

Conceptualizing the link among brand experience, brand trust, and customer engagement

Mohd Suhail
Research Scholar
MJPRU Campus Bareilly

Tulika Saxena
Professor
MJPRU Campus Bareilly

Abstract

This conceptual paper explores the intricate relationships between brand experience, brand trust, and customer engagement. In today's experience-driven marketplace, creating strong, engaging, and trustworthy brand relationships has become imperative for firms aiming for long-term success. The paper proposes a conceptual framework that positions brand experience as a key antecedent to both customer engagement and brand trust. Furthermore, it emphasizes the mediating role of engagement in fostering trust. The study is grounded in relationship marketing and social exchange theory, offering valuable implications for both researchers and brand managers.

Keywords: Customer Engagement, Brand Trust, Brand Experience, Relationship Marketing, Consumer Behaviour

Introduction

The shift from transactional marketing to relational marketing has significantly altered the way businesses engage with their customers. While traditional marketing emphasized transactional exchanges, modern marketing focuses on building long-term relationships that enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty (Grönroos, 1994). Today's consumers are increasingly seeking meaningful, emotional experiences and deeper connections with brands, moving beyond mere product functionality (Schmitt, 1999). This shift has brought to light the importance of understanding key constructs that govern these consumer-brand interactions. Among these, customer engagement, brand trust, and brand experience stand out as essential components in developing a lasting brand relationship (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Customer engagement is defined as the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral investment a customer makes in their interactions with a brand, reflecting a deeper level of involvement than traditional brand loyalty (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Brand trust, on the other hand, represents

the confidence consumers place in a brand's reliability and ability to fulfill its promises (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Furthermore, brand experience is the sum of all the sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses a consumer has to brand-related stimuli, which plays a pivotal role in shaping customer perceptions and trust (Brakus et al., 2009). Given the interconnected nature of these constructs, this paper proposes a conceptual framework that links brand experience, brand trust, and customer engagement. By integrating these elements, this framework provides a foundation for future empirical research that will deepen our understanding of the dynamics between these constructs and their impact on brand relationships.

Conceptual Foundations

Brand Experience: Brand experience refers to a multidimensional construct encompassing consumers' internal responses—sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural—evoked by brand-related stimuli, such as the brand's identity, packaging, communication, and retail environment. It is subjective, varies in intensity and duration, and significantly influences consumer attitudes, trust, and loyalty toward the brand (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010). Brand experience encompasses the holistic perceptions a consumer forms based on sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses to brand interactions. These experiences may occur online, in-store, or through advertising, and contribute to how customers perceive and evaluate a brand (Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt, 1999).

Brand Trust: Brand trust is the willingness of consumers to rely on a brand, based on perceptions of its reliability, integrity, and competence. Trust is fundamental to relationship longevity and customer loyalty and is influenced by consistent performance, transparent communication, and positive experiences. Brand trust is a key component of the consumer-brand relationship and plays a crucial role in shaping customer attitudes and behaviours. It is commonly defined as the consumer's willingness to rely on a brand's ability to deliver on its promises (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). This trust is built over time through consistent brand performance, honest communication, and emotional assurance, leading to a feeling of security and confidence in the brand (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003). In broader terms of relationship marketing, trust is seen as the confidence a consumer places in the brand's reliability and integrity, which fosters long-term commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Brand trust not only enhances customer satisfaction and loyalty but also serves as a mediator between brand

experience and customer engagement, strengthening the consumer's emotional and behavioural connection with the brand.

Customer Engagement: Customer engagement reflects the degree of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural investment a customer places in their interactions with a brand. It is not limited to purchasing behaviour but extends to brand advocacy, co-creation, and active participation across digital and physical touchpoints. (Vivek et al., 2012) Customer engagement has emerged as a critical construct in understanding how consumers build meaningful and lasting relationships with brands. It is generally defined as the level of a customer's emotional, cognitive, and behavioural investment in specific brand interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Unlike traditional views that focus solely on satisfaction or loyalty, customer engagement reflects a deeper, more active connection, encompassing participation, advocacy, and emotional attachment (Brodie et al., 2011).

Conceptual Framework and Proposed Relationships

Constructs

- Brand Experience → Refers to consumers' sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses to brand-related stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009).
- Brand Trust → Represents the consumer's confidence in the brand's reliability and integrity (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003).
- Customer Engagement → Describes a customer's emotional, cognitive, and behavioral connection with a brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Brodie et al., 2011).

