

TOURISM BRAND LOVE IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE ROLE OF ONLINE TOURIST EXPERIENCES, TOURIST-BRAND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract:

Digital transformation has led to a shift towards online shopping, making it imperative for companies to provide customers with a quality online experience. However, existing sustainability research still provides limited insight into brand experience in marketing practice. Hence, this study examined the relationship between online tourist experience and brand love through the mechanism of relationship quality in the context of online tourism shopping in Vietnam. The research process surveyed 231 local tourists and selected 224 people with valid answer sheets. Results showed that the online tourist experience significantly impacts customer relationship quality, which leads to brand love. However, sustainability has a negative effect on the direct relationship with brand love. This finding suggests that including customers in the sustainability process and affording them a pleasurable online shopping experience may be an excellent way to enhance customer relationship quality and brand love. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Key words: *digital transformation; tourism marketing; sustainable development; brand love; consumer behavior.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background introduction

The advent of digital transformation has ushered in a new era of customer engagement for brands (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013). Given the advancements in technology, infrastructure, and lifestyles, there has been a marked shift towards online shopping, making it imperative for companies to provide customers with a quality experience. In addition, the younger generation, particularly, is drawn to online shopping options, affording companies a more excellent range of options (Choirisa, 2022).

On the other hand, branding is an intangible asset that companies must approach with great care. The emotional aspects of branding are increasingly crucial in current branding initiatives. Studies reveal that people's feelings and opinions about a brand impact purchasing decisions (Brakus et al., 2009). As such, companies must keep abreast of changing trends and preferences in their target audience and continuously enhance their branding efforts. In today's world, brands must focus on establishing a robust and lasting bond with their customers rather than solely concentrating on sales.

Another critical factor is the quality of the tourists' experience, both online and offline. This quality includes everything from user-friendly websites and mobile apps to personalized recommendations and exceptional service at every touchpoint. In addition, successful tourism organizations leverage data

analytics to gain insights into customer behavior and preferences, allowing them to tailor their offerings and marketing strategies accordingly. Creating a strong, memorable brand is essential for attracting repeat customers while investing in digital tools can streamline operations, cut costs, and open new revenue streams. Partnerships with other businesses in the travel industry can help organizations expand their reach and offer more comprehensive packages to customers. By focusing on these key strengths, tourism organizations can build brand love in the digital age and stay ahead of the competition.

Furthermore, the tourism industry is increasingly recognizing the significance of sustainability in its operations. Tourism businesses must adopt sustainable practices to reduce their environmental footprint and gain consumer loyalty. To accomplish this, minimizing waste and energy usage, sourcing materials locally, and supporting the community are some ways to embrace sustainability. With sustainability, tourism businesses can differentiate themselves in a highly competitive market and attract consumers who prioritize their impact on the planet. Effective communication of their commitment to sustainability is crucial for tourism businesses to foster loyalty and maintain a positive reputation. As a tourism business owner, it is vital to understand the importance of building brand loyalty and embracing digital transformation to achieve sustainable growth. Prioritizing sustainable practices can also appeal to eco-conscious travelers and help position the business as a responsible tourism leader. By focusing on these three key areas - brand recognition, digital transformation, and sustainability – tourism marketers can ensure that the tourism business thrives in today's competitive market.

1.2. Problem statement

However, the difficulties for the Vietnam tourism industry are still weighty. In recent years, Vietnam tour operators have paid too much attention to the Business to Business (B2B) model without doing any digital marketing. Following the B2B model, many travel companies in Vietnam have shut down when their partners have closed or disappeared. Many others lose market share if their partners suddenly stop cooperating. To develop strongly and sustainably, the tour operators must focus on selling tours to their Business to Consumer (B2C) market. Nevertheless, when trying to establish a B2C model, travel companies in Vietnam still face many blockages.

One of the challenges is that tourists do not have a loyal relationship with the brand. Many companies struggle to sell their products directly to their potential customers. Because these organizations have been focusing on selling products to their B2B market, the consumers do not recognize the tourism brand once they shift to selling products in the B2C market. Accordingly, the tourism business cannot shape the consumer-brand relationship bond in the B2C market. They also do not know how to promote their tourism products online and get more social media engagement with prospective tourists. More importantly, their tourism products do not know how to create sustainability in their operations. Thus, they are still struggling to attract their B2C market with their current performance.

1.3. Aim

For those reasons, to help tourism organizations keep up with the latest online consumer behavior and build their brand love in spectacular ways, this paper will focus on explaining 03 indicators that impact the tourist and tourism brand relationship bond: (1) online tourists' experience, (2) tourist-brand relationship quality, and (3) sustainability.

