International Review of Management and Marketing

ISSN: 2146-4405

available at http: www.econjournals.com

International Review of Management and Marketing, 2026, 16(1), 461-471.

The Mediating Role of Brand Love between Brand Experience Dimensions and Word-of-Mouth Relationship: A Student Perspective of Smart Gadgets

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Received: 01 July 2025 **Accepted:** 22 October 2025 **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.32479/irmm.21445

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate how university students who use smart devices perceive brand love as a mediating factor between brand experience qualities and word-of-mouth. To achieve its objective, the research study employed a cross-sectional research design that was based on positivism as a paradigm and a quantitative technique. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to choose 300 participants to receive a fully structured, self-administered questionnaire. Students of Walter Sisulu University in Mthatha were the participants and data collected using an online questionnaire. The key findings under Smart PLS revealed that all hypothesized relationships are positive in a significant way. However, the association between Word-of-Mouth and Brand Love was determined to be the strongest with a path coefficient of β = 0,861; t = 43,613; P = 0 000, while the relationship between Affective Experience and Brand Love was the poorest determined by a path coefficient of β = 0,374, t = 5,118, P = 0,000, while still favorable. Policymakers should provide extra clear instructions on how to use smart gadgets as not only the young people use smartgets. The results of the research will help businesses selling smart gadgets make informed decisions regarding their marketing plans. Marketers who have an interest in segmenting the markets will benefit from controlling the consumer demographic traits. The results suggest that brand experience and word-of-mouth marketing are the suitable direct marketing channels or dimensions which customers have become most familiar with to truly fall in love with the brand.

Keywords: Affective Experience, Brand Experience, Brand Love, Intellectual Experience Sensory, Word-of-Mouth
JEL Classifications: D12

1. INTRODUCTION

The love for a brand is a complex and multifaceted development that has been investigated by scholars and practitioners in empirical studies that have shown that favorable effects of brand love include brand loyalty and a readiness to pay a premium, hence there is still a need for more comprehensive and integrative models considering the various causes and effects of brand loyalty (Rajeev, 2019). Although this association is positive, the amount of variance explained by customer happiness is minimal, according to a recent analysis of the connection between satisfaction and loyalty (Kumar and Kumar, 2022). The content-loyalty chain is widely supported. Nonetheless, the prediction significantly improved when additional variables were considered as facilitators, mediators, or antecedents. This suggests that researchers should think about expanding the models to include more factors to have a greater awareness of the satisfaction-loyalty relationship. Thus, the relationship between a brand and the behaviors of its customers is where the outcome, or quality of the brand relationship, originates.

A semantic procedure development, clarification, and validation is started by the activities that are taken by the brand and the consumer (Ferreira et al., 2022). This procedure can be viewed as the consumer's collection of experiences. Thus, the concept of

meaning-creation, elaboration, and reinforcement is consistent with the idea of brand experience, which is defined as unreliable within customer reactions (feelings, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral reactions generated by stimuli related to a brand that are part of a brand's development and belonging, packaging, communications, and environments (Brakus et al., 2019). The processes of meaning generation, elaboration, and reinforcement that are included in the concept of brand experience improve and prolong the relationship between the brand and the consumer (Kumar and Kumar, 2022).

Many products and services, like the iPhone from Apple, Samsung, Hisense, Disney Theme Parks, and W Hotels, are meant to provide memorable experiences for their clientele due to the growing significance of the customer experience, especially when it comes to brand loyalty (Gilmore, 2018). Regardless of the significance of brand perception and customer loyalty, companies' customer acquisition strategies typically prioritize the functional benefits of their customers over their brand experiences. However, a small body of marketing literature has looked at the intermediary mechanisms that underlie the connections between the two trusts.

Thus, the current study closes this gap and shows how crucial brand love is as a mediator in the connections among brand experience and word-of-mouth. Compared to other studies, this one provides a more comprehensive description of how, and to what degree, consumers build brand loyalty (Alturka, 2020). Furthermore, by defining the brand experience and love for the brand as a single construct, earlier research has tended to ignore their complexity (Barkus, 2019). This can ignore their distinct yet significant dimensions. Hence, in contrast to past research, this study looks at the outcome variable, or word-of-mouth, as well as four other aspects of the brand experience: sensory, effective, behavioral, and intellectual. Therefore, the present study offers a deeper examination of the characteristics of brand experience and brand love than previous research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical literature refers to the existing theories, models and concepts that are relevant to a research topic or mainly to support the research topic chosen (Palusuk et al., 2019). It reviews and assists in establishing existing theories, their relationships, and potential applications to a given research question. The field may comprise three layers of knowledge, with the third layer being true even though it frequently has only a tenuous connection to the reviews of primary and secondary literature. This study will be reviewing two theories that are in relations to, or rather support, the main three variables of the study. The theories are discussed below:

2.1. Propinquity Effect Theory

Kumar and Kumar (2022) defines this theory as a psychological theory that explains the tendency of individuals to form close relationships with people they repeatedly encounter, who in this case may be the users of smart gadgets, the students talking to one another in terms of their experience with the use of smart gadgets and how they have been treating them. This theory alone supports both the brand experience and word of mouth variables as they are indeed the variables that have previously been stated, researched, and investigated by the previous researchers but in different aspects than study. The theory puts emphasis on attraction increases because it is indeed a theory that increases familiarity (Polat and Cetinsoz, 2021). If you involve yourself in conversations with the other students that specifically talk about their day-to day-use of smart gadgets you end up as wellbeing familiar with many brands that you have never thought you could use nor hear about them, but because you are now familiar with them, it creates increased interest and love towards each brand of a smart gadgets and creates an urge to use them for your own benefit (Davies et al., 2019). It can lead to formation of friendships or romantic relationships between individuals who encounter each other regarding the use of certain branded smart gadgets, suggested by the theory (Pardo and Román, 2013). Its impact can be leveraged to gain true influence in business and personal relationships. By increasing physical or psychological proximity, individuals can increase the likelihood of forming strong relationships using smart gadgets (Davies et al., 2019). Overall, the Propinquity Effect Theory is an important theory in social psychology that explains the impact of physical and psychological proximity on interpersonal attraction and relationship formations (Safeer et al., 2020). By understanding this theory, individuals and businesses can improve their relationship and increase their influence in the world where the use of smart gadgets is mainly dominated by students.

2.2. Social Learning Theory

According to Unal (2010), this is a philosophy that suggests that people can learn from each other through observation, imitation, and modelling. If one student see another student with a better iPhone, branded cell phone or an iPad, the student will feel the pressure of wanting to have the same or similar smart gadget because they saw the brand from the other students, heard about it or got to know of their experiences with the brand and, in return, may automatically fall in love with the brand and also want to experience it themselves by using it personally (Roy et al., 2019). According to the theory, people learn by seeing the results of other people's actions (Duckett, 2023). It investigates the way cognitive and environmental factors interact to affect human behaviour and learning. Two key concepts were introduced to the theory by Coehl and Albert Bandura (2019): Behaviour is acquired from the environment through the process of observational learning, and a mediating mechanism occurs between stimulus and response. A crucial component of social learning theory is observational learning, which entails people picking up new behaviours from watching others (Strandberg, 2020). Modelling after people that are similar, of high rank, knowledgeable, rewarded, or nurturing characters in our lives is a common thing in the process. According to Schweidel (2022), the application or a positive relationship of this theory may be when it is used in studies that speak on brand love and brand experience but most specifically on word-of-mouth aspects as well as social work part, as it suggests that social behaviour is learning and behaviour imitation of others. By highlighting the significant roles that different internal processes play in learning individuals, the theory builds on conventional theories of behaviour (Babic-Rosario, 2020). It can be used effectively in a classroom or for research paper purposes to observe the behaviour and what one has to say regarding their own

experience with a certain brand and how they came to terms with falling on love with the brand of the smart gadget each student is currently using in their day-to-day life experiences (Gharib et al., 2020).

3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

To outline possible actions to be taken or to communicate an idea or thinking, a conceptual model is a framework that is originally utilized in research. This study's model is displayed in Figure 1 below, and it has been created by drawing on the literature that has been evaluated. This conceptual model identifies brand love as the mediator variable and the predictor factors under the characteristics of brand experience that include sensory, effective, behavioural, and intellectual aspects. The study's only outcome variable is word-of-mouth. In the next sections, the actual formulation of the study's hypotheses will be presented, along with the correlations among the proposed study constructs.

The present study proposes a conceptual paradigm upon which the following six hypotheses are based.

3.1. Sensory Experience

Sensory brand experience has a significant positive impact on brand loyalty. Research has shown that the five sensory cues: visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and taste, can all contribute to a strong sensory brand experience that fosters emotional attachment and brand love (Safeer et al., 2020). Specifically, studies have found that sensory marketing impressions and brand experiences in luxury retail stores have a positive impact on emotional attachment and brand loyalty. Additionally, extraordinary sensory experiences at travel destinations can shape destination brand love. Gender differences should also be considered when developing sensory brand experiences, as research indicates that the impact on brand loyalty may vary between men and women (Dissanayake et al., 2023). Overall, the evidence suggests that creating a multisensory brand experience is an effective strategy for building strong emotional connections and brand loyalty with consumers (Gharib, 2020). Hence, Hypothesis 1 reads as follows:

H_1: "Sensory experience dimension of brand experience has positive and significant effects on brand love."

