

The impact of brand love on brand experience, brand loyalty and willingness to pay: A case study for sneaker brands

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the complex relationships between brand experience, brand love, brand loyalty, and willingness to pay among Ho Chi Minh City students, specifically focusing on sneaker brands. Primary data was collected through an online survey utilizing Google Forms, distributed to university students (ranging from freshmen to seniors) across Ho Chi Minh City via their institutional email systems. The final sample comprised 273 complete and reliable responses, establishing a robust foundation for comprehensive data analysis.

Embracing brand love as a strategic component in brand management, this study seeks to illuminate how positive brand experiences contribute to brand love formation, subsequently affecting brand loyalty and premium payment propensity. The research objectives are threefold. First, it investigates the impact of brand experience on brand love development. Second, it analyzes the significant connections between brand love, brand loyalty, and willingness to pay premium prices. Third, the study explores brand love's mediating function in the relationships connecting brand experience with brand loyalty and willingness to pay.

By examining these intricate relationships, this research endeavors to advance understanding of how brands can leverage positive experiences to cultivate brand love, strengthening customer loyalty and enhancing purchase value. Furthermore, it contributes to expanding knowledge of brand love's crucial role in influencing consumer behavior, particularly within the fashion clothing sector among Ho Chi Minh City university students. The study's findings provide valuable insights for brand managers seeking to develop effective strategies that harness experiential elements to build stronger emotional connections with their target audience, ultimately driving loyalty and willingness to pay premium prices for preferred sneaker brands.

Key words: Brand Experience, Brand Love, Brand Loyalty, Willingness to Pay, Sneaker, Ho Chi Minh City

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, businesses face heightened competition and a proliferation of product and service choices. The centrality of the brand to customer loyalty has become a key topic in contemporary discussions, with sustaining customer partnerships recognized as integral to business success. Within a fiercely competitive market, the establishment and maintenance of customer loyalty have been emphasized as essential (Al-Suraihi et al. ¹)

Brand loyalty, a key factor enabling informed purchasing decisions and deterring customers from switching to competing brands, is underscored for its potential to bring substantial value to businesses (Suryawardani et al.; Sarwar et al. ^{2,3}). Loyal customers are the backbone of any business, driving repeat purchases and greater financial security. Unlike price-sensitive consumers who prioritize the lowest cost, loyal customers are more willing to pay for the

products or services they value. This demonstrates their trust and positive perception for the brand, making them less likely to be deterred by price increases and more likely to remain loyal even in a fluctuating market. The importance of brand loyalty is further accentuated by its potential to reduce marketing expenses, augment trade, and provide businesses with the necessary time to respond to competitive threats (Sarwar et al. ³). The development of brand loyalty, as argued by P.S. Coelho et al. ⁴, necessitates a belief in the brand, highlighting the psychological connection between consumers and the brands.

While scholars have long investigated consumers' attitudes toward brands, recent attention has shifted towards understanding consumers' emotional connection or "brand love" for brands (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi ⁵). Defined by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) ⁶ as the passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer harbors for a particular brand name, brand love

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transcends mere satisfaction. It encompasses hedonic products and brand self-expression (P.S. Coelho et al., 2018⁴). This emotional and passionate bond between consumers and brands has sparked heightened academic interest, with research intensifying in the extant literature (Albert, Merunka, and Valette-Florence; Huber, Meyer, and Schmid; Sarkar and Sreejesh,⁷⁻⁹)

Since brand love is rooted in emotional and passionate consumer-brand relationships, it can be strengthened through experiential factors, particularly brand experience (Roy, Eshghi, and Sarkar,¹⁰). According to Brakus¹¹ and Iglesias¹², brand experience, considered a vital contributor to customer brand satisfaction, plays a crucial role in influencing customer satisfaction levels, brand loyalty, and even willingness to pay (Roy, Eshghi, and Sarkar; Carroll and Ahuvia^{6,10}) There are many reasons why sneakers could be a good target for a business to focus on. According to the General Department of Customs, the average growth rate for Vietnam's footwear export during the 2019 - 2023 was 2.81% per year. Vietnam is currently the second-largest footwear export market in the world and is expected to maintain and grow its export turnover in the coming years. Vietnam has exported footwear products to about 150 countries worldwide. Among them, footwear exports to China and ASEAN during the first 11 months of 2023 increased compared to the same period last year, specifically 1.71 billion USD to China (up 11.1%) and 497 million USD to ASEAN (up 26.9%)¹³.

In this paper, we examine whether positive brand experiences lead to the development of brand love, which in turn strengthens brand loyalty and increases consumers' willingness to pay. Acknowledging brand love as a strategic construct in brand management (Kohli, Melewar, & Yen, 2014,¹⁴), the study's objectives are threefold: Firstly, it seeks to examine the influence of brand experience on brand love. Secondly, it aims to investigate the significant relationships between brand love, brand loyalty, and the willingness to pay. Finally, the study explores the mediating role of brand love in the relationships between brand experience and brand loyalty, as well as willingness to pay a premium price. By investigating these relationships, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of how brands can leverage positive experiences to cultivate brand love and ultimately drive stronger customer loyalty and higher purchase value, and contribute to the evolving understanding of brand love as a pivotal factor in shaping consumer behavior in the context of sneakers among university students in Ho Chi Minh City.