2. Literature Review & Hypothesis Development

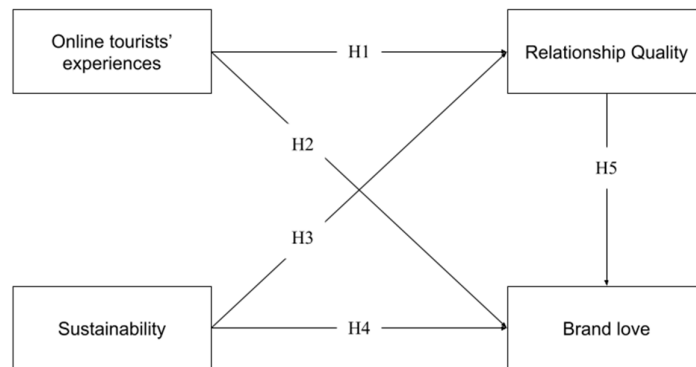
2.1. Literature review

Brand love is outlined as a satisfied consumer's emotional attachment to a specific brand, which can be established when the consumer is proficient in (a) generating identity and supporting and conveying a

self-identity, (b) activating his or her memory, and (c) inspiring his or her delight and exuberance sentiment (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Batra et al., 2012). According to Batra et al. (2012), consumers organize their cognitions, emotions, and behaviors into a mental prototype for brands. This mental prototype is crucial in determining brand love, which various researchers have extensively studied. Fetscherin et al. (2014) investigated the role of brand love in creating customer loyalty, while (Sarkar & Sreejesh, 2014) explored the relationship between brand love and consumer engagement. Huber et al. (2015) examined the impact of brand love on consumer behavior, while Vernuccio et al. (2015) focused on the influence of brand love on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Kaufmann et al. (2016) delved into the role of brand love in creating positive word-of-mouth communication among consumers. These researches highlight the importance of understanding and cultivating brand love to build strong customer relationships and drive business success. Accordingly, this study aimed to explore the intricate connection between online tourist experience and brand love in the context of online tourism shopping in Vietnam for several reasons. Brand love fosters an emotional connection between tourists and destinations, leading to loyalty and trust. This bond goes beyond rational decision-making and can significantly impact word-of-mouth marketing. Genuine affection for a destination's brand fosters repeat visits and customer loyalty, boosting tourism revenue and enhancing the destination's reputation as a preferred choice among travelers.

Furthermore, brand love contributes to sustainable tourism development, as tourists are more likely to choose a destination with a solid emotional connection, even if it is more expensive or less convenient. By focusing on relationship quality as the mediating mechanism, researchers sought to uncover the underlying factors that contribute to the formation of brand love among online tourists. Through a comprehensive analysis of data collected from Vietnamese online shoppers, this study shed light on the significance of a positive online tourist experience in fostering brand love. Hence, the author examined the impact of online tourists' experiences, relationship quality, and sustainability on tourism brand love (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework



2.2. Hypothesis development

Online customer experience refers to a customer's perception after interacting with goods, services, and businesses based on sensory data (Anshu et al., 2022). It is crucial to satisfy customers, set expectations, inspire confidence, win trust, keep business, and develop strong relationships (Slack & Singh, 2020). As marketers focus on pushing distinctive online selling propositions to create dynamic relationships with customers, the value of brand love will only grow in modern marketing (Huber et al., 2015). A favorable brand attitude, brand trust, self-expression, pleasant customer experience, a sensation of psychological

attachment to the brand in an online way, and a brand's hedonic worth are all antecedents of brand love, according to existing research (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Batra et al., 2012).

Besides, tourist-brand relationship quality measures the connection, trust, and loyalty between a tourist and a brand or destination commitment (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). It influences behavior and decision-making, such as revisiting the destination, recommending it, or engaging with the brand on social media. Factors influencing this relationship include the tourist's experiences of the brand's reputation, service quality, satisfaction, and personalization. A high level of tourist-brand relationship quality can lead to increased customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth marketing, and repeat business. Thus, the author hypothesizes that:

- **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Online tourists' experiences positively affects relationship quality.
- **Hypothesis 2(H2):** Onlinet tourists' experiences positively affects brand love.

