brand Love Relationship for Indian Hypermarket Brands: The Moderating Role of Customer Personality Traits. *J. Relatsh. Mark.* **2021**, *20*, 20–41. [[CrossRef](#)]
59. Carroll, B.A.; Ahuvia, A.C. Some Antecedents and Outcomes of Brand Love. *Mark. Lett.* **2006**, *17*, 79–89. [[CrossRef](#)]
60. Thomson, M.; MacInnis, D.J.; Whan Park, C. The Ties That Bind: Measuring the Strength of Consumers’ Emotional Attachments to Brands. *J. Consum. Psychol.* **2005**, *15*, 77–91. [[CrossRef](#)]
61. Alnawas, I.; Altarifi, S. Exploring the Role of Brand Identification and Brand Love in Generating Higher Levels of Brand Loyalty. *J. Vacat. Mark.* **2016**, *22*, 111–128. [[CrossRef](#)]
62. Coelho, A.; Bairrada, C.; Peres, F. Brand Communities’ Relational Outcomes, through Brand Love. *J. Prod. Brand Manag.* **2019**, *28*, 154–165. [[CrossRef](#)]
63. Roy, S.K.; Eshghi, A.; Sarkar, A. Antecedents and Consequences of Brand Love. *J. Brand Manag.* **2013**, *20*, 325–332. [[CrossRef](#)]

64. Schnebelen, S.; Bruhn, M. An Appraisal Framework of the Determinants and Consequences of Brand Happiness. *Psychol. Mark.* **2018**, *35*, 101–119. [CrossRef]
65. Jo, M.; Cha, J.; Kim, J. The Effects of Tourism Storytelling on Tourism Destination Brand Value, Lovemarks and Relationship Strength in South Korea. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 16495. [CrossRef]
66. Loureiro, S.M.C.; Gorgus, T.; Kaufmann, H.R. Antecedents and Outcomes of Online Brand Engagement: The Role of Brand Love on Enhancing Electronic-Word-of-Mouth. *Online Inf. Rev.* **2017**, *41*, 985–1005. [CrossRef]
67. Voorveld, H.A.M.; Araujo, T.; Bernitter, S.F.; Rietberg, E.; Vliegthart, R. How Advertising in Offline Media Drives Reach and Engagement with Brands on Facebook. *Int. J. Advert.* **2018**, *37*, 785–805. [CrossRef]
68. Long-Tolbert, S.J.; Gammoh, B.S. In good and bad times: The interpersonal nature of brand love in service relationships. *J. Serv. Mark.* **2012**, *26*, 391–402. [CrossRef]
69. Langner, T.; Schmidt, J.; Fischer, A. Is It Really Love? A Comparative Investigation of the Emotional Nature of Brand and Interpersonal Love. *Psychol. Mark.* **2015**, *32*, 624–634. [CrossRef]
70. Prentice, C.; Wang, X.; Loureiro, S.M.C. The Influence of Brand Experience and Service Quality on Customer Engagement. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* **2019**, *50*, 50–59. [CrossRef]
71. Bairrada, C.M.; Coelho, F.; Coelho, A. Antecedents and Outcomes of Brand Love: Utilitarian and Symbolic Brand Qualities. *Eur. J. Mark.* **2018**, *52*, 656–682. [CrossRef]
72. Junaid, M.; Hou, F.; Hussain, K.; Kirmani, A.A. Brand love: The emotional bridge between experience and engagement, generation-M perspective. *J. Prod. Brand Manag.* **2019**, *28*, 200–215. [CrossRef]
73. Mollen, A.; Wilson, H. Engagement, Telepresence and Interactivity in Online Consumer Experience: Reconciling Scholastic and Managerial Perspectives. *J. Bus. Res.* **2010**, *63*, 919–925. [CrossRef]
74. Vivek, S.D.; Beatty, S.E.; Morgan, R.M. Customer Engagement: Exploring Customer Relationships beyond Purchase. *J. Mark. Theory Pract.* **2012**, *20*, 122–146. [CrossRef]
75. Hapsari, R.; Clemes, M.D.; Dean, D. The impact of service quality, customer engagement and selected marketing constructs on airline passenger loyalty. *Int. J. Qual. Serv. Sci.* **2017**, *9*, 21–40. [CrossRef]
76. Osei-Frimpong, K.; McLean, G. Examining Online Social Brand Engagement: A Social Presence Theory Perspective. *Technol. Forecast. Soc. Chang.* **2018**, *128*, 10–21. [CrossRef]
77. Izogo, E.E.; Jayawardhena, C. Online Shopping Experience in an Emerging E-retailing Market: Towards a Conceptual Model. *J. Consum. Behav.* **2018**, *17*, 379–392. [CrossRef]
78. Bowden, J.L.-H. The Process of Customer Engagement: A Conceptual Framework. *J. Mark. Theory Pract.* **2009**, *17*, 63–74. [CrossRef]
