THE MEDIATING IMPACT OF BRAND LOVE AND BRAND IMAGE BETWEEN BRAND EXPERIENCE AND BRAND LOYALTY: AN ANALYSIS OF CAR BRANDS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the parallel meditation of brand love and brand image between brand experience and brand loyalty. Data were collected, distributed online among car consumers (n = 897). A parallel mediation analysis using Hayes PROCESS was employed. Results demonstrate brand love and brand image mediate the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. It also indicates brand experience is formed over time, thus, not limited to a given situation since consumers constantly are exposed to brand-related stimuli every time driving the vehicle. Future research is encouraged to investigate brand categories such as luxury watches and constructs that situate meaning and value. Brand experience research is advanced by providing a deeper understanding of what's happening between brand experience and brand loyalty. Brand experience can be tailor-made with brand-related stimuli to facilitate consumer's brand love and brand image, which positively impact brand loyalty increasing the intermittent likelihood of purchase.

Keywords: Brand Experience; Brand Image; Brand Love; Brand Loyalty; Car Brands; Hayes Process.

INTRODUCTION

Goods and services have become commoditized since memorable experiences provided by manufacturers matter the most (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Although the advancement of the experience economy is applicable in many industries, some brands are more interesting than others. Car brands are of particular interest since manufacturers in the automotive industry encounter fierce competition (Kirca, et al. 2020). At first glance, the automotive industry seems hard to penetrate. Due to the radical industrial change, new opportunities have unfurled (Stringham, et al. 2015) such as embedding sensory triggers in the car (Sheller, 2004). Substantial research has investigated car brands (Hsieh, 2002; Landwehr, et al. 2013; Bartikowski & Cleveland, 2017) but remarkably little attention has been given to brand loyalty from an experimental perspective (Obiegbu, et al. 2020). This corresponds with Bartikowski & Cleveland (2017) who state there is a need to deepen the knowledge on consumer perception among car brands.

Four concepts are commonly used in explaining brand outcomes. Brand experience is conceptualized as sensations, cognitions, emotions, and behavioural responses (Brakus, et al. 2009). Brand love is emotionally laden and dependent on trust (Albert, et al. 2013; Bagozzi, Batra & Ahuvia, 2017). Brand image relates to associations and attitudes primed and formed in consumer's mind (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Esch, et al. 2006). Brand loyalty indicates whether a consumer will re-purchase the same brand (Iglesias, et al. 2011).

Insofar research has examined the aforementioned concepts separately, or in pairwise to explain how consumers' perceive different brands, for instance, brand experience on brand loyalty (Francisco-Maffezzolli, et al. 2014; Iglesias et al. 2011), or brand love and brand loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). However, the concepts have not yet been incorporated with another. With this in mind, Zha, et al. (2020) illuminate the importance to relate brand experience with other brand relationship variables. Examining brand love and brand image as mediators could advance the understanding of how brand experience transmutes into brand loyalty.

Research emphasises the necessity for consumers to be exposed to brand-related stimuli to form a brand image (Brakus et al. 2009) and brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). While brand loyalty is imperative, it has frequently been positioned as the outcome in the cause-effect chain (Veloutsou, 2015). With this in mind, brand experience is first generated, followed by brand love and brand image. The mediating effect between brand experience and brand loyalty is still untold, and research suggests more attention to brand love (van der Westhuizen, 2018) and brand image (Santini, et al. 2018). Although the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty is widely examined (Andreini, et al. 2018), little attention has been given to provide a deeper understanding in-between. Joshi & Garg (2021) emphasize that the popularity of consumer brand-relationships has skyrocketed, specifically with emotions as a predictor for brand outcomes. Brand love is one such construct that captures consumers' emotional attachment with a brand. Moreover, Khan & Rahman (2015) state little is known about the (un)conscious state in the mind of the consumer, but propose that brand experience can stimulate consumers and foster a brand image. With this in mind, the variables brand love and brand image deserve further analysis of the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty (Santini et al. 2018; Das, et al. 2019). This signals the urgent need to examine and test mediating effects of the variables to ascertain a deeper understanding of the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty.