Regarding the novelty of this research, although the integration of "brand love" into the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty has been implemented in several developed markets (Batra et al., 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Bagozzi et al.^{5,6,15}) this study still makes specific contributions to consumer behavior theory and marketing theory through extending the empirical research model in the particular context of the Vietnamese market - where research on brand love remains limited (Le, 2021)¹⁶. Building upon previous research on the role of brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009¹¹) the mediating role of brand love and trust in brand relationships (Huang¹⁷) emotional aspects in young consumer-brand relationships (Hwang & Kandampully¹⁸), and the relationship between brand love and willingness to pay premium (Dwivedi et al.; Santos and Schlesinger; Laradi¹⁹⁻²¹), this study is one of the few that simultaneously integrates all four factors - brand experience, brand love, brand loyalty, and willingness to pay - within a unified model. This integration provides a comprehensive view of Generation Z consumer behavior, particularly in the context of the Vietnamese market. The research not only clarifies the role of brand love as a crucial mediating variable that connects and amplifies the impact from experience to actual purchase behavior (Albert & Merunka; Langner et al.; Rahman et al.; Botha et al.²²⁻²⁵ but also explores how brand love influences willingness to pay premium - an essential indicator for assessing brand value and competitive advantage (Netemeyer et al.; Bairrada et al.; Santos and Schlesinger²⁶⁻²⁸. This is particularly important in the sneaker industry - a highly symbolic product category where young consumers are often willing to pay premium prices for brands they love.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review and hypothesis development. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 and 5 present the empirical results and discuss the research finding. Finally, Section 6 concludes with limitations and future research directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Theoretical foundation

This study is built upon the following theoretical foundations:

- First, the Triangular theory of love, developed by Sternberg²⁹, plays a core role in this research. This theory identifies love as comprising three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Albert et

al.⁷ and Batra et al.³⁰ demonstrated that brand love encompasses emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, evaluation, attachment, and commitment. This theory provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the multidimensional nature of brand love. It explains how brand love impacts loyalty and willingness to pay premium prices through fundamental psychological mechanisms.

- Second, Experiential marketing theory, developed by Schmitt³¹, explains how to create comprehensive and engaging experiences. Brakus et al.¹¹ describe brand experience as "subjective, internal consumer responses, sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments". These stimuli can include brand design, packaging, communications, and environments. Prahalad & Ramaswamy³² emphasize that customer experience can be used to develop products and deliver real value to customers. This theory explains the mechanism of brand love formation from positive experiences.

- Third, the Consumer-brand relationship theory developed by Fournier³³ provides a framework for understanding the dynamic relationship between consumers and brands. Morgan and Hunt³⁴, contributed the concept of trust from interpersonal relationship theory in social psychology. Ramaseshan and Stein³⁵ indicate that through brand experiences, consumers connect with companies' personalities and create strong bonding relationships. This theory explains how relationship quality impacts behavioral outcomes, where Santos and Schlesinger²⁰ have demonstrated that brand love significantly influences brand loyalty.

- Finally, Perceived value theory by Zeithaml,³⁶ explains willingness to pay premium prices. Homburg et al.³⁷ define willingness to pay as the maximum price customers are willing to pay for a product or service. Keller³⁸ and Dwivedi et al.³⁹ have proven that deeply loyal consumers will pay higher prices for their preferred brands, and willingness to pay premium prices is influenced by brand loyalty and positive brand attributes. This theory explains the psychological mechanism behind consumers' willingness to pay higher prices when they have love and loyalty toward a brand.

These theories contribute to establishing a comprehensive theoretical framework that elucidates the complex interrelationships between brand experience, brand love, brand loyalty, and willingness to pay premium prices. Specifically, they provide the

theoretical rationale for understanding how positive brand experiences foster emotional connections (brand love), which drive behavioral outcomes such as enhanced loyalty and increased price tolerance. This integrated theoretical approach enables a more profound comprehension of consumer-brand relationship dynamics within the contemporary marketplace, particularly in the context of sneaker brands among Vietnamese young consumers.

Key concepts and hypothesis developments

Brand Experience

Brakus et al.¹¹ describe brand experiences as "subjective, internal consumer responses, sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments". The stimuli that appear as a component of a brand's identity and design can be a name, signage, and logo; as part of marketing communications and packaging, brochures, websites, advertisements; and the environment where it is sold or marketed, such as websites, events, and stores. The term "brand experience" stems from the principles of experiential marketing, as articulated by Schmitt³¹. Schmitt describes the aim of brand experience as the creation of comprehensive experiences that merge individual encounters into a unified whole. This is achieved through sensory perception, emotional response, cognitive engagement, interpersonal connection, and behavioral involvement. This implies that certain sensations might be favorable, stronger than others, and bad. While some brand encounters are purposeful and hence stay longer than others. According to Addis and Holbrook,⁴⁰ and Prahalad and Ramaswamy³², customer experience may be used to develop and modify goods while also providing actual value to customers. However, the experience might vary. Product experiences can be direct via physical touch or indirect through advertising (Hoch & Ha; Kempf & Smith^{41,42}). However, direct experience is more successful than advertisements (Wright & Lynch,⁴³).

To separate themselves from competition, businesses must offer engaging brand experiences that persuade people to continue purchasing from and staying loyal to the brand. Through these brand experiences, people relate to the company's personality and create strong bonds and relationships with it (Ramaseshan & Stein³⁵). Brand experiences, which serve as a vital source of personal feedback, may instill trust in consumers. Trust is derived from personal connection

theories in social psychology, which are regarded as an essential property of any worthwhile social interaction (Morgan & Hunt³⁴).

Generally, brand experience refers to a consumer's comprehensive and immersive interaction with a brand, encompassing emotional, cognitive, sensory, and behavioral dimensions. It is shaped by various stimuli, such as the brand's design, communication, and environment, influencing how consumers perceive and engage with the brand. A positive and engaging brand experience fosters strong emotional connections, trust, and loyalty, encouraging consumers to maintain their relationship with the brand over time. By providing memorable and meaningful experiences, brands can differentiate themselves from competitors and build lasting customer loyalty.

Brand Loyalty

Keller [38] defines brand loyalty as a combination of liking a brand and being committed to buying its products or services, even if other choices are available. In fact, loyalty is not a habit this factor includes the dedication of consumers and the commitment in the relationship between consumers and brands. Loyalty refers to repeat purchase, preference, commitment, and dedication instead of its meaning of action (Şahin et al.⁴⁴). Brand loyalty shows that consumers have a positive attitude towards a particular brand and tend to buy this brand regularly (Aaker⁴⁵). Consumers with high loyalty tend to recommend this brand to their relatives or friends. Brands cannot ignore that they operate in a highly competitive, digital world, where it becomes increasingly complex to secure customers' loyalty. The goal is to increase customer retention by making loyalty more convenient for the customer than non loyalty. The pursuit of customer loyalty is a perpetual one. It is more of a journey than a destination. There are no clearly defined guidelines to make loyalty marketing approaches easy in any given industry. But understanding the background and evolution of loyalty marketing can help simplify the strategy definition process.