Sustainable tourism development is a holistic approach that aims to maximize the positive impacts of tourism while minimizing its adverse effects on the environment, economy, and local communities. It promotes responsible travel practices that preserve natural resources, protect cultural heritage, and enhance social well-being. Sustainable tourism practices have become an increasingly important factor in tourists' decision-making, with many tourists seeking sustainable and responsible travel options. A study by Kim and Ritchie (2014) found that tourists who perceive a destination or brand as environmentally responsible are more likely to have positive attitudes toward it. This attitude can lead to stronger emotional connections and increased relationship quality with the brand. As such, the author proposes:

- **Hypothesis 3 (H3):** Sustainability positively affects relationship quality.
- **Hypothesis 4 (H4):** Sustainability positively affects brand love.

In today's digital age, the online experience of tourists significantly impacts their perceptions and attitudes toward destinations and brands (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Research in tourism and marketing shows that the quality of the online experience influences tourists' perceptions, intention to visit, and recommend a destination (Wang et al., 2016). Moreover, Brand love, a strong emotional attachment, can increase loyalty and repeat business (Batra et al., 2012). Hence, the relationship between tourists and a brand influences their attitudes and behaviors. A positive online experience and perception of sustainability can lead to increased brand love, but the strength of this association depends on the quality of the relationship between the tourist and the brand. Therefore, based on the above evidence, the author argues that the association between the online tourists' experience, sustainability, and brand love is mediated by tourist-brand relationship quality. Specifically, a positive online experience and perception of sustainability can lead to increased brand love, but the strength of this association depends on the relationship between the tourist and the brand. A high-quality relationship can reinforce positive attitudes and behaviors towards the brand, while a low-quality relationship can weaken them. The hypothesis is proposed:

- **Hypothesis 5 (H5):** The association between the online tourists' experience, sustainability, and brand love is mediated by tourist-brand relationship quality.

3. Method

Using the non-probability sampling technique, participants were chosen based on their prior internet purchase history. Between March 15 and April 14, 2023, information was gathered from online travelers in Ho Chi Minh City using a Google Forms questionnaire; most responses came from various social classes. Due to their online buying abilities and willingness to try new things, only online tourists who had made at least one purchase online were eligible. Screening questions were added to ensure respondents had prior

experience with online buying, resulting in 224 complete responses from a total data set of 231. The data were analyzed, and conclusions were drawn using the statistical tools SPSS and Smart-PLS.

Table 1. Online tourists' characteristics in this study

Characteristics	Participants (N=224)	
	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	111	49.6
Female	113	50.4
Age		
From 20 to 25 years old	56	25.0
From 26 to 30 years old	63	28.1
From 31 to 35 years old	46	20.5
35 years old and above	59	26.3
Education		
Student	60	26.8
Graduation	59	26.3
Master and above	62	27.7
Intermediate	43	19.2
Occupation		
Student	38	17.0
Business	32	14.3
Employee	30	13.4
Self-employed	34	15.2
Housewife	44	19.6
Unemployed	46	20.5
Income		
Less than 5 mil	40	17.9
From 5 to 10 mil	49	21.9
From 11 to 20 mil	43	19.2
From 21 to 30 mil	40	17.9
Above 31 mil	52	23.2
Usage time for online purchases		
1-6 months	85	37.9
6-12 months	68	30.4
More than a year	71	31.7
Online purchase frequency		
Everyday	46	20.5
Once a week	39	17.4
Twice a week	44	19.6
3-4 times a week	37	16.5
5-6 times a week	58	25.9
Value of each online purchase		
Less than 100.000vnd	53	23.7
100.000vnd to 200.000vnd	49	21.9
201.000vnd to 500.000vnd	41	18.3
501.000vnd to 1.000.000vnd	51	22.8
More than 1.000.000vnd	30	13.4

4. Analysis

The survey questionnaire uses a 5-level Likert scale to measure customer satisfaction: Level 1- Strongly disagree; Level 2- Disagree; Level 3 - Neutral; Level 4- Agree; Level 5- Strongly agree. The research model is evaluated through two steps: the measurement model and the structural model. The measurement model is evaluated by assessing the measurement concepts' reliability, convergence value, and discriminant validity. The structural model is evaluated by examining the relationships between the

constructs and testing the proposed hypotheses. This evaluation helps to determine the overall fit of the research model and validate its theoretical framework. Additionally, it allows researchers to gain insights into the causal relationships between variables and understand the underlying mechanisms at play.

According to Hair et al. (2013), the outer loading coefficient is greater than or equal to 0.708; the observed variable is quality. Because $0.7082 = 0.5$, it means that the latent variable explained 50% of the variation of the observed variable. According to Table 2, the observed variables of this study are all greater than 0.708 and are of good quality.