The present paper seeks to examine and test the parallel mediation of brand love and brand image between brand experience and brand loyalty. This to advance the understanding of how brand experience becomes brand loyalty by shedding light on mediation effects. Hence, examining and testing these relationships would provide insights into how brand image and brand love could predict even more loyal consumers for manufacturers.

The remainder of this paper is followed by a literature review funnelling out into the hypothesis development and research model, data analysis and results, and ends with conclusions and discussion.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Brand Experience

Brakus et al. (2009) coined brand experience as "*subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments*". Brand experience occurs from various consumer interactions with brand-related stimuli provided by the manufacturer to convey a holistic impression (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013). Although research so far has examined the relationship between brand experience with other constructs (Brakus et al. 2009; Das et al. 2019; Francisco-Maffezzolli et al. 2014; Iglesias, Markovic & Rialp, 2019), advancement of the concept is encouraged (Zha et al. 2020; Andreini et al. 2018).

Manufacturers are no longer solely responsible for the creation of experiences (Varshneya, et al. 2017).

Therefore, a deeper understanding of the manufacturer's proposed brand experience (Vander Shee, Peltier & Dahl, 2020) by taking into account how consumers situate meaning and value is needed (Andreini et al. 2018). Consequently, creating a resonant brand experience may result in positioning and situate non-imitable associations in the consumer's mind (Zha et al. 2020).

Brand Love

Brand love attracted attention in the marketing domain recently (Bagozzi et al. 2017; Junaid, et al. 2019). Still, since first being discussed by Carroll & Ahuvia (2006), brand love has gained substantial interest (Huber, et al., 2015; Junaid et al., 2019). Although the substantial interest in brand love, less consensus has been reached upon its definition (Albert, et al. 2008). Research emphasizes that consumer-brand relationships are constructed on emotions well-known (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998). Love reflects the excitement, passion, and desire to lose the self or achieve arousal in the mind (Aron & Aron, 1996). Fournier (1998) emphasise that love is based on a close and intimate relationship, in which the brand is an active partner. Following this, love is about excitement, passion, and desire to lose the extended self or unify lovers with another (Aron & Aron, 1996) such as consumers and brands (Shimp & Madden, 1988). Brand love is commonly described as "*the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name*" (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), which is organized as a mental map in the consumer's brain (Batra, et al. 2012).

Brand Image

Brand image has been widely studied (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). For example, in the automotive (Birdwell, 1968; Hsieh, 2002; Malhotra, 1981) and retail industry (Cho & Fiore, 2015; Cho, et al. 2015), and regarding customer-based brand equity (Faircloth, et al. 2001; Keller, 1993). Despite scholars have provided various meanings of brand image, research has explained the concept as messages and meanings associated with the brand, product, or service held by the consumers (Durgee & Stuart, 1987). Brand image is conceptualized as "*perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory. Brand associations are the other informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory and contain the meaning of the brand for consumers*" (Keller, 1993). Hsieh's (2002) empirical study with car brands demonstrated that sensory, symbolic, utilitarian, and economic brand associations form a distinct image in the consumer's mind. Thus, brand image builds upon the constitutions of ideas and images in the consumer's mind, and memory storing attitudes and knowledge of the brand (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Keller, 2003).

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is imperative for manufacturers in highly competitive landscapes. Despite being an important concept regarding building strong relationships with consumers, brand loyalty does not necessarily occur (van der Westhuizen, 2018). One way to enhance brand loyalty is to create an emotional attachment. This follows Aaker (1991) who defines brand loyalty as "*the attachment that a customer has to a brand*". The definition posits that *"... a*

deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior" (Oliver, 1999). Subsequentially, consumers' emotional attachment towards the brand is imperative to ensure brand loyalty (Obiegbu et al. 2020). Brand loyalty is, thus, a powerful tool if consumers are emotionally attached to the brand. In addition, research shows that loyal consumers are willing to pay a premium since the additional value they perceive (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) and tend to recommend the brand to others (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

Hypotheses Development and Research Model

The advancement of the experience economy has changed the competitive landscape for brands. A growing body of research investigating the human senses (Biswas, 2019; Eklund & Helmefalk, 2018). An experience needs to be carefully planned and designed by manufacturers to create a positive and memorable experience for the consumers by utilizing sensory stimuli as triggers (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). As such, sensory appealing product design has evolved into a powerful marketing tool (Krishna, et al. 2017), which fosters brand experience (Andreini et al. 2018) leading to brand loyalty (Brakus et al. 2009).