3.2. Affective Experience

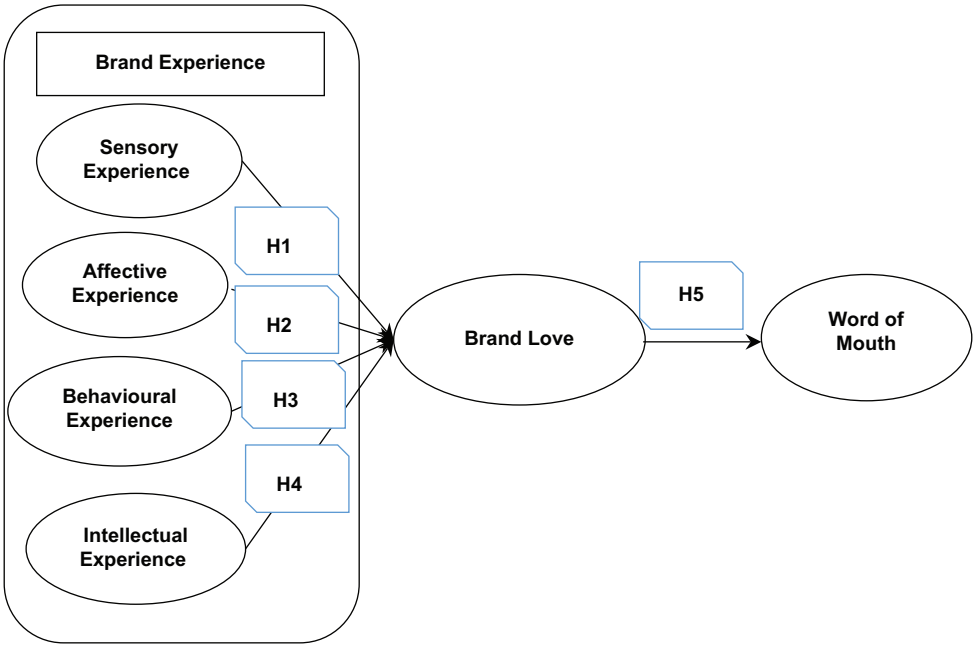
The affective dimension of brand experience, such as evoking positive emotions and feelings of belongingness, strengthens the emotional attachment and passionate connection that customers develop towards the brand (Ferreira et al., 2019). Customers who have a more positive and memorable affective experience with a brand are more likely to develop strong brand love (Karjaluoto et al., 2016). For example, in the context of online streaming services, the hedonic and emotional gratification that customers derive from the brand experience can trigger brand love (Ferreira et al., 2019). Additionally, the ability of online platforms to facilitate self-expression and activate nostalgic memories can further enhance the affective brand experience and foster brand love (Santos and Schlesinger, 2021). Overall, research indicates that the affective component of brand experience, which encompasses the emotional and sensory aspects of customer-brand interactions, is a key antecedent of the passionate emotional attachment known as brand love. Below is Hypothesis 2:

H_2: Affective experience dimension of brand experience has positive andsignificant effects on brand love.

3.3. Behavioral Experience

Brand experience has a positive impact on brand love, brand trust, and brand loyalty. Several studies have found that brand experience has a positive effect on brand love and brand trust (Khan et al., 2021). Consumers who have positive experiences with a brand are more likely to develop strong emotional attachments (brand love) and trust in that brand (Na et al., 2023). Brand love and brand

Figure 1: Conceptual model



trust also have a positive effect on brand loyalty. Consumers who love a brand and trust it are more likely to remain loyal to that brand over time. The relationship among brand experience, brand love, brand trust, and brand loyalty are complex (Joshi and Garg, 2021). Brand experience can directly influence brand love and trust, which, in turn, impacts brand loyalty. Factors like product involvement and brand community engagement can also moderate these relationships (Khan et al., 2021). The research indicates that delivering positive brand experiences is key to fostering strong consumer-brand relationships characterized by brand love, trust, and loyalty. Hypothesis 3 reads as follows:

H_3: Behavioral experience dimension of brand experience has positive and significant effects on brand love.

3.4. Intellectual Experience

According to the search studies, intellectual experience, which is one of the dimensions of brand experience, has a positive effect on brand love. A study by Joshi and Garg, 2021 found that intellectual experience has positive effects on brand love. This suggests that the cognitive and creative thoughts evoked by a brand's stimuli can contribute to a consumer's feelings of love towards that brand. Additionally, a research study by Brakus et al., 2019 explains that the intellectual and cognitive experience is one of the four key dimensions of brand experience, along with sensory, affective, and behavioural experiences. The authors state that intellectual experience includes analytical and creative thoughts caused by consumers' interactions with brands and shows to what extent a brand stimulates the curiosity and thoughts of consumers. Therefore, the research indicates that the intellectual component of a consumer's brand experience, which involves the brand evoking analytical and creative thinking, can positively influence the consumer's feelings of brand love. The more a brand can stimulate a consumer's intellect and curiosity, the stronger the consumer's emotional attachment and love for that brand may become. This leads us to Hypothesis 4:

H_4: Intellectual experience dimension of brand experience has positive and significant effects on brand love.

3.5. Word-of-Mouth

Brand love has a positive influence on word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. When consumers love a brand, they are more likely to engage in positive WOM and recommend the brand to others (Kohli et al., 2021). Several studies have found a direct and significant relationship between brand love and WOM: Brand love positively influences both electronic WOM (eWOM) and traditional WOM. Consumers who love a brand will consistently share positive information about it.Brand love in brand communities affects WOM both directly and indirectly. Strong emotional connections with a brand lead to increased WOM.For fashion brands, brand love is a central concept that affects WOM along with brand personality and image. Consumers who love a fashion brand are more likely to talk positively about it. However, the strength of the brand love-WOM relationship may depend on factors like consumer experience with the brand. More research is needed on how brand love influences WOM in different contexts and for various types of brands. In summary, the literature clearly shows that brand love is a key driver of positive WOM. Brands that can cultivate strong emotional bonds with consumers can benefit from increased advocacy and recommendations from their loyal fans. This leads us to Hypothesis 5 below:

H_5: Brand love has positive and significant effects on word of mouth.