In general, brand loyalty refers to the tendency of consumers to consistently choose a particular brand over others, demonstrating a strong preference and commitment to its products or services. This loyalty can manifest through repeat purchases, positive word-of-mouth recommendations, and a willingness to pay a premium for the brand. Factors influencing brand loyalty include customer satisfaction, emotional connection, perceived value, and trust in the brand. Overall, brand loyalty is crucial for businesses as it can lead to increased customer retention and long-term profitability.

Willingness to Pay

Willingness to pay (WTP) is the maximum price a customer is willing to pay for a product or service (Homburg et al.,³⁷). It's typically represented by a dollar figure or, in some cases, a price range. Minor variations in prices and corresponding consumer behavior can have notable effects on revenues and profits. Companies often adopt some business rules and follow a strategy that could be denoted as "intuitive" pricing. Remarkably, such a behavior is not limited to retailing or service industries only, where mark-up pricing is still the predominant practice. In contrast to what seems to be common practice, managers consider the knowledge of customers' responses to different prices as a cornerstone of marketing strategies, particularly in product development, brand management, value audits, and competitive strategy. Such estimates about the importance of WTP and customer value perception can be used to forecast market response to price changes and for modeling demand functions.

Brand Love

The foundation of Brand Love is the word love. The meaning of the term "love" varies across individuals, and each person interprets it differently (Junaid et al.⁴⁶). As defined by Khan⁴⁷, love is the confluence of human emotions, thought processes, and behaviors that result in intimate, passionate partnerships. According to Eklund,⁴⁸ human conduct demonstrates a reaction in the form of action, emotion characterizes a feeling of liking, and cognition is founded on profound recognition. Emotions of many different sorts make up brand love. As an illustration, consider a cheerful disposition, enthusiasm, appraisal, prejudice, attachment, commitment, etc. (Batra et al. Albert et al.^{5,7}). Related studies also show how vital these emotional components are for brand loyalty, such as attachment (Leckie et al.⁴⁹). In an earlier study, it was examined that his research provided empirical validation for the idea that distinct brands significantly impact consumer loyalty (Santos and Schlesinger, [20]). According to Yadav and Paul⁵⁰, a strong commitment to regularly making repeat purchases of a favored good or service in the future is known as brand loyalty. Brand experience factors have a positive impact on brand love. The better the experience with the products or services, the more love consumers will have for the brand (Kazmi & Khalique⁵¹). Brand loyalty is significantly and favorably impacted by brand love. Similar results were seen in other research that discovered brand love influences brand loyalty (Carroll and Ahuvia⁶). Deeply

brand-loyal consumers will pay a premium for their preferred brand therefore, pricing won't have a significant influence on their choices. Additionally, to the extent that they compare and assess pricing and optional brands, consumers trust the cost and estimation of their favorite brands (Keller³⁸). Furthermore, customers' willingness to pay a premium price is influenced by brand loyalty and positive brand attributes (Dwivedi et al³⁹). While scholars have identified some similarities between brand love and satisfaction, they acknowledge that these are two distinct constructs. Unlike brand satisfaction, brand love focuses on stronger emotions and arises from a long-term relationship between the consumer and the brand. Once brand love exists, consumers often rely on this emotional connection to purchase.

The Impact of Brand Experience on Brand Love, Loyalty, and Willingness to Pay

Brand experience plays a pivotal role in fostering brand love. Research by Joshi & Garg⁵² explores how brand experience acts as a moderator in shaping the connections associated with brand love, particularly through the example of branded clothing. Positive brand experiences enhance customers' understanding and appreciation of the brand, boosting their self-esteem and encouraging loyalty (De Oliveira Santini et al.⁵³). This experience encompasses four dimensions, each contributing to a holistic perception of the brand. For instance, sensory brand experiences evoke aesthetic enjoyment, excitement, and happiness (Schmitt³¹), while strong positive feelings can lead to mental arousal (Patwardhan & Balasubramanian⁵⁴). Furthermore, integrating intellectual, sensory, and emotional experiences enriches the overall brand connection. Marketers must recognize that brand experience is crucial for developing brand love, as this affection evolves gradually (Joshi & Garg,⁵²). Enhanced brand experience and customer involvement significantly influence purchase decisions, even when consumers already have a favorable view of the brand. This highlights the importance of experiential factors in shaping their decision-making processes (Lee and Turban⁵⁵).

- H1: There is a positive correlation between Brand Experience and Brand Love
- H2: There is a positive correlation between Brand Experience and Brand Loyalty
- H3: There is a positive correlation between Brand Experience and Willingness to Pay

The Role of Brand Love on Brand Experience, Brand Loyalty, and Willingness to Pay

The mediating role of brand love in the relationship between brand experience, brand loyalty, and willingness to pay is a crucial focus of our investigation. Akoglu³⁹ highlights that positive brand experiences directly influence customers' affection for the brand, fostering brand loyalty. As the strength of the brand experience increases, so does the level of brand affection, making brand love a key catalyst for enhancing customer loyalty. Supporting this view, research by Huang⁴⁰ in the mobile phone context reveals that brand experience indirectly influences brand loyalty through brand love. This finding aligns with existing literature, which indicates that factors like hedonic emotions (Ding and Tseng⁴¹) and brand passion (Rohra and Sharma⁴²) also mediate the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. Given the importance of this relationship in the mobile phone context, prior studies demonstrate a clear connection between brand experience and brand love (Huang⁴⁰), further establishing its link to a brand's financial performance (Bairrada et al.²⁷). While brand love can mediate the relationship between brand experience and financial outcomes (Dwivedi et al.³⁹), research also indicates a direct effect of brand experience on consumers' willingness to pay a premium price. Thus, understanding the complex interplay between brand experience, brand love, and willingness to pay is essential for grasping the overall impact of brand interactions on consumer behavior.