Car manufacturers traditionally expose consumers to the brand in advertisements to facilitate a purchase (Lienert, 1998). However, cars are complex products, engineered with exterior and interior, suggesting creativity when positioning the brand (Kirca et al. 2020). Thus, there are ample opportunities for planning and designing an experience for cars. One such opportunity is the inside of the car. Compared with the exterior that has colour and shape to be seen, the inside of the car is full of an interior that consumers can see, hear, touch, and smell over time. It alludes to the car's inside is an arena where consumers (sub)conscious is exposed by brand-related stimuli located in the interior embedded by the car manufacturer. These brand-related stimuli are filtered by consumers human senses when interacting with the car's interior. In regard to this, brand-related stimuli in the car's interior foster positive brand outcomes. This reasoning follows Ismail, Melewar, Lim & Woodside (2011) who emphasise that managing the experience transmutes into brand loyalty.

Brand love is a fundamental tenet of a consumer's passionate emotional attachment to a brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Research emphasizes that passionate consumers comprise particular sensations, emotions, cognitions, and actions evoked by interacting with brand-related stimuli (Das et al. 2019). Brand-related stimuli are part of the brand's advertisements, design, environment, and identity (Brakus et al. 2009). A car's interior is full of brand-related stimuli, forming the brand experience and yields an emotional attachment. Therefore: H_1: Brand experience has a positive impact on brand love

Consumers associate a brand with particular attributes or features (John, et al. 2006). These associations constitute a brand image and provide value for consumers (Keller, 1993). Brand experience is fundamental in understanding the relationship between brands and consumers regarding brand image associations (Chang & Chieng, 2006). Specifically, experiences associated with stimuli tend to leave an imprint on the brain (Legendre, et al. 2019). Although Eklund (2019) demonstrated a positive relationship between brand experience and brand image, the relationship according to Santini et al. (2018) deserves further attention. Thus: H_2: Brand experience has a positive impact on brand image. Developing long-lasting relationships for a brand relates to consumer's deep and underlying feelings for the given brand (Fournier, 1998). Research has demonstrated a positive relationship between brand love and

brand loyalty (Albert & Merunka, 2013; Bıçakcıoğlu, İpek & Bayraktaroğlu, 2018). Therefore: H_3: Brand love has a positive impact on brand loyalty

Holding a positive brand image, the higher likelihood of brand loyalty (Keller, 1993). Although research scarcely examined the relationship between brand image and brand loyalty (Joshi & Garg, 2021; Lee, et al. 2011), brand associations held and accessed in the memory influence brand loyalty positively following the reasoning of Oliver (1999). Thus: H_4: Brand image has a positive impact on brand loyalty

The relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty has been widely examined (Brakus et al. 2009; Iglesias et al. 2011; van der Westhuizen, 2018). Experiences occur from interactions with the brand, leading to pleasurable outcomes, which consumers want to repeat (Brakus et al. 2009). This repetition increases the likelihood of brand loyalty (Oliver, 1999). Therefore: H_5: Brand experience has a positive impact on brand loyalty.

Significant direct effects between concepts do not automatically signify mediation, rather an initial indication (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Although brand experience positively influences brand loyalty, further empirical investigation of the relationship is inquired (Ding and Tseng, 2015; Huang, 2017). With this in mind, brand love and brand image are discussed as mediators. Since brand experience may trigger emotional attachment, brand love would influence the outcome of brand loyalty. Conceptually, research argues brand love may influence memorable experiences and signify effects on brand loyalty (Albert et al. 2013; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). This reasoning follows Santini et al. (2018) who emphasize brand love could advance the understanding of brand experience and brand loyalty. It indicates brand love is a suitable nominee as a mediator, corresponding with Ding & Tseng's (2015) future avenue inquiry, partly proven by Huang (2017). Therefore: H_6: Brand love mediate the effect between brand experience and brand loyalty