3.6. Brand Love

Brand experience has a positive and direct effect on brand love. Several studies have found that brand experience is an important antecedent of brand love (Kohli et al., 2021). The affective component of brand experience, which involves the feelings and emotions that customers develop towards a brand, is a key driver of brand love. When customers have positive, memorable interactions and experiences with a brand, these can foster a strong emotional attachment and sense of belongingness, leading to brand love (Iqbal et al., 2021). Research has shown this relationship between brand experience and brand love in various contexts, including mobile phones, retail, hypermarkets, and online streaming services. The hedonic and emotional nature of many of these product categories seems to facilitate the development of brand love as an outcome of positive brand experiences. In summary, studies indicate that brand experience has a direct, positive effect on brand love (Sohaib et al., 2021) argues that providing customers with engaging, affective brand experiences is an effective way for companies to cultivate strong emotional bonds and brand love. Thus, below is Hypothesis 6:

H_6: Brand love mediates the relationship between brand experience dimensions and word-of- mouth in a significant way.

4. METHODOLOGY ASPECTS

4.1. Sample and Data Collection

Participants in this study were students from Walter Sisulu University in Mthatha, located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. To qualify, students needed to be actively enrolled during the data collection period. Their student cards, which displayed their names and enrollment years, served as the primary method of identification for eligibility. The sampling frame utilized the university's database, which lists enrolled students. Everyone in the population had an equal and known probability of being chosen, employing a basic random sampling technique (Weideman, 2014). For example, every name on the university's student list had an equivalent chance of selection. The questionnaires assured respondents that their identities would remain confidential and that the research was strictly for educational purposes. The sample size was calculated using the Raosoft sample size calculator (Raosoft Incorporated, 2004), considering a total student population of approximately 27,000, a 5% margin of error, a 90% confidence level, and a recommended response rate of 50%. This resulted in a minimum sample size of 379 respondents. Of the 379 distributed questionnaires, 300 usable responses were received, culminating in a response rate of 69.9%. It is essential to note that the respondents completed the questionnaire on a voluntary basis, and informed consent was obtained prior to their participation.

4.2. Respondents Profile

Table 1 presents the gender results of the 300 respondents who filled out the questionnaire. Of the participants in the study, 171 are females, represented 57.0% of the total respondents, followed

Table 1: Sample demographic characteristics

Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Gender		
Female	171	57.0
Male	106	35.3
Prefer not to say	23	7.7
Total	300	100.0
Age (year)		
18–25	135	47.7
26–34	92	30.7
36–45	35	11.7
46–55	27	9.0
55 and above	12	4.0
Total	300	100.0
Employment status		
Student	136	45.3
Employed	76	25.3
Unemployed	61	20.3
Self-employed	27	9.0
Total	300	100.0
Income level		
>R5000	171	57.0
R5000–R10000	56	18.7
R10000–R15000	27	9.0
R15000–R25000	22	7.3
R25000–R45000	17	5.7
<R45000	7	2.3
Total	300	100.0

by 106 male respondents represented by 35.3%, and the 23 participants who chose not to state their gender, representing a percentage of 7.7%. A questionnaire has been issued where 134 were between the ages of 18-25 years represented by 44.7%, 92 were between the ages of 26-35 years presented by 30.7%, 35 were between the ages of 36-45 years presented by 11.7%, 27 were between the ages of 46-55 years presented by 9.0% and lastly the ones that were between the ages of 56 years and above presented by 4.0 %. With regards to employment levels, results were obtained from 136 respondents represented by 45.3%, 27 respondents being students, self-employed represented by 9.0%, 61 of respondents being unemployed and represented by a 20.3%, and 76 respondents being employed represented by a 25.3%. The income level is represented by the results showing 171 respondents that earn less than R5000 being 57.0%, 56 respondents earning between R5000-R10000, represented by 18.7%, 27 respondents earning between R10000-R15000, represented by 7.3%, 22 earning between R15000-R25000 represented by 7.3%, 17 earning between R25000-45000 at 5.7% and lastly, the 7 respondents earing R45000 and above, represented by 2.3% of the results. In terms of education level results, a questionnaire was filled by 300 students as well and 88 respondents are at matric level which are students that have not yet acquired their degree which in this case can regarded as first year students, represented by 29.3%, 67 of them have a diploma represented by 22.3%, 104 of them have a degree and are represented by 34.7%, as well as 41 post graduates that are represented by 13.7% response rate.

4.3. Measurement Instrument and Questionnaire Design

The variables under investigation were operationalized based on previous studies. Modifications to the scales were made to reflect the study's context. The measurement scales, items used, and sources were interrogated into details to fit into the study. The scale indicators were attached to a continuum ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) on a Likert scale.

5. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

In this work, the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) method and Smart PLS software were used to statistically assess the measurement and structural models. According to Marcoulides et al. (2020), Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) is a multivariate statistical method that entails approximating the parameters of equations that are calculated simultaneously. Among the methods employed are latent growth curve models, factor analysis, regression analysis, pathway analysis, and simultaneous econometric equations (Stein, Morris, Hall & Nock, 2017). Furthermore, Smart PLS works well with small sample sizes and supports both exploratory and confirmatory research. Additionally, for multivariate normal distributions, it is resistant to deviations (Chinomona & Sandada, 2013). The path coefficients significance, level values, effect size, and prediction relevance were all considered in the structural equation modelling evaluation (Ali et al., 2018). To assess the collinearity of this structural model, the variance and tolerance increase factor (VIF) criterion — which is developed from Smart PLS — is often employed. Path coefficient bias is demonstrated by the significant presence amount of collinearity among predictor variables. Similarly, the variables are removed or combined within the framework model when collinearity is present.