- H4: Brand Love mediates the positive relationship between Brand Experience and Brand Loyalty
- H5: Brand Love mediates the positive relationship between Brand Experience and Willingness to Pay

Brand Loyalty and Willingness to Pay

Brand loyalty and a customer's willingness to pay a higher price are closely interconnected (Sayman & Hoch,⁵⁶). When customers develop loyalty to a brand, their investment shifts from merely the product or service to the brand itself. This loyalty diminishes the importance of price as a deciding factor, as customers begin to recognize the brand's value beyond its monetary cost. Consequently, brands can command a price premium, charging more for their products because customers associate a higher value with the brand name (e.g., Finkelman; Reichheld and Sasser^{57,58}). Many authors agree that willingness to pay is a fundamental indicator of brand loyalty, reflecting how much more a buyer is prepared to spend on a brand compared to similar alternatives. One

significant outcome of this loyalty is that consumers become less sensitive to price increases, which enhances the effectiveness of marketing strategies and generally improves business performance. This connection arises because loyal customers form a strong emotional attachment to the brand, viewing it irreplaceable (Thomson et al.⁵⁹). Consequently, even when faced with lower-priced competitors, these customers are willing to pay extra for the brand they trust (Soedarto et al.⁶⁰). In essence, brand loyalty creates an environment where price becomes less significant, making customers more inclined to remain loyal to a brand they love, even at a higher cost.

- H6: Brand loyalty and willingness to are interrelated

RESEARCH METHOD

Data collection

The data collection was conducted through an online survey using Google Forms. The form was created and sent to students studying at universities in Ho Chi Minh City who have a favorite sneaker brand and have had previous experience buying their favorite sneakers. The final results collected 273 forms with complete information and a reliable basis for data analysis. The research group collected 294 responses from students at various universities in Ho Chi Minh City, out of which 21 responses were deemed invalid as they did not belong to the appropriate demographic for the survey.

Method

This research was conducted in Ho Chi Minh City, and 273 valid responses were collected for data analysis. The analytical approach was determined based on study objectives and data characteristics. A two-phase analytical methodology was implemented: First, SPSS was used for preliminary analysis, including reliability testing through Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (threshold $\alpha > 0.7$) and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for scale validation. Second, Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was performed using SmartPLS 4.0 to assess structural relationships and test hypotheses.

PLS-SEM was selected over covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM) for several reasons: (1) the exploratory nature of investigating brand love's mediating role in the Vietnamese market context, (2) model complexity involving multiple constructs with mediating pathways, (3) sample size of 273 respondents meets PLS-SEM requirements but may be insufficient for CB-SEM analysis, and (4) PLS-SEM's effectiveness in analyzing both reflective and formative measurement

models, particularly higher-order constructs (Hair et al.)⁶¹. Additionally, PLS-SEM is particularly suitable for prediction-focused studies examining effects on willingness to pay a premium - a key dependent variable in this investigation (Shmueli et al.⁶²)

The measurement approach utilized first-order reflective constructs for all variables in the study. Brand Experience employed eight measurement items spanning four conceptual areas: behavioral experiences (BEE1, BEE2), intellectual experiences (IE1, IE2), affective experiences (AE1, AE2), and sensory experiences (SE1, SE2). Additional constructs included Brand Love with nine measurement items (BL1-BL9), Brand Loyalty assessed through four items (BLO1-BLO4), and Willingness to Pay Premium evaluated using two items (WTP1-WTP2). The decision to employ first-order measurement structures supports analytical efficiency while ensuring model stability, given the available sample size, and maintaining construct validity. The PLS-SEM analysis followed standard procedures, including measurement model assessment (reliability, convergent and discriminant validity, multicollinearity testing), structural model evaluation (path coefficients significance through 5,000 bootstrap samples), and mediation analysis using bootstrap procedures to examine both direct and indirect effects for Brand Love's mediating role between Brand Experience and outcome variables.

Sample size

Kline⁶³ suggests a typical sample size for structural equation modeling (SEM) is around 200. According to Hair et al.⁶¹, the minimum sample size should be 5 times the number of observed variables (number of questions). Since the study included 24 observed variables, the team aimed to collect at least 120 survey responses. Therefore, the research team set a target of collecting at least 200 survey responses. After conducting the sample size collection, questionnaires not targeted to the right respondents and questionnaires with errors during the collection process were all eliminated. The data after cleaning resulted in 273 observations, exceeding the minimum requirement and falling within the ideal range. This strong sample size strengthens the generalizability of our results and allows for more confident conclusions about the relationships between the variables studied in our research.

Variables

Dependent Variables

We identified that there will be 04 dependent variables, namely "Brand Experience" (symbol BE), "Brand Love" (symbol BL), "Brand Loyalty" (symbol BLO), "Willingness to Pay" (symbol WTP), to measure the influence and impact of the independent variables.

Independent Variables

Appendix 1 represents the descriptive data for the Encoding of observed variables. The proposed research model consists of 06 independent variables. The first four independent variables will affect Brand Experience, namely "Behavioral Experience" (symbol BEE), "Intellectual Experience" (symbol IE), "Sensory Experience" (symbol SE), and "Affective Experience" (symbol AE). The independent variable "Brand Experience" (symbol BE) affects the dependent variable "Brand Love" (symbol BL). The independent variable "Brand Love" (symbol BL) affects the two dependent variables "Brand Loyalty" (symbol BLO) and "Willingness to Pay" (symbol WTP).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 represents the Descriptive demographics Variables in our survey. In the 273 valid survey responses, there were 90 males, accounting for 32.97%, and 183 females, accounting for 67.03%. According to the statistical results, based on 273 valid student responses, there is a significant difference among students belonging to different academic years. Specifically, third-year students (seniors) constituted the highest proportion of survey participants, with 100 students surveyed, accounting for 36.63% of the total responses received. According to data collected by the research team, there are many sports shoe brands loved by the research target group. These include: Nike with a total of 32.97% of favorites out of 273 valid surveys, equivalent to 90 students, Adidas with 50 favorites with a rate of 18.32%, Bitis with 13.55% of the total. The other band such as: Juno, TokyoLife, Anta accounted for a small percentage of about 35,16%.

Results and discussion

Results

Table 2 displays the psychometric properties of the study's constructs. All variables achieved satisfactory reliability levels, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients between 0.772-0.950 and Composite Reliability scores from 0.832-0.965, well above the 0.7 cutoff.