Although the relationship between brand image and brand loyalty is proven (Lee et al. 2011; Joshi & Garg, 2021), little is known about how brand experience forms a brand image. Research indicates brand experience could potentially be a prerequisite for forming a brand image since the experience occurs in the given moment. An experience tends to stick in the consumer's mind and access memory nodes (Schmitt, 1999). Once the brand is established in the memory (Keller, 1993), the exposure of brand-related stimuli elicits brand associations based on ongoing and past experiences and interactions (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013). Subsequently, consumers are continuously motivated to refine currently held brand associations in the memory by accessing relevant information (Keller, 2003). This logic follows Santini et al. (2018) who state brand image would enable a deeper understanding and a greater prediction power on brand experience and brand loyalty. Hence: H_7: Brand image mediates the effect between brand experience and brand loyalty.
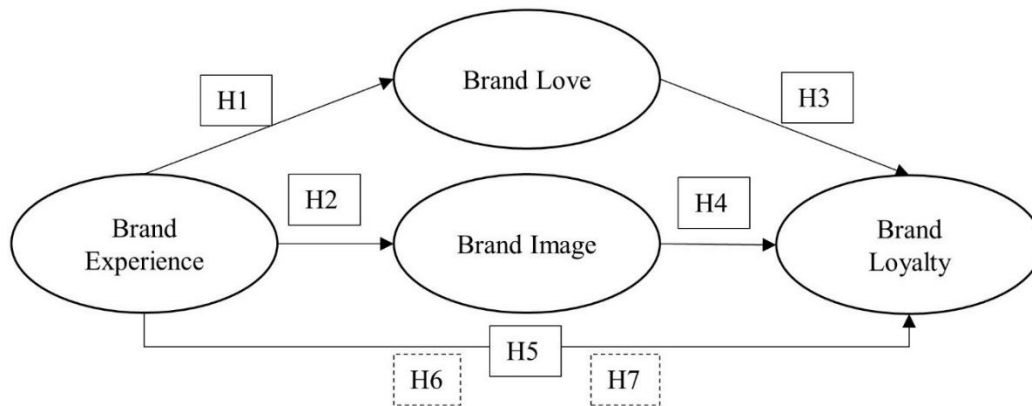
FIGURE 1
HYPOTHESIZED RELATIONSHIPS

METHODOLOGY

Operationalisation

The operationalization was based on an extensive literature review of brand experience, brand love, brand image, and brand loyalty. The constructs were operationalized based on established scales from prior research. The brand experience scale from Brakus et al. (2009) was adjusted to capture consumer perception of brand-related stimuli located in the car's interior. This is exemplified by "*I find my car's interior interesting in a sensory way*", "*my car's interior induces feelings and sentiments*", "*I engage in a lot of thinking when I use my car's interior*", and "*I engage in physical actions and behaviours when using my car's interior*". The brand love items were replicated from the established scale from Carroll & Ahuvia (2006). Since no generic brand image scale has been established, the logic of Christodoulides, et al. (2015) was followed by bringing together items from multiple studies. As the context is the automotive industry, a scale regarding cars was sought out as suggested by Zarantonello & Pauwels-Delassus (2015). The brand image scale from Hsieh (2002) was a suitable point of departure but adapted with other scales that measured the construct (Birdwell, 1968; Cho & Fiore, 2015; Cho et al. 2015; Faircloth et al., 2001; Malhotra, 1981). Brand loyalty was operationalized from Yoo and Donthu (2001) but due to the composite comprehensiveness of the concept (Knox & Walker, 2001) items from other brand loyalty scales were included (Chandrashekaran, et al. 2007; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Gounaris & Stathakopoulos, 2004).

All items were measured on a seven-point scale, ranging from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree) following Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003). The advantage of the same scale and anchor points are that it may enhance covariation due to a standardized design.

Questionnaire Administration

Before administration, the questionnaire was pre-tested. Ten consumers between 19 and 78 years who owned a car and marketing experts were included in the consumer panel. The respondents completed the questionnaire and marked item(s) perceived as abstrusely. These

items were discussed and modified to avoid misunderstandings and to establish validity in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was distributed through a Swedish automobile magazine - whose main reader is a man with a car interest – online article. The online article presented the background, purpose, a link to the questionnaire. Simultaneously as posting the questionnaire, links were put on the magazine's social media accounts. The questionnaire was available for three weeks. Consumers were reminded once per week to participate in the questionnaire. The questionnaire could only be answered once per IP address. It should be noted that the questionnaire was part of a larger data collection, with prior publications on the data set (see blind for review).