79. Van Doorn, J.; Lemon, K.N.; Mittal, V.; Nass, S.; Pick, D.; Pirner, P.; Verhoef, P.C. Customer Engagement Behavior: Theoretical Foundations and Research Directions. *J. Serv. Res.* **2010**, *13*, 253–266. [CrossRef]
80. Zainol, Z.; Omar, N.A.; Osman, J.; Habidin, N.F. The Effect of Customer–Brand Relationship Investments’ Dimensions on Customer Engagement in Emerging Markets. *J. Relatsh. Mark.* **2016**, *15*, 172–199. [CrossRef]
81. Ranjan, K.R.; Read, S. Value Co-Creation: Concept and Measurement. *J. Acad. Mark. Sci.* **2016**, *44*, 290–315. [CrossRef]
82. Prentice, C.; Loureiro, S.M.C. An Asymmetrical Approach to Understanding Configurations of Customer Loyalty in the Airline Industry. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* **2017**, *38*, 96–107. [CrossRef]
83. Prentice, C.; Wang, X.; Lin, X. An Organic Approach to Customer Engagement and Loyalty. *J. Comput. Inf. Syst.* **2018**, *60*, 326–335. [CrossRef]
84. Sohaib, M.; Safeer, A.A.; Majeed, A. Role of Social Media Marketing Activities in China’s E-Commerce Industry: A Stimulus Organism Response Theory Context. *Front. Psychol.* **2022**, *13*, 941058. [CrossRef]
85. Sohaib, M. An Investigation of Repurchase Intentions in the Banking Industry: What Reason Do They Return? *SAGE Open* **2022**, *12*, 21582440211067228. [CrossRef]
86. Guerrieria, M. Valuable Global Brands in 2022? Available online: <https://www.kantar.com/inspiration/brands/what-are-the-most-valuable-global-brands-in-2022> (accessed on 13 August 2022).
87. Textor, C. Population Distribution in China in 2020, by Five-Year Age Group. Available online: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1101677/population-distribution-by-detailed-age-group-in-china/> (accessed on 10 October 2022).
88. Reuters Apple Grabs Record China Market Share as Q4 Sales Surge-Research. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/technology/apple-grabs-record-china-market-share-q4-sales-surge-research-2022-01-26/> (accessed on 30 October 2019).
89. GlobalData Thematic Research Apple Diversifies Supply Chain but Keeps China at the Center. Available online: <https://www.verdict.co.uk/apple-supply-chain-china/> (accessed on 20 November 2022).
90. Sohaib, M.; Wang, Y.; Iqbal, K.; Han, H. Nature-Based Solutions, Mental Health, Well-Being, Price Fairness, Attitude, Loyalty, and Evangelism for Green Brands in the Hotel Context. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2022**, *101*, 103126. [CrossRef]
91. Sekaran, U.; Bougie, R. *Research Methods for Business: A Skill Building Approach*; John Wiley & Sons: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 2016; ISBN 1119165555.
92. Wolf, E.J.; Harrington, K.M.; Clark, S.L.; Miller, M.W. Sample Size Requirements for Structural Equation Models: An Evaluation of Power, Bias, and Solution Propriety. *Educ. Psychol. Meas.* **2013**, *73*, 913–934. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
93. Wang, Y.-C.; Qu, H.; Yang, J. The Formation of Sub-Brand Love and Corporate Brand Love in Hotel Brand Portfolios. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2019**, *77*, 375–384. [CrossRef]

94. Hollebeek, L.D.; Glynn, M.S.; Brodie, R.J. Consumer Brand Engagement in Social Media: Conceptualization, Scale Development and Validation. *J. Interact. Mark.* **2014**, *28*, 149–165. [[CrossRef](#)]
95. Kumar, J. Understanding customer brand engagement in brand communities: An application of psychological ownership theory and congruity theory. *Eur. J. Mark.* **2021**, *55*, 969–994. [[CrossRef](#)]
96. Hair Jr, J.F.; Hult, G.T.M.; Ringle, C.M.; Sarstedt, M. *A Primer on Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)*; Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2021; ISBN 1544396333.
97. Hair, J.F.; Ringle, C.M.; Sarstedt, M. PLS-SEM: Indeed a Silver Bullet. *J. Mark. Theory Pract.* **2011**, *19*, 139–152. [[CrossRef](#)]
98. Hair Jr, J.F.; Sarstedt, M.; Ringle, C.M.; Gudergan, S.P. *Advanced Issues in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling*; Sage Publications: New York, NY, USA, 2017; ISBN 1483377385.