The Rho_A values (0.813-0.951) further support measurement consistency.

For convergent validity, three constructs showed strong performance: Willingness to Pay (AVE=0.933), Brand Loyalty (AVE=0.869), and Brand Love (AVE=0.677) all exceeded the 0.5 benchmark. Brand Experience recorded a lower AVE of 0.401, suggesting some limitations in variance capture, though its reliability metrics remain acceptable for analysis. Overall, the measurement model demonstrates adequate psychometric quality for hypothesis testing in the Vietnamese sneaker context. The structural model analysis presented in Table 3 confirms support for all research hypotheses at the $p < 0.001$ significance level, with T-values ranging from 2.64 to 11.13.

In this study, the PLS-SEM (Partial Least Squares Equation Model) structural equation model was applied. The first step is to create a path diagram that reflects the relationships between the variables in the study. Next, evaluation of the external model or measurement model is performed, and the internal model or structural model is used to see the relationships between variables in the research model. After the model evaluation stage, hypothesis testing is conducted to examine the relationship between variables in the model. The entire data processing process in this study uses SMART-PLS 4.0 software to analyze and interpret data to provide appropriate and accurate results.

Validity and Reliability tests: An item will be considered valid if the significance of the r count is ($>$) (smaller) 5% or 0.05. Reliability in this study shows reliable results, namely the results of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient ($>$ (greater than) 0.60. Table 4 shows that each variable has a composite reliability value, and Cronbach's alpha is above 0.6, meaning that the construct is declared reliable.

The results reveal:

BE \rightarrow BL coefficient reaches 0.576 (highest in the model), demonstrating that brand experience strongly impacts brand love. **BE \rightarrow BL \rightarrow BLO:** Partial mediation - brand experience influences brand loyalty through both direct and indirect pathways via brand love. **BE \rightarrow BL \rightarrow WTP:** Full mediation - the direct BE \rightarrow WTP effect is negligible (-0.030), while the indirect effect through brand love is statistically significant.

The authors believe that this finding has important theoretical significance in confirming the role of brand love as an emotional bridge, and practical implications showing that sneaker brand managers need to focus on building positive experiences to nurture

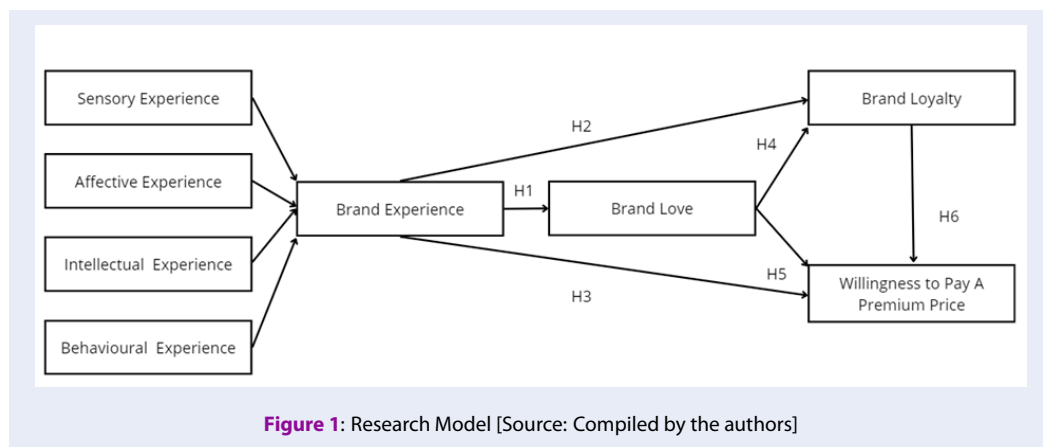


Table 1: Descriptive Demographics Variables Description Total Proportion [Source: Compiled by the authors]

Variable	Description	Total	Proportion
Gender	Male	90	32.97%
	Female	193	67.03%
Average income	< 3 million VND	98	34.8%
	3-5 million VND	114	40.2%
	5-7 million VND	43	15.2%
	7-10 million VND	20	7.1%
	>10 million VND	7	2.56%
Favourite Brand	Nike	90	32.97%
	Adidas	50	18.32%
	Bitis	37	13.55%
	Other	96	35.16%

Table 2: Validity and Reliability test results for measurement model [Source: Compiled by the authors from SPSS]

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Brand Experience	0.772	0.813	0.832	0.401
Brand Love	0.947	0.951	0.954	0.677
Brand Loyalty	0.950	0.951	0.964	0.869
Willingness to pay	0.929	0.951	0.965	0.933

Table 3: Recapitulation of hypothesis test results and of direct path and validity of structural model [Source: Compiled by the authors from SMART-PLS]

Hypothesis	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics	P Values	Adi R- square	Result
H1: BE → BL	0.576	11.13	0.000	0.3110	Supported
H2: BE → BLO	0.394	5.60	0.000	0.1003	Supported
H3: BE → WTP	0.030	2.64	0.008	0.0204	Supported
H4: BL → BLO	0.338	7.52	0.000	0.1695	Supported
H5: BL → WTP	0.099	4.21	0.000	0.0579	Supported
H6: BLO → WTP	0.394	7.62	0.000	0.1736	Supported

Table 4: SEM Model [Source: Compiled by the authors from SMART-PLS]

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Brand Experience	0.772	0.813	0.832	0.401
Brand Love	0.947	0.951	0.954	0.677
Brand Loyalty	0.950	0.951	0.964	0.869
Willingness to pay	0.929	0.951	0.965	0.933