Population Sample

A total of 907 responses was obtained. Incomplete answers above 20 % were removed from the sample following Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson (2010). In total 897 (n) respondents were included in the sample. The participants' age ranges from 18 to 84 years, with an average of 43.11. As the automotive magazine's typical reader is a man, 98.2 % in the sample are men. The highest education level is a university degree (51.9%), followed by high school (42.5%) and elementary school (5.5%). Monthly salary ranged between 0 and 150 000 SEK, with an average of 39235. The most owned car brand was a Volvo Cars (18.2%), followed by BMW (13.1%), Mercedes-Benz (8.6%), Volkswagen (8.5%), Skoda (3.6%), Ford (3.1%), Toyota (2.9%), Citroen (2.2%), Peugeot (2%), Renault (1.2%), KIA (1.1%), Nissan (1.1%), Lexus (1%), and another brand (23.5%). These car brands are models of the year between 1975 and 2015, and the cars' have been owned for between 1 to 25 years.

Robustness Checks

Before testing the hypothesized relationships Figure 1, the variables were examined to determine if a parallel mediation was appropriate. Statistical assumptions were considered by testing the data (Hair et al., 2010; Hayes, 2018). Outliers and linearity were checked with residuals statistics and scatterplots (e.g., Cook's distance) as suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2004). The regression appears fairly linear since the Loess curve centres closely to zero along the X-axis. Thus, no cases of extreme outliers were found. Multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, and autocorrelation were checked following Hair et al. (2010). The data in the scatterplots showed a relatively constant vertical range across the X-axis. Thus, estimation error was excluded. Third, normality of estimation error was checked. The data in the Q-Q plots fit the diagonal line well, indicating the residuals were normally distributed.

Moreover, Cronbach's alpha, skewness and kurtosis, and correlations were checked. In accordance with DeVillis (2016) acceptable Cronbach's alpha values>0.6 ensuring internal reliability (brand experience 0.864; brand image 0.774; brand love 0.663; and brand loyalty 0.742). Following Pituch and Stevens (2015) all variables were within absolute skewness and kurtosis range – 2 and + 2 (brand experience -0.456 and -0.178; brand love -0.538 and -0.228; brand image; brand image -1.039 and 1.133; and brand loyalty -0.586 and -0.415). Thus, the variables have obtained asymmetry and normal univariate distribution. All variables have a correlation >0.3 and <0.9, indicating no multi-collinearity (Hair et al. 2010).

Data Analysis and Results

Hayes PROCESS for SPSS was employed to test and examine the hypothesized relationships. This is a path-analysis modelling technic using OLS regression procedures and estimates indirect effects for assessing the (Hayes, 2018). The technic can be employed with a small sample with irregular sampling distributions since bootstrapping methods are used to estimate indirect effects (Hayes, et al. 2017) and are commonly applied in the marketing realm (Yaoyuneyong, et al. 2018; Mehta, et al. 2017). The advantage is that Hayes PROCESS allows for analysing direct, indirect, and total effects simultaneously for the total sample without requiring subgroup analysis (Hayes, 2018).