99. Kock, N. Common Method Bias in PLS-SEM: A Full Collinearity Assessment Approach. *Int. J. E-Collab.* **2015**, *11*, 1–10. [[CrossRef](#)]
100. Hepola, J.; Karjaluoto, H.; Hintikka, A. The effect of sensory brand experience and involvement on brand equity directly and indirectly through consumer brand engagement. *J. Prod. Brand Manag.* **2017**, *26*, 282–293. [[CrossRef](#)]
101. Sarstedt, M.; Hair, J.F., Jr.; Cheah, J.-H.; Becker, J.-M.; Ringle, C.M. How to Specify, Estimate, and Validate Higher-Order Constructs in PLS-SEM. *Australas. Mark. J.* **2019**, *27*, 197–211. [[CrossRef](#)]
102. Henseler, J.; Ringle, C.M.; Sarstedt, M. A New Criterion for Assessing Discriminant Validity in Variance-Based Structural Equation Modeling. *J. Acad. Mark. Sci.* **2015**, *43*, 115–135. [[CrossRef](#)]
103. Chin, W.W. The Partial Least Squares Approach to Structural Equation Modeling. *Mod. Methods Bus. Res.* **1998**, *295*, 295–336.
104. Stone, M. Cross-validated Choice and Assessment of Statistical Predictions. *J. R. Stat. Soc. Ser. B* **1974**, *36*, 111–133. [[CrossRef](#)]
105. Hu, L.; Bentler, P.M. Cutoff Criteria for Fit Indexes in Covariance Structure Analysis: Conventional Criteria versus New Alternatives. *Struct. Equ. Model. A Multidiscip. J.* **1999**, *6*, 1–55. [[CrossRef](#)]
106. Efron, B. Better Bootstrap Confidence Intervals. *J. Am. Stat. Assoc.* **1987**, *82*, 171–185. [[CrossRef](#)]
107. Sarstedt, M.; Ringle, C.M.; Hair, J.F. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling. In *Handbook of Market Research*; Springer: Berlin/Heidelberg, Germany, 2021; pp. 587–632.
108. Khan, I.; Rahman, Z.; Fatma, M. The Role of Customer Brand Engagement and Brand Experience in Online Banking. *Int. J. Bank Mark.* **2016**, *34*, 1025–1041. [[CrossRef](#)]
109. Biedenbach, G.; Marell, A. The Impact of Customer Experience on Brand Equity in a Business-to-Business Services Setting. *J. Brand Manag.* **2010**, *17*, 446–458. [[CrossRef](#)]
110. Iglesias, O.; Markovic, S.; Rialp, J. How Does Sensory Brand Experience Influence Brand Equity? Considering the Roles of Customer Satisfaction, Customer Affective Commitment, and Employee Empathy. *J. Bus. Res.* **2019**, *96*, 343–354. [[CrossRef](#)]
111. Algharabat, R.; Rana, N.P.; Alalwan, A.A.; Baabdullah, A.; Gupta, A. Investigating the Antecedents of Customer Brand Engagement and Consumer-Based Brand Equity in Social Media. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* **2020**, *53*, 101767. [[CrossRef](#)]
112. Gumparthy, V.P.; Patra, S. The Phenomenon of Brand Love: A Systematic Literature Review. *J. Relatsh. Mark.* **2020**, *19*, 93–132. [[CrossRef](#)]
113. Bergkvist, L.; Bech-Larsen, T. Two Studies of Consequences and Actionable Antecedents of Brand Love. *J. Brand Manag.* **2010**, *17*, 504–518. [[CrossRef](#)]
114. Albert, N.; Merunka, D. The role of brand love in consumer-brand relationships. *J. Consum. Mark.* **2013**, *30*, 258–266. [[CrossRef](#)]
115. Trivedi, J. Examining the Customer Experience of Using Banking Chatbots and Its Impact on Brand Love: The Moderating Role of Perceived Risk. *J. Internet Commer.* **2019**, *18*, 91–111. [[CrossRef](#)]
116. Beckers, S.F.M.; Van Doorn, J.; Verhoef, P.C. Good, Better, Engaged? The Effect of Company-Initiated Customer Engagement Behavior on Shareholder Value. *J. Acad. Mark. Sci.* **2018**, *46*, 366–383. [[CrossRef](#)]
117. Hollebeek, L. Exploring Customer Brand Engagement: Definition and Themes. *J. Strateg. Mark.* **2011**, *19*, 555–573. [[CrossRef](#)]
118. Hollebeek, L.D. Exploring Customer Engagement: A Multi-Stakeholder Perspective. In *Customer Engagement*; Routledge: London, UK, 2015; pp. 85–100, ISBN 1315725185.
119. Srivastava, M.; Sivaramakrishnan, S. The impact of eWOM on consumer brand engagement. *Mark. Intell. Plan.* **2020**, *39*, 469–484. [[CrossRef](#)]
120. Yang, J.; Zheng, R.; Zhao, L.; Gupta, S. Enhancing Customer Brand Experience and Loyalty through Enterprise Microblogs: Empirical Evidence from a Communication Framework Perspective. *Inf. Technol. People* **2017**, *30*, 580–601. [[CrossRef](#)]
121. Lurigio, A.J.; Carroll, J.S. Probation Officers' Schemata of Offenders: Content, Development, and Impact on Treatment Decisions. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* **1985**, *48*, 1112. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.