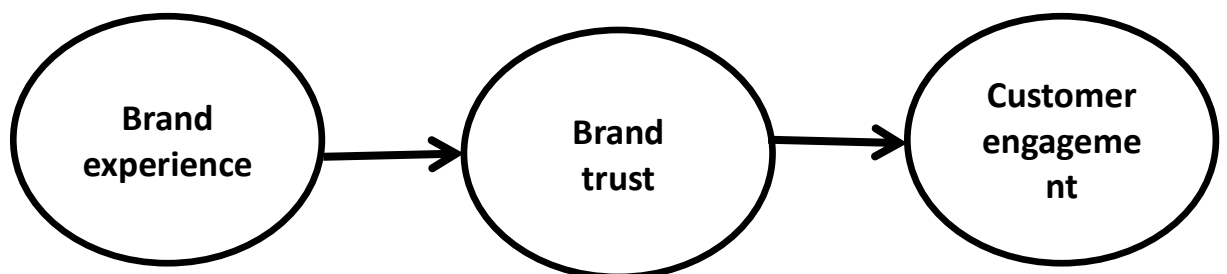


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

In accordance with the conceptual framework developed (see Figure 1) the paper proposes the following propositions-

Brand Experience → Brand Trust: Consistent, positive experiences reinforce a customer's belief that the brand is dependable. For instance, high-quality service and ethical practices embedded in the experience can directly foster trust. Brand experience has a significant positive effect on brand trust. Brand experience, encompassing sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses, creates meaningful and memorable interactions between consumers and brands (Brakus et al., 2009). Positive brand experiences shape consumer perceptions of the brand's consistency and reliability, laying the foundation for trust (Iglesias et al., 2011). When customers consistently encounter favourable experiences, they are more likely to perceive the brand as dependable and sincere, enhancing their trust in the brand (Sahin et al., 2011). Thus, brand experience serves as a crucial antecedent of brand trust.

Brand Trust → Customer Engagement: Customer who feel trusted with the brands are more likely to feel engaged with the brand. Trust leads to familiarity, which reduces uncertainty and builds confidence. Brand trust represents the confidence consumers place in a brand's competence and integrity (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Trust reduces uncertainty in customer-brand relationships and fosters a sense of emotional security, which encourages consumers to invest more of their attention, time, and effort into the brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014). When consumers trust a brand, they are more likely to exhibit behaviours such as active participation, advocacy, and long-term loyalty (Brodie et al., 2011). Consequently, brand trust becomes a key driver of customer engagement.

Brand experience → customer engagement: Engaging brand experiences stimulate emotional and cognitive responses that go beyond functional benefits, creating strong emotional ties with the brand (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010). These experiences motivate customers to connect, interact, and engage with the brand in both direct and indirect ways (Vivek et al., 2012). Experiential value leads to greater involvement, such as sharing brand-related content, providing feedback, or participating in brand communities. Therefore, a positive brand experience directly enhances customer engagement.

Brand trust as a Mediator: The relationship between brand experience and customer engagement may be mediated by brand trust. That is, brand experiences first drive brand trust which then leads to customer engagement. While brand experience can directly influence engagement, its effect is often channeled through brand trust. Positive experiences build trust, which in turn strengthens emotional and behavioral involvement with the brand (Sahin et al.,

2011). This mediation suggests that brand trust acts as a psychological bridge that translates experiential satisfaction into sustained engagement. The mediating role of trust has been supported in relationship marketing and branding literature (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), indicating its importance in the customer engagement process.

Theoretical underpinnings

This conceptual framework is grounded in several key theories that offer valuable insights into the dynamics of customer-brand relationships. These include Relationship Marketing Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Keller's Brand Resonance Model. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive understanding of how trust, engagement, and brand experience interact to shape customer perceptions and brand loyalty.

Relationship Marketing Theory

Relationship Marketing Theory focuses on creating long-term, mutually beneficial relationships between businesses and their customers, moving beyond one-time transactions to foster continuous engagement (Grönroos, 1994). Trust and engagement are central to this theory, as they enable firms to build sustained relationships that result in enhanced customer loyalty and satisfaction (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). According to this perspective, brand experience plays a vital role in developing trust, which, in turn, influences customer engagement and loyalty. By engaging customers in meaningful, ongoing interactions, brands can cultivate deeper emotional and cognitive connections, facilitating long-term relationship-building (Brodie et al., 2011).