Predictor constructs that exhibit collinearity have VIF values greater than 0.5 and a tolerance level less than 0.2. The collinearity scores, or collinearity Inner VIF values, were computed using the Smart PLS Results-Inner VIF values. Path coefficients were used to evaluate the structural model if any values are <5.0, indicating the absence of collinearity in the model.

5.1. Procedures Used for Testing the Moderation Relationship in the Model

The model's relevance is ascertained by evaluating its validity and reliability, which is accomplished by looking at Cronbach Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were used to estimate discriminant validity, while values larger than 0.5 were used to assess convergence dependability. This would show how the variables can evaluate the anticipated results (Hair, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2012). The questionnaire's reliability was examined. According to Taherdoost (2018), reliability is the extent to which results from a phenomenon's measurement are dependable and consistent with the capacity to discern between variability arising from measurement error and real differences owing to the underlying construct is another definition of reliability. When several measurements are similar, the measurement tool's error is decreased, and the power and interpretation of a later statistical analysis are improved. To investigate the mediating role of brand love between brand experience dimensions and word-of-mouth relationship: a student perspective of smart gadgets, resilience moderates the relationship between brand love and brand experience being the results of word

of mouth, the boot-strapping method with a substantial sample size of 379 bootstrap samples to deter-mine the significance of the interaction effect. The assessment of the moderating effect involved examining the significance of the interaction term and its impact on the relationship between brand love dimensions and word of mouth.

6. MEASUREMENT MODEL VALIDATION

The degree to which a methodology yields consistent and reproducible results is known as research dependability (Rouliez et al., 2019). To assess the dependability, the researcher used Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability scores. The results show that all variables fall within the allowed range of 0.6 to 0.90. As a result, all the measurement instruments employed in this study are reliable, except for intellectual experience, which yielded results that were <0.6 as shown in Table 2.

The reliability of the measurement was evaluated, and internal consistency with the scale was confirmed, using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. Every Cronbach's Alpha value was higher than the suggested cut-off of 0.6. All measurement instruments are dependable, as shown in the above Table, with the lowest α (0.792) reflecting intellectual experience and the greatest α (0.967) expressing brand love. The results of this study's use of Smart PLS4 to compute the CR indicate that all measures are deemed reliable given that every Composite Reliability value exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Mohd Dzin and Lay, 2021). The lowest CR value is 0.834, representing brand experience and the highest CR value is 0.967, representing brand love as shown in Table above. The current study used factor loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) from the following table to examine convergent validity using the methodology proposed by Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2022). AVE was used in this investigation and the results are shown in the table below; Compared to the recommended cut-off point of 0.5, four out of the seven AVE values were higher. The lowest AVE value is 0.759; representing word-of-mouth on behavioural experience, while 0.900 is the highest AVE value, representing behavioural experience. Factor loading was done for this investigation and is shown in the table below. Every factor loading was higher than the recommended cut-off of 0.5. 0.867 is the largest factor loading, signifying WOM, and 0.768 is the lowest, reflecting SE1. This demonstrates that convergent validity exists as depicted in Table 1.

6.1. Discriminant Validity

Convergent and discriminant validity were assessed using validity metrics. Below is a display of both test results with the use of convergent validity and Fornell Lacker's approach. The current study used factor loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) to examine convergent validity using the methodology proposed by Hair, Hult, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2022). AVE was used in this investigation and the results are shown in the table below; Compared to the recommended cut-off point of 0.5, four out of the seven AVE values were higher. The lowest AVE value is 0.759; representing word-of-mouth on behavioural experience, while 0.900 is the highest AVE value, representing behavioural experience. These results are illustrated in Tables 3 and 4 resctively below.

Table 2: Cronbach alpha and composite reliability 1

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)
AE	0,873	0,922
BE	0,900	0,937
BL	0,967	0,972
BeHE	0,822	0,918
IE	0,792	0,905
SE	0,924	0,943
WOM	0,949	0,963

AE: Affective experience, BeHE: Behavioural experience, BE: Brand experience, IE: Intellectual experience, SE: Sensory experience, BL: Brand love, WOM: Word of mouth

Table 3: AVE

Variables	Average variance extracted (AVE)
AE	0,798
BE	0,833
BL	0,813
BeHE	0,848
IE	0,827
SE	0,768
WOM	0,867

AE: Affective experience, BeHE: Behavioural experience, BE: Brand experience, IE: Intellectual experience, SE: Sensory experience, BL: Brand love, WOM: Word of mouth

Table 4: Fornell Lacker Criteria

Variables	AE	BE	BL	BeHE	IE	SE	WOM
AE	0,893						
BE	0,778	0,913					
BL	0,857	0,810	0,902				
BeHE	0,758	0,821	0,752	0,921			
IE	0,786	0,805	0,849	0,741	0,910		
SE	0,864	0,767	0,804	0,744	0,753	0,876	
WOM	0,762	0,702	0,861	0,666	0,753	0,714	0,931

AE: Affective experience, BeHE: Behavioural experience, BE: Brand experience, IE: Intellectual experience, SE: Sensory experience, BL: Brand love, WOM: Word of mouth

6.2. Structural Model Assessment (Path Analysis)

After the suggested measurement and structural model were examined and improved, path analysis was utilized to assess causal relationships between constructs (Henseler et al., 2016; Qonongo & Chinomona, 2021; Jollineau & Bowen, 2022). To get estimation findings that explain the nature of the link between these latent variables, structural equation modelling asks for some constructs to either directly or indirectly influence other constructs within the research model (Henseler et al, 2016; Hair et al., 2022). A table was used to demonstrate results which includes the proposed hypothesis, path coefficients, t-statistics, probability values (P-values), and whether the hypothesis is accepted or rejected, shows the estimation results from the hypothesis testing in this study. Higher path coefficients are known to indicate a strong relationship among constructs, and latent literature indicates that t>1.96 is an indication of a relationship significance (Beiranvand et al., 2022; Mousa & Othman, 2020; Purwanto, 2021).