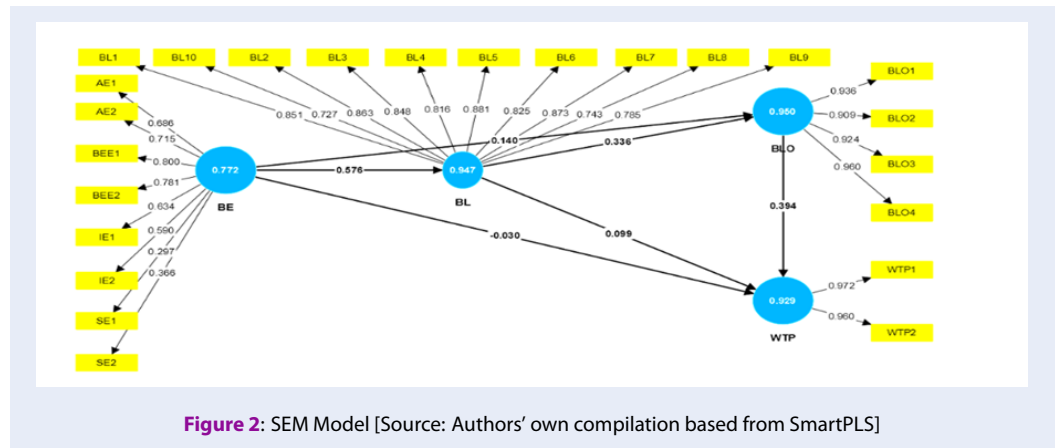


Figure 2: SEM Model [Source: Authors' own compilation based from SmartPLS]

brand love, particularly to enhance customers' price premium acceptance through emotional connection.

Discussion

Among the tested relationships, brand experience shows its greatest influence on brand love formation (H1: $\beta = 0.576$), supporting theoretical perspectives from Huang (2017), Brakus et al. (2009), Khan & Fatma (2017), Joshi & Garg (2020)^{11,40,47,52} regarding experiential marketing. The experience-loyalty connection (H2: $\beta = 0.394$) and experience-willingness to pay link (H3: $\beta = 0.030$) both achieve statistical significance, though the latter displays a more modest effect size.

The emotional pathway through brand love proves particularly robust. Brand love contribution to loyalty development (H4: $\beta = 0.338$) reinforces established consumer-brand relationship theories proposed by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006), Batra et al. (2012)^{6,15}. Furthermore, the love-premium pricing (willingness to pay) relationship (H5: $\beta = 0.099$) reveals substantial economic implications, echoing recent findings by Santos & Schlesinger (2021)²¹ across different service contexts.

Perhaps most noteworthy is the loyalty-premium pricing coefficient (H6: $\beta = 0.394$), which represents the model's strongest path. This finding suggests Vietnamese sneaker consumers demonstrate ex-

ceptional price tolerance when brand loyalty is established. This finding, consistent with Homburg et al. (2005)³⁷, suggests Vietnamese sneaker consumers demonstrate exceptional price tolerance when brand loyalty is established. Such results highlight how sneakers transcend functional utility in this market, embodying cultural significance and identity expression for young urban consumers.

To examine the mediating role of brand love in the relationships between brand experience and both brand loyalty and willingness to pay premium prices, the study conducted mediation analysis following the procedure outlined by Hair et al. (2017)⁶³.

Robustness check

To assess multicollinearity issues in the measurement model, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) analysis was conducted using 5000 bootstrap samples in SmartPLS 4 (Table 6). Results demonstrate excellent collinearity statistics for the structural model, with all inner model VIF values below 2.0 (ranging from 1.00 to 1.85), well within acceptable thresholds. This indicates no significant multicollinearity concerns among latent constructs, ensuring structural relationships remain uncompromised.

Regarding the outer model (Appendix 2) most indicators exhibited acceptable VIF values. Two Aesthetic Experience indicators (AE1: 9.24; AE2: 9.87)

showed elevated VIF values, indicating strong inter-correlation between these indicators. However, both indicators were retained based on established reflective measurement principles. In reflective measurement models, indicators are expected to correlate highly as they reflect the same underlying construct (Jarvis et al., 2003)⁶⁴. The authors argue that elevated VIF values between AE1 and AE2 reflect their complementary measurement of aesthetic experience from different yet mutually reinforcing perspectives, where AE1 focuses on visual design aspects while AE2 measures overall aesthetic evaluation. Removing either indicator could compromise construct comprehensiveness and content validity. AE1 measures visual design aspects of aesthetic experience, including elements such as color, shape, and visual layout, while AE2 assesses the overall aesthetic evaluation users derive from their complete brand experience. These two aspects, despite high correlation, represent distinct dimensions of the same aesthetic experience concept. Eliminating AE1 would sacrifice information about specific design aspects, while removing AE2 would lose overall aesthetic assessment. This could result in inadequate construct measurement, reducing the ability to capture the full conceptual scope of aesthetic experience and thus negatively impacting the scale's content validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981)⁶⁵.

Importantly, multicollinearity remains confined to the outer model without affecting structural model relationships, as evidenced by excellent inner model VIF values (Appendix 2). In PLS-SEM research, multicollinearity assessment primarily focuses on the inner model since this represents the model's core structural relationships. Remaining indicators with VIF values of 5.0-7.0 were also retained as they remain below levels causing serious problems and do not compromise structural path coefficient stability. The final model therefore maintains theoretical integrity while acknowledging the nature of reflective measurement models, where high indicator correlation is expected and necessary to ensure internal consistency of measurement constructs.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This investigation provides substantial theoretical and practical insights to brand relationship scholarship. From a theoretical standpoint, the research positions brand love as a pivotal emotional intermediary within the experience-loyalty-pricing acceptance framework, identifying two unique mediation mechanisms: partial mediation for experience→love→loyalty (VAF=33.0%) and complete mediation for experience→premium payment

willingness via brand love. The remarkably robust loyalty-pricing acceptance coefficient ($\beta=2.120$) indicates Vietnamese consumers display extraordinary price flexibility when emotional bonds are formed, expanding consumer-brand relationship frameworks to emerging Asian contexts.

Methodologically, this work authenticates Western-originated constructs within Vietnam's collective cultural environment while discovering market-distinctive behavioral dynamics. Results confirm that athletic footwear surpasses utilitarian functions, representing cultural meaning and personal identity for young metropolitan consumers. The substantial experience-brand affection relationship ($\beta=0.700$) delivers empirical support for experiential marketing efficacy in developing economies.

From an applied perspective, this study provides strategic direction for athletic footwear brand administration by mapping the emotional route from experience to pricing acceptance. The complete mediation function of brand affection in premium payment willingness indicates that organizations must emphasize emotional bond cultivation rather than direct commercial strategies to achieve pricing authority.