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory, originating from sociology and applied to marketing, posits that customer-brand relationships are governed by the principle of reciprocity and perceived value (Blau, 1964). Consumers engage with brands based on the benefits they perceive from the interaction, such as functional, emotional, or social value. When brands provide positive experiences and consistently meet customer expectations, it fosters trust, and customers feel a sense of reciprocity, which drives engagement (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Trust developed through reciprocal and positive exchanges enhances customer loyalty, leading to increased engagement behaviours such as advocacy, co-creation, and repeat purchases (Vivek et al., 2012).

Brand Resonance Model

Keller's Brand Resonance Model (2001) outlines the process through which brands build strong, lasting relationships with customers. According to this model, brand resonance—the ultimate level of brand loyalty and emotional attachment—is reached when customers have a deep connection with the brand, supported by strong brand experiences and attitudes such as trust and engagement. The model highlights that brand experience is crucial in creating positive brand associations, which foster a sense of belonging and connection. Trust and engagement further enhance this resonance, as customers who trust a brand are more likely to become emotionally invested and form strong, lasting bonds with it (Keller, 2001). The resonance achieved through these experiences is the pinnacle of brand loyalty, representing a high level of customer attachment and advocacy.

Managerial Implications

This paper's conceptual framework offers valuable insights for managers seeking to enhance brand relationships with customers. The following managerial implications are drawn from the relationship between brand experience, brand trust, and customer engagement:

Brand Design: Managers should prioritize creating immersive and memorable brand experiences across all touchpoints, including digital and physical platforms, to foster emotional connections with customers (Brakus et al., 2009). By delivering consistent, engaging experiences, brands can differentiate themselves from competitors and build long-term relationships with customers (Schmitt, 1999). Designing experiences that resonate with customer emotions, values, and expectations is essential for creating positive brand perceptions and enhancing trust (Brodie et al., 2011). As consumer expectations evolve, brand experiences must be dynamic, adaptable, and integrated across various media and environments.

Engagement Strategies: To foster deeper customer engagement, managers should leverage interactive platforms, gamification, personalized communication, and customer communities (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Interactive elements and gamified features enhance customer participation, creating a sense of co-creation and emotional investment (Vivek et al., 2012). Personalized communication that addresses individual customer needs and preferences can strengthen emotional bonds and enhance engagement (Schmitt, 1999). Furthermore, fostering

customer communities, where customers can share experiences and provide feedback, builds a sense of belonging and attachment to the brand (Brodie et al., 2011).

Trust Building: Building and maintaining brand trust is crucial for long-term customer loyalty and engagement. Managers should focus on transparency, consistent delivery, and emotional connection as essential pillars of trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Transparent communication about product quality, brand values, and corporate social responsibility initiatives builds customer confidence and trust (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003). Consistently meeting customer expectations through high-quality products and services strengthens trust over time (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Additionally, establishing an emotional connection through personalized experiences and storytelling can further solidify customer trust (Brodie et al., 2011).

Measurement Focus: Brands should track engagement metrics alongside traditional performance metrics like customer satisfaction to better gauge customer involvement and loyalty (Hollebeek et al., 2014). While satisfaction remains an important measure, engagement metrics such as interaction frequency, social media mentions, and participation in brand-related activities provide deeper insights into customer commitment and brand affinity (Vivek et al., 2012). By measuring engagement, brands can more accurately assess the strength of their relationships with customers and identify areas for improvement or innovation (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

Research Implications and Future Directions

The proposed conceptual framework calls for empirical validation through surveys or structural equation modelling (SEM) to test the relationships between brand experience, trust, and customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011). Future research could explore moderators such as brand personality, cultural factors, or digital interactivity that may influence the strength of these relationships (Hollebeek et al., 2014).

Additionally, investigating the role of brand experience and engagement during crisis or recovery scenarios would provide valuable insights into how brands can maintain customer loyalty during challenging times (Vivek et al., 2012).

Finally, comparative studies across different sectors (e.g., retail, technology, hospitality) would offer a more nuanced understanding of how these constructs function across diverse industry contexts (Brakus et al., 2009).

Conclusion

This study underscores the interconnected roles of brand experience, customer engagement, and brand trust as critical drivers of strong and lasting customer-brand relationships. By synthesizing existing literature, it proposes a conceptual framework that integrates these constructs, emphasizing their mutual influence and relevance in enhancing brand value and loyalty. Grounded in established theories, the framework provides a solid foundation for future empirical investigations and offers actionable insights for practitioners aiming to strengthen brand-consumer bonds in competitive markets (Brakus et al., 2009; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Iglesias et al., 2011).

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