Table 2. Outerloading

	BL	OE	RQ	ST
BL1	0.891			
BL2	0.833			
BL3	0.862			
BL4	0.891			
OE1		0.819		
OE2		0.820		
OE3		0.792		
OE4		0.733		
RQ1			0.702	
RQ2			0.743	
RQ3			0.764	
RQ4			0.702	
ST1				0.947
ST2				0.947
ST3				0.717
ST4				0.717

The reliability of the observed variables must have an outer loading coefficient greater than or equal to 0.7, and the composite reliability coefficient must be greater than or equal to 0.7. Convergent validity is used to evaluate the scale's stability, with a coefficient of AVE greater than or equal to 0.5. Table 3 shows composite reliability statistical values above the cutoff point, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.726. All calculated values are acceptable, and the average variance extracted (AVE) values are above the minimum required level of 0.530.

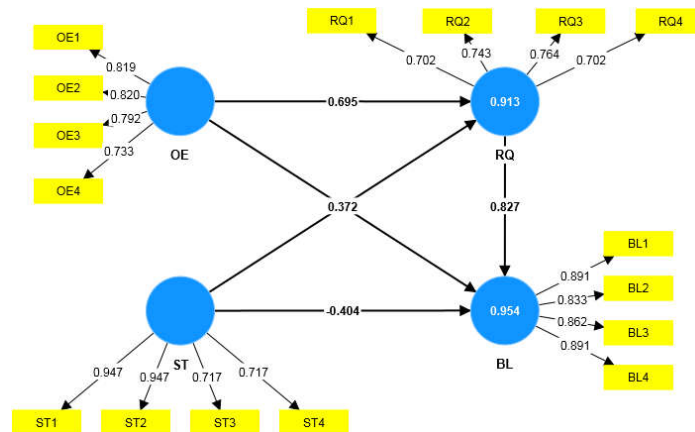
Table 3. The result of composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, and average variance extracted

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
BL	0.892	0.925	0.756
OE	0.804	0.870	0.627
RQ	0.726	0.819	0.530
ST	0.859	0.904	0.706

The Fornell-Larcker criterion and PLS approach demonstrate discriminant validity, as Dijkstra & Henseler (2015) found that heterotrait-monotrait correlations less than 0.900 are acceptable for evaluating shared variance between latent variables. The result in Table 4 confirms the reliability and validity of the measurement scales.

Table 4. The result of discriminant validity

	BL	OE	RQ	ST
BL	0.870			
OE	0.846	0.792		
RQ	0.862	0.837	0.728	
ST	0.274	0.295	0.687	0.840

Figure 2. PLS result

According to Figure 2, the calculated equation's R^2 value of BL is 0.954, which is significant at the 1% probability level. It demonstrates that online tourists' experience, relationship quality, and sustainability together account for 0.954 (95.4%) percent of the variation in brand love. Moreover, the R^2 value of RQ is 0.913. It shows that online tourists' experience and sustainability describe 0.913 (91.3%) percent of the variation in relationship quality.

Table 5. Path analysis

	Path Coefficients	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values	Hypothesis	Outcome
OE -> RQ	0.695	0.064	10.936	0.000	H1	Supported
OE -> BL	0.372	0.071	5.263	0.000	H2	Supported
ST -> RQ	0.482	0.064	7.533	0.000	H3	Supported
ST -> BL	-0.404	0.059	6.833	0.000	H4	Supported
RQ -> BL	0.827	0.057	14.568	0.000	H5	Supported
OE -> RQ -> BL	0.575	0.072	8.029	0.000	-	Supported
ST -> RQ -> BL	0.399	0.060	6.662	0.000	-	Supported

The results in Table 4 indicate that online tourists' experiences positively affect relationship quality and brand love. The direct effect (H1: $\beta = 0.695$, $p < 0.01$; H2: $\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.01$) validates the hypotheses. The path analysis also reveals that sustainability positively affects relationship quality (H3: $\beta = 0.482$, $p < 0.01$). However, the direct effect of sustainability on brand love is negative and significant (H4: $\beta = -0.404$, $p < 0.01$). Thus, H4, which expects a positive impact, is rejected. Finally, according to H5, relationship quality mediates the link between Online tourists' experiences, sustainability, and brand love. The stated path analysis (see Table 4) indicated that Online tourists' experiences have an indirect influence on brand love through relationship quality ($\beta = 0.575$, $p < 0.01$). Sustainability also indirectly influences brand love through relationship quality ($\beta = 0.399$, $p < 0.01$). As such, H5 is valid.