6.3. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual

The researchers also evaluated the model fit using the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), which measures the average

standardized residuals between the observed and hypothesized covariance matrices (Chen, 2007). A good fit for the study model is indicated by an SRMR value of less than 0.08, with a lower value signifying a better fit (Hu and Bentler, 1998). In this instance, the theoretical model's SRMR was 0.041, indicating a good fit. Furthermore, the Chi-Square value was reported as 1,919.037, and the Normed Fit Index (NFI) was measured at 0.849, which met the recommended threshold for NFI (Afthanorhan, 2013). Table 5 presents the results for model fit.

6.4. Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

The coefficient of determination (R^2) values of the endogenous constructs was examined as part of the study's analysis. These values further supported the model's adequacy. The researchers examined the coefficient of determination (R^2) values for the endogenous constructs as part of the study's analysis. According to Schumacher et al. (2016), the R^2 value represents the percentage of variance in a variable that the independent variable groups can explain. Hair et al. (2019) suggest that R^2 values of 0.75, 0.5, and 0.25 can be considered substantial, moderate, and weak, respectively. The researchers reported the R^2 values for two constructs in the study: Brand Experience Dimensions and Word of Mouth. The R^2 values for these constructs were 0.816 and 0.640, respectively. These values indicate that the developed model has moderate to substantial explanatory power, as noted by Hair et al. (2019). This is depicted in Table 6.

Table 5: Model Fit Assessment 1

Items	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0,041	0,042
NFI	0,849	0,849

Table 6: R-Squared

Effect size	R-square	R-square adjusted
BL	0,827	0,824
WOM	0,741	0,741

BL: Brand love, WOM: Word of mouth

Table 7: Effect size (f2)

Research Variables	f-square
AE -> BL	0,161
BE -> BL	0,033
BL -> WOM	2,868
BeHE -> BL	0,000
IE -> BL	0,207
SE -> BL	0,008

AE: Affective experience, BeHE: Behavioural experience, BE: Brand experience, IE: Intellectual experience, SE: Sensory experience, BL: Brand love, WOM: Word of mouth.

6.5. Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

In addition to R^2 as a predictive criterion, Hair et al. (2019) suggest that researchers should also examine Q^2 to evaluate the predictive relevance of the structural model. The predictive applicability of constructs should be positive, with values greater than zero (Hair et al., 2019). Q^2, a table that measures the contribution of an exogenous construct to an endogenous latent construct. Q^2 values can be small (0.02), medium (0.15), or large (0.35) to assess the size of the Q^2 effect. In the study, the Q^2 values obtained were 0.824 for brand experience dimensions and 0.741 for word of mouth. These values fall within the required limit, indicating that the path model has adequate predictive relevance for the endogenous constructs.

6.6. Effect Size (f2)

According to Habtemaryam, Degoma, and Tsegaye (2025), the F-squared (f2) measure of effect size indicates the degree of correlation between a predictor and an endogenous variable in PLS-SEM. Cohen (1988) recommended using the F-squared statistic to assess the magnitude of impact in exploratory and predictive studies. An effect size $f^2 \geq 0.30$, $0.30 < f^2 \leq 0.50$, and $f^2 > 0.50$ are regarded as representing weak, moderate, and strong effects, respectively (Bliwise, 2006). According to Table 7, the f^2 values for brand experience dimensions and word of mouth are deemed strong.

6.7. Path Model

In addition to offering support for the study's theoretical underpinnings, path modelling enables a comprehensive examination of the connections among the variables and concepts in the research model. As stressed by earlier researchers, this method brought attention to the importance of the relationships between various constructs inside the model (Roche et al., 2011; Jenatabadi and Ismail, 2014). Through the examination of P-values and standardized regression coefficients, the study's structural model was evaluated; ultimately yielding results that supported or rejected the proposed hypotheses (Held and Ott, 2018). These results are depicted in Table 8 below.