Specifically, managers should: (1) Invest in multidimensional experiential touchpoints - product demonstrations, educational content, aesthetic store environments, and sensory engagement opportunities - to strengthen brand experience, which significantly influences brand love ($\beta=0.700$); (2) Develop emotional loyalty programs featuring community platforms, authentic brand narratives aligned with consumer values, and exclusive membership benefits rather than discount-based promotions, given brand love's full mediating function; (3) Implement value-justified premium pricing through superior product attributes (advanced technology, premium materials), exclusive offerings (limited editions, customization), and enhanced services (extended warranties, priority support), as loyal customers ($\beta=2.120$) accept higher prices when emotional attachment is reinforced by tangible product excellence. This sequential strategy - experience creation, relationship cultivation, then premium positioning - emphasizes that sustainable pricing authority emerges from combining emotional engagement with genuine value delivery.

Future investigations should explore longitudinal brand relationship evolution in emerging markets to understand temporal dynamics, while conducting cross-cultural validation across Southeast Asian economies to assess theoretical generalizability. Additionally, research examining the effects of digital platforms on experiential brand engagement would

provide valuable insights for contemporary marketing strategies. Studies investigating generational differences in emotional brand attachment and pricing tolerance could reveal demographic-specific patterns, while exploring product category extensions beyond athletic footwear in collectivist cultures would enhance theoretical scope and practical applicability across diverse consumer goods sectors.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This investigation presents several constraints requiring acknowledgment. The cross-sectional framework limits causal inference and temporal analysis between constructs. Convenience sampling from urban Vietnamese respondents restricts generalizability to rural populations and diverse cultural segments. Focusing exclusively on athletic footwear constrains applicability across product categories with varying emotional involvement levels.

Self-reported survey methods may introduce standard method variance and response bias despite statistical controls. The demographic concentration on Generation Z urban consumers potentially overlooks broader generational perspectives. Additionally, emphasizing perceptual measures rather than actual purchase behavior may inadequately capture authentic marketplace dynamics.

The cultural specificity within Vietnam's collectivist context requires cautious interpretation when applying findings to individualistic societies or alternative emerging markets. These limitations underscore the necessity for cross-cultural validation studies to enhance theoretical robustness and practical applicability across diverse market environments.

Future studies could explore: (1) comparing how well first-order and higher-order models predict outcomes and provide insights across various industries and cultures; (2) creating combined approaches that use the best features of both methods based on what researchers want to achieve and their data type.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This research represents a collaborative effort among the co-authors, with each member contributing substantially to different sections of the paper. The specific contributions are as follows:

Huynh Thuy Tien (Corresponding Author) was responsible for overall project coordination, supervision of all research activities, conceptualization of the research framework, comprehensive review and editing of the entire manuscript, final approval of the submitted version, and ensuring the integrity and quality of the work.

Tran Thi My Le was responsible for the Introduction section, including the research background, motivation, research questions, objectives, and overall contribution of the study.

Phan Hoang Anh Khoi was responsible for the Literature Review and Hypothesis Development section, including the theoretical framework, empirical literature review, and formulation of research hypotheses.

Le Nhat Minh Hang was responsible for the Research Design and Methods section, including model specification, variable definitions, data collection procedures, and econometric methodology.

Le Quoc Bao was responsible for the Results, Discussion and Conclusion sections, including empirical findings presentation, interpretation of results, policy implications, and concluding remarks.

Nguyen My Tra contributed to both the Literature Review and Hypothesis Development section and the Discussion and Conclusion sections, providing additional insights on theoretical perspectives and practical implications.

All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

APPENDIX

Table 5: Descriptive data for Encoding of observed variables [Source: Compiled by the authors]

Observed variables	ITEMS	Scale	Source
BE	Brand Experience		
BEE	Behavioral Experience		
BEE1	I often use this sports shoe brand in physical activities.	Likert	Addapted from Brakus et al. (2009) ¹¹
BEE2	This sports shoe brand provides me with a comfortable feeling when using.	Likert	Addapted from Brakus et al. (2009) ¹¹
IE	Intellectual Experience		
IE1	This sports shoe brand has designs and styles that stimulate my curiosity, and I am eager to learn more about them.	Likert	Addapted from Brakus et al. (2009) ¹¹
IE2	I not only think about one factor but also consider many other factors when it comes to the sports shoes of this brand.	Likert	Addapted from Brakus et al. (2009) ¹¹
AE	Affective Experience		
AE1	The design of this sports shoe brand impresses me visually.	Likert	Addapted from Brakus et al. ¹¹
AE2	I find this sports shoe brand fascinating due to its unique design and high-quality materials.	Likert	Addapted from Brakus et al. ¹¹
SE	Sensory Experience		
SE1	I like the sports shoes from this brand.	Likert	Addapted from Brakus et al. ¹¹
SE2	This brand emotionally connects with me, making me feel confident and energetic when using it.	Likert	Addapted from Brakus et al. ¹¹
BL	Brand Love		
BL1	I feel excited about the sports shoe products of this brand.	Likert	Addapted from Batra et al. ⁵
BL2	I look forward to using products from this sports shoe brand.”	Likert	Addapted from Batra et al. ⁵
BL3	This sports shoe brand helps me express my personality in the way I desire.	Likert	Addapted from Carroll & Ahuvia ⁶
BL4	This sports shoe brand brings me wonderful experiences and enriches my life.	Likert	Addapted from Batra et al. ⁵

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Table 5 continued

BL5	This sports shoe brand is always a top priority choice in my mind.	Likert	Addapted from Albert et al. ⁷
BL6	The style of this sports shoe brand fits my aesthetic taste.	Likert	Addapted from Carroll & Ahuvia ⁶
BL7	I am satisfied with the products of this brand and will continue to use them in the future.	Likert	Addapted from Batra et al. ⁵
BL8	I regularly purchase products from this brand.	Likert	Addapted from Carroll & Ahuvia ⁶
BL9	I would be very disappointed if this brand stopped selling sports shoes.	Likert	Addapted from Batra et al. ⁵
BL10	My satisfaction level with this sports shoe brand is evaluated as follows.	Likert	Addapted from Albert et al. ⁷
BL	Brand Love		
BL1	I feel excited about the sports shoe products of this brand.	Likert	Addapted from Batra et al. ⁵
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BL3	This sports shoe brand helps me express my personality in the way I desire.	Likert	Addapted from Carroll & Ahuvia ⁶
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BL5	This sports shoe brand is always a top priority choice in my mind.	Likert	Addapted from Albert et al. ⁷
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BL9	I would be very disappointed if this brand stopped selling sports shoes.	Likert	Addapted from Batra et al. ⁵
BL10	My satisfaction level with this sports shoe brand is evaluated as follows.	Likert	Addapted from Albert et al. ⁷
BLO	Brand Loyalty		