5. Findings and recommendations

In this research, we investigated the conceptual model to identify the 03 indicators that impact the tourist and tourism brand relationship bond: (1) online tourists' experience, (2) tourist-brand relationship quality, and (3) sustainability.

Firstly, online tourists' experience is crucial in shaping their perceptions and attitudes towards a tourism brand. A positive online experience can increase satisfaction, trust, and loyalty toward the brand and a greater likelihood of recommending it to others. In contrast, a negative online experience can lead to a weaker bond between tourists and brands. As such, tourism brands must strive to provide a positive online experience to their customers, such as through user-friendly websites, engaging social media content, and personalized communication.

Secondly, the quality of tourist-brand relationships is vital in building a strong bond between tourists and tourism brands. Tourists with a positive relationship with a brand are likelier to have positive attitudes toward it and more likely to return and recommend it to others. The relationship quality between tourists and a brand can be influenced by factors such as trust, satisfaction, and engagement. Therefore, tourism brands must build strong relationships with their customers through personalized communication, loyalty programs, and excellent customer service.

Thirdly, sustainability is an increasingly important factor in tourists' decision-making. Tourists are increasingly seeking sustainable and responsible travel options and are more likely to have positive attitudes toward tourism brands that prioritize sustainability. Interestingly, this study reveals that sustainability has a negative effect on brand love. The finding may seem counterintuitive, as sustainability is often seen as a positive attribute that can enhance a brand's reputation and appeal to environmentally conscious consumers. However, this finding has been reported in some studies in tourism and marketing. One possible explanation for this finding is that tourists may perceive sustainability as an essential requirement that all tourism brands should meet rather than a unique selling proposition that sets a brand apart from its competitors. As such, sustainability may not be seen as a distinctive attribute that can create a strong emotional attachment or brand love. In other words, sustainability alone may not be enough to create a strong bond between tourists and a tourism brand. Another possible explanation is that sustainability may have a negative impact on some other aspects of the tourism experience, such as convenience, comfort, or price. For example, a tourism brand that prioritizes sustainability may have to make trade-offs regarding the quality or quantity of amenities, services, or facilities it offers. This may lead to a less enjoyable or satisfying experience for tourists, which can weaken their bond with the brand. It is also worth noting that contextual factors, such as the type of tourism product or service, the target market, or the cultural norms and values of the tourists, may influence the relationship between sustainability and brand love. Thus, the negative effect of sustainability on brand love may not be generalizable to all tourism contexts or populations. According to this research, while sustainability is essential in tourists' decision-making, it may not always lead to increased brand love. Tourism brands must carefully balance sustainability with other attributes that can create a strong emotional attachment, such as personalization, engagement, authenticity, or social responsibility. By doing so, they can build a loyal customer base that values both sustainability and brand love.

Based on the research findings, several recommendations can be made to improve the relationship between tourists and tourism brands in the digital age. One recommendation is for tourism brands to focus on creating meaningful and memorable online tourist experiences. This can be achieved through interactive

and engaging content, personalized recommendations, and virtual tours that allow tourists to immerse themselves in the destination before their actual visit. Additionally, fostering a strong tourist-brand relationship quality is crucial, which can be done through effective communication, responsiveness to customer feedback, and building trust and loyalty. Finally, incorporating sustainability practices into tourism brands can enhance their appeal to environmentally conscious tourists and contribute to a positive brand image in the digital age.

6. Conclusion

In today's digital age, the Vietnam tourism industry is facing difficulties due to its focus on the B2B model without digital marketing. This has led to many travel companies in Vietnam shutting down and losing market share. To develop strongly and sustainably, tour operators must focus on selling tours to their B2C market, but they still face many blockages when trying to establish a B2C model. The research article emphasizes the significance of engaging with B2C markets in the tourism industry. Tourism brands must enhance online tourist experiences, prioritize tourist-brand relationship quality, and prioritize sustainability to build strong customer relationships. By implementing the recommendations, tourism organizations can create a positive image, appeal to environmentally conscious consumers, and build brand love and loyalty. Unique experiences, social media influencers, and online feedback monitoring can also help. By prioritizing customer satisfaction and quality, tourism organizations can successfully engage with their B2C market and build a loyal customer base. Overall, these three indicators – online tourists' experiences, relationship quality, and sustainability will help tourism organizations to strengthen their bond with consumers and establish themselves as leaders in the industry.

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