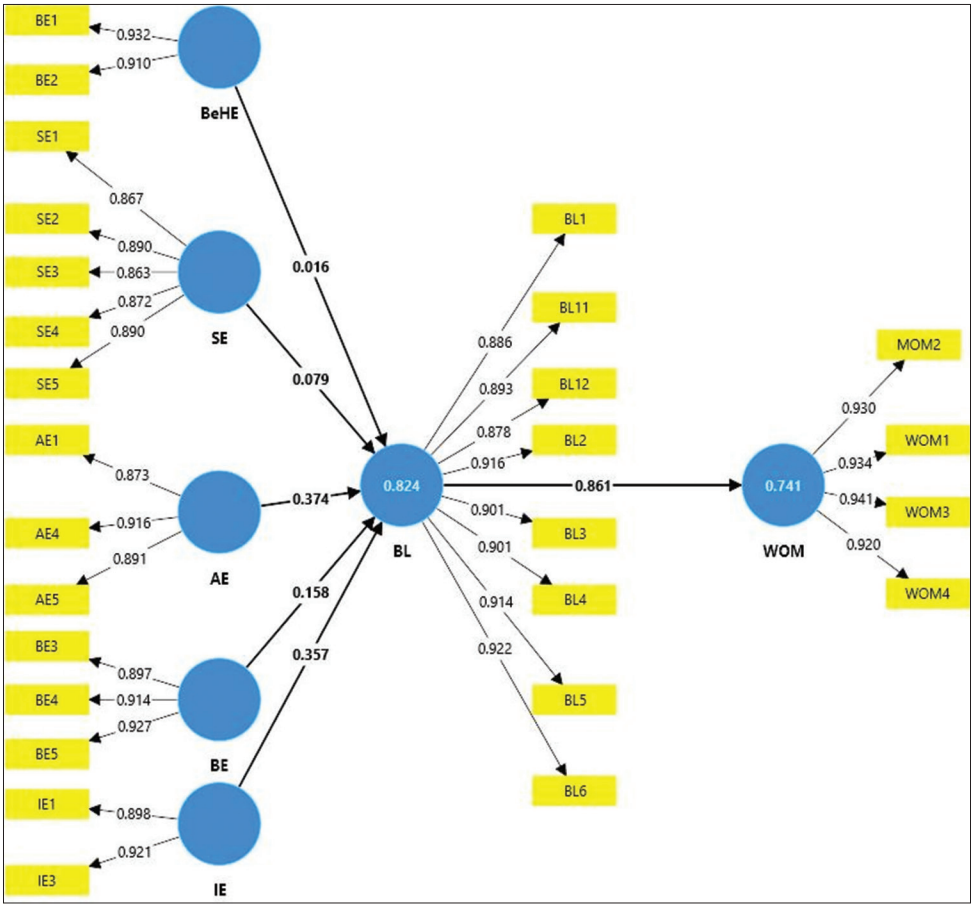
Six hypotheses were tested, of which two instruments (A2 and IE1) as they were not valid instruments, and path coefficients, are presented above (values in the arrows between variables). The significant levels were assessed using P-values and T-statistics. Hypotheses are considered significant when they meet a 95% or higher significance level (≥95%) or P≤0.05, according to Hair et al. (2022). According to Mia et al. (2022), a relationship cannot be considered acceptable if the t-statistics value is <1.96. These results are illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 8: Path Coefficient Model 1

Research Variables	Path coefficient	T-statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	Hypothesis Decision
AE -> BL	0,374	5,118	0,000	Accepted
BE -> BL	0,185	2,239	0,025	Accepted but insignificant
BL -> WOM	0,861	43,613	0,000	Accepted
BeHE -> BL	0,016	0,263	0,793	Insignificant
IE -> BL	0,357	6,248	0,000	Accepted
SE -> BL	0,075	1,259	0,208	Insignificant

AE: Affective experience, BeHE: Behavioural experience, BE: Brand experience, IE: Intellectual experience, SE: Sensory experience, BL: Brand love, WOM: Word of mouth

Figure 2: Final SEM model



7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This investigation put forth six theories. Two were determined to be unimportant, but the others were all accepted as positive. Word-of-mouth and brand love were shown to have the strongest correlation, with a path coefficient of β = 0,861; t = 43,613; P = 0 000. At β = 0,357; t = 6,248; P = 0.000, the link between Intellectual Experience and Brand Love was the most significant. Afterwards, β = 0,374, t = 5,118, P = 0,000, was the relationship between Affective Experience and Brand Love; following that, β = 0,016, t = 0,263, P = 0,0793, was the relationship between Behavioural Experience and Brand Love; following that, β = 0,075, t = 1,259, P = 208, was the relationship between Sensory Experience and Brand Love; and lastly, β = 0,185, t = 2,239, P = 025. The hypothesis presented in the second chapter suggests that the sensory experience dimension of brand love has a considerable and positive impact on brand love. The study's findings suggest that brand love and sensory experience are positively correlated. The study supports the findings of other studies that found a positive correlation between brand love and sensory enjoyment, like Onditi (2016) and Fang, Wang and Yan (2020). Despite this, it is crucial to keep in mind that customers in this situation evaluate the products' quality before making purchases because the quality will also determine if they like the product or not.

The findings show that affective experience on brand experience significantly influences brand love (t = 5.118; P = 0.000). For instance, researchers looking into the relationship between brand love and affective experience (Fang et al., 2020; Karunarathna et al., 2020; Bejan & Dabija, 2021) found that affective experience positively impacted brand love. Nekmahmud et al.'s (2022), which critically proved the existence of a favourable and significant association between affective experience and brand love, backed the same idea. After analysing H_3, it was determined that affective experience has a positive correlation with brand love with a path coefficient of 0.016. The findings also show that behavioural experience on brand experience positively effects brand love in a negligible way (t = 0.263; P = 0.793). These results are at odds with the body of research examined in Chapter 2, which consistently demonstrated that a brand's behavioural experience positively affects brand love. it was determined that intellectual experience and brand love have a positive correlation with a path coefficient of 0.357. The findings also showed that intellectual experience significantly influences brand love (t = 6.248; P = 0.000). These results are consistent with the body of research examined in Chapter 2, which consistently demonstrated that brand love is positively impacted by intellectual experience with a brand. After analyzing H_5, it was determined that there is a positive correlation between brand love and word of mouth, with a path coefficient of 0.861. The findings show that this relationship is statistically significant (t = 43.613; P = 0.000). Following the analysis of H_6, it was discovered that there is a positive association between brand love and brand experience and word-of-mouth, with a path coefficient of 0.185. The results indicate that there is statistical significance in this connection (t = 2.239; P = 0.025). H_1, H_2, H_3,