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Table 5 continued

BLO1	I only purchase sports shoes from this brand because I trust in the quality of their products.	Adapted from Thomson et al. ⁴⁷
BLO2	When I go shopping, I pay attention to this sports shoe brand without much concern for other brands.	Adapted from Sahin et al. ²³
BLO3	If the place I go to doesn't have this sports shoe brand, I would postpone the purchase or go to another location to find it.	Adapted from Thomson et al. ⁴⁷
BLO4	I would rather go without than buy sports shoes from a brand other than this one.	Adapted from Sahin et al. ²³
WTP	Willingness to pay	
WTP1	I am willing to pay more to buy sports shoes from this brand than to shop at another brand.	Adapted from Dwivedi et al. ³⁴
WTP2	I am willing to pay a higher price to use this sports shoe brand again because I love and want to support their values.	Adapted from Homburg et al. ²⁵

Note: All scales were adapted and translated for the Vietnamese sports footwear context

Table 6: VIF Values for AllModel Indicators [Source: Authors’ own compilation based on SmartPLS 4 analysis]

Relation	VIF
BEE → BL	1.00
BEE → BLO	1.69
BEE → WTP	1.73
BL → BLO	1.69
BL → WTP	1.85
BLO → WTP	1.29
Total	2.0

Table 7: VIF and ToleranceResults for All Indicators [Source: Authors’ own compilation from Smart-PLS]

No.	Construct	Indicator	VIF	Tolerance
1	AE	AE1	9.236	0.108
2	AE	AE2	9.866	0.101
3	BEE	BEE1	6.140	0.163
4	BEE	BEE2	5.992	0.167
5	BL	BL1	3.258	0.307
6	BL	BL2	3.718	0.269
7	BL	BL3	3.608	0.277
8	BL	BL4	3.079	0.325
9	BL	BL5	6.073	0.165
10	BL	BL6	4.483	0.223
11	BL	BL7	5.395	0.185
12	BL	BL8	1.831	0.546
13	BL	BL9	2.386	0.419
14	BL	BL10	2.257	0.443
15	BLO	BLO1	1.718	0.582
16	BLO	BLO2	2.377	0.421
17	BLO	BLO3	4.526	0.221
18	BLO	BLO4	4.855	0.206
19	IE	IE1	2.366	0.423
20	IE	IE2	2.106	0.475
21	SE	SE1	6.751	0.148
22	SE	SE2	6.683	0.150
23	WTP	WTP1	3.566	0.280
24	WTP	WTP2	3.566	0.280

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Tác động của tình yêu thương hiệu đối với trải nghiệm thương hiệu, lòng trung thành và mức giá sẵn lòng chi trả: Nghiên cứu trường hợp thương hiệu giày sneaker

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TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu tập trung phân tích các mối quan hệ giữa trải nghiệm thương hiệu, tình yêu thương hiệu, lòng trung thành thương hiệu và mức giá sẵn lòng chi trả đối với các thương hiệu giày thể thao của sinh viên tại khu vực thành phố Hồ Chí Minh. Dữ liệu nghiên cứu được thu thập thông qua khảo sát trực tuyến, với đối tượng khảo sát là 273 sinh viên đại học đang học tập tại khu vực thành phố Hồ Chí Minh. Dựa trên lập luận rằng tình yêu thương hiệu là một thành phần chiến lược trong quản lý thương hiệu, nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu các nhân tố giúp nâng cao những trải nghiệm tích cực góp phần vào việc hình thành tình yêu thương hiệu, từ đó tác động đến lòng trung thành đối với thương hiệu và mức giá sẵn lòng chi trả cao cho các sản phẩm được chọn. Mục tiêu nghiên cứu của bài báo gồm ba mục tiêu chính: Thứ nhất, đánh giá tác động của trải nghiệm thương hiệu lên sự phát triển của tình yêu thương hiệu. Thứ hai, phân tích các mối liên kết quan trọng giữa tình yêu thương hiệu, lòng trung thành thương hiệu và mức độ sẵn lòng chi trả. Thứ ba, khám phá vai trò trung gian của tình yêu thương hiệu trong mối quan hệ giữa trải nghiệm thương hiệu với cả lòng trung thành và mức giá sẵn lòng chi trả.

Thông qua việc khảo sát những mối quan hệ này, bài nghiên cứu cung cấp thêm những hiểu biết về cách thức các thương hiệu có thể tận dụng những trải nghiệm tích cực để nuôi dưỡng tình yêu thương hiệu, qua đó củng cố lòng trung thành và gia tăng mức độ sẵn lòng chi trả của người tiêu dùng. Bên cạnh đó, nghiên cứu còn đóng góp vào việc mở rộng những hiểu biết thực tiễn nhất định liên quan đến vai trò thiết yếu của tình yêu thương hiệu trong việc tác động đến hành vi tiêu dùng, cụ thể trong phân khúc giày thể thao của sinh viên đại học tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh. Kết quả nghiên cứu còn giúp cung cấp những thông tin cho các nhà quản trị trong việc phát triển các chiến lược hiệu quả, khai thác tối đa các yếu tố trải nghiệm để xây dựng mối kết nối cảm xúc sâu sắc với nhóm khách hàng mục tiêu. Từ đó, góp phần thúc đẩy lòng trung thành và nâng cao khả năng chấp nhận thanh toán mức giá cao hơn cho các thương hiệu giày thể thao được yêu thích.

Từ khoá: tình yêu thương hiệu, trải nghiệm thương hiệu, lòng trung thành thương hiệu, sẵn lòng chi trả, sneaker, Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh

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