H_4, H_5, and H_6 each had individual path coefficients of 0.374, 0.158, 0.861, 0.016, 0.357, and 0,079, in that order. Overall, these results show that out of the six connections that were suggested, all were as expected positive; only two were not significant. Based on the results, brand love and word of mouth had the strongest relationship as a path coefficient value of 0.861 is realized, while the weakest and negative relationship was seen between affective behavioural experience and brand love as indicated by a path coefficient of 0.016.

7.1. Implications of the Study

The findings of this study contribute to the theoretical understanding of the role of brand experience dimensions and word of mouth. This study also explains the tendency of individuals to form close relationship with people they repeatedly encounter, who in this case may be the users of smart gadgets, the students talking to one another in terms of their experience with the use of smart gadgets and how they have been treating them. This theory alone supports both the brand experience and word of mouth variables as they are indeed the variables that have previously been stated, researched, and investigated by the previous researchers but in different aspects than study. The theory puts emphasis on attraction increases because it is indeed a theory that increases familiarity (Polat and Cetinsoz, 2021). If you involve yourself in conversations with the other students that specifically talk about their day-to day-use of smart gadgets you end up as wellbeing familiar with many brands that you have never thought you could use nor hear about them, but because you are now familiar with them, it creates increased interest and love towards each brand of a smart gadgets and creates an urge to use them for your own benefit (Davies et al., 2019). It can lead to formation of friendships or romantic relationships between individuals who encounter each other regarding the use of certain branded smart gadgets, suggested by the theory (Pardo and Román, 2013). Its impact can be leveraged to gain true influence in business and personal relationships. By increasing physical or psychological proximity, individuals can increase the likelihood of forming strong relationships using smart gadgets (Davies et al., 2019). Overall, the Propinquity Effect Theory is an important theory in social psychology that explains the impact of physical and psychological proximity on interpersonal attraction and relationship formations (Safeer et al., 2020). By understanding this theory, individuals and businesses can improve their relationship and increase their influence in the world where the use of smart gadgets is mainly dominated by students.

Furthermore, the study extends the application of social learning theory that according to Unal (2010), this is a philosophy that suggests that people can learn from each other through observation, imitation, and modelling. If one student see another student with a better iPhone, branded cell phone or an iPad, the student will feel the pressure of wanting to have the same or similar smart gadget because they saw the brand from the other students, heard about it or got to know of their experiences with the brand and, in return, may automatically fall in love with the brand and also want to experience it themselves by using it personally (Roy et al., 2019). According to the theory, people learn by seeing the results of other people's actions (Unal and Aydın, 2013). It investigates the way cognitive and environmental factors interact to affect human behaviour and learning. Two key concepts were introduced to the theory by Coehl and Albert Bandura (2019): behaviour is acquired from the environment through the process of observational learning, and a mediating mechanism occurs between stimulus and response. A crucial component of social learning theory is observational learning, which entails people picking up new behaviours from watching others (Strandberg, 2020). Modelling after people that are similar, of high rank, knowledgeable, rewarded, or nurturing characters in our lives is a common thing in the process. According to Perara (2019), the application or a positive relationship of this theory may be when it is used in studies that speak on brand love and brand experience but most specifically on word-of-mouth aspects as well as social work part, as it suggests that social behaviour is learning and behaviour imitation of others. By highlighting the significant roles that different internal processes play in learning individuals, the theory builds on conventional theories of behaviour (Babic-Rosario, 2020). It can be used effectively in a classroom or for research paper purposes to observe the behaviour and what one has to say regarding their own experience with a certain brand and how they came to terms with falling on love with the brand of the smart gadget each student is currently using in their day-to-day life experiences (Gharib et al., 2020).

7.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

First and foremost, the study employed a cross-sectional design in which respondents' data was collected once to get their viewpoints on the use of smart devices and how it affected their daily decisions as Walter Sisulu University students. Secondly, only Walter Sisulu University in Mthatha was the site of the primary data collection. While the study's conclusions were derived from a sizable sample of 300/379 respondents, the reader should proceed cautiously when interpreting and extrapolating the study's findings. Finally, if the study had used a mixed technique approach rather than just the quantitative approach, the study's conclusion on the variables would have been more balanced. Consequently, the results relied solely on numerical data. Given that the self-administered questionnaire was only available in English, it is probable that some respondents did not fully comprehend the questions. The first way that future researchers can improve this study is by enlarging the sample size and adding more respondents from various regions. Subsequent research endeavors ought to concentrate on modifying the mediating component and observing the ensuing effects on the outcome, input variable, and respondent reaction. In conclusion, future research endeavors could contemplate that a qualitative investigation would yield a deeper comprehension and fundamental drivers of customer purchasing choices. Notwithstanding the limitations of this study that have been outlined, it is possible to suggest that future research will address these shortcomings.

8. FUNDING

This research received no external funding.

9. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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