Direct Effects

Consistent with H_1, the relationship between brand experience and brand love is positively accepted (B=0.71, t=26.37, and p<0.05) with R^2=0.44. This is following prior research emphasise consumer experience enhances emotional relationships with the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Das et al. 2019; Junaid et al. 2019). The result posits that the brand experience stemmed from brand-related stimuli located in the car's interior has a positive impact on brand love. The effect of brand experience on brand image was statistically positively significant, thus, H_2 is accepted (B=0.62, t=28.36, and p<0.05) with R^2 =0.48. The positive relationship between brand experience and brand image, responds to the call from Santini et al. (2018) who inquired an empirical analysis of the variables. Specifically, the result demonstrates that the more pleasant perceived brand-related stimuli in the car's interior, the higher impact brand experience has on brand image, following the logic of Chang & Chieng (2006). In concert with H_3, brand love had a statistically positively significant impact on brand loyalty (B=0.45, t=9.88, and p<0.05) with R^2 =0.66. Accordingly, H_3 is accepted following prior research (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Bıçakcıoğlu et al. 2018). The result shows that a passionate emotional attachment leads to a positive relationship between brand love and brand loyalty in the context of car brands. In accordance with H_4, brand image has a significant positive impact on brand loyalty (B =0.73, t=12,80, and p<0.05) with R^2=0.66, thus, H_5 is accepted. The results are in line with prior research (Oliver, 1999; Lee et al. 2011), and demonstrates that brand image have a positive effect on brand loyalty for car brands. H_5 is accepted (B=0.68, t=18.74, and p<0.05) with R^2 =0.28. The result is in accordance with prior research that has widely demonstrate a significantly positive relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty (Brakus et al. 2009; Ding & Tseng, 2015; van der Westhuizen, 2018). Subsequently, pleasurable experiences stemmed from brand-related stimuli in the car's interior yields a positive relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty in Table 1.

Table I DIRECT EFFECTS							
Hypothesis	B	Std. error	t-value	Sig.	R^2	LLCI	ULCI
H_1: Brand experience → brand love	0.71	0.03	26.37	0.000	0.44	0.66	0.77
H2: Brand experience → brand image	0.62	0.02	28.36	0.000	0.48	0.58	0.66
H_3: Brand love → brand loyalty	0.45	0.05	9.88	0.000	0.66	0.36	0.54
H_4: Brand image → brand loyalty	0.73	0.06	12.80	0.000	0.66	0.62	0.84
H_5: Brand experience → loyalty	0.68	0.04	18.74	0.000	0.28	0.61	0.75
Note: ‡ p<0,10; [*]p<0,05; [**]p < 0,01; [***]p<0,001, and level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output 95 %.							

Indirect Effects

Ahead of employing the parallel mediation using Hayes PROCESS (Model 4) (Hayes, 2018; Jose, 2013) to examine and test H_6 and H_7, the four preconditions from Baron & Kenny (1986) were fulfilled. First, the predictor variable brand experience is significantly associated with the outcome variable of brand loyalty. Second, brand experience is significantly associated with the mediating variables brand love and brand image respectively. Third, brand love and brand image are significantly associated with brand loyalty; and fourth, when brand experience also is included in the analysis. Thus, the preconditions were meet for performing a mediation analysis.

To test the mediating effect of H_6, and H_7, Hayes PROCESS macro was employed with a Sobel's Test (Sobel, 1982) and bootstrapping methods (Bollen & Stine, 1990). The total effect was significant, (B=0.68, p=0.000). Most importantly, the relationship and the effect between brand experience and brand loyalty was weaker in this analysis (B =-0.09 and p<0.05) compared with the total effect (B=0.68). These results indicate mediation. Moreover, the indirect effect of both brand love (B=0.32 and SE=0.04) and brand image (B =0.45 and SE=0.04) were positively significant using the Sobel Test and bootstrapping with 5000 samples. The confidence interval was evidently significant for brand love (LL=0.25 and UL=0.40) and brand image (LL=0.37 and UL=0.85). Thus, a significant mediation effect was obtained for H_6 and H_7. Not only was Sobel's Test significant, but also the 95 % bias-corrected confidence interval yielded range for the indirect effect did not exceed zero, hence, not violated (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Accordingly, both H_6 and H_7 are accepted Table 2.

Table 2 MEDIATING RESULTS						
Total, direct and indirect effect of brand experience on brand loyalty						
Total effect of brand experience on brand loyalty						
	Effect	Std. error	t-value	Sig.	LLCI	ULCI
	0.68	0.04	18.74	0.000	0.61	0.075
Direct effect of brand experience on brand loyalty						
	Effect	Std. error	t-value	Sig.	LLCI	ULCI
	-0.09	0.04	-2.65	0.008	-0.16	-0.02
Indirect effect(s) of brand experience on brand loyalty						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
Total	0.78	0.04	0.70	0.85		
Brand love	0.32	0.04	0.25	0.40		
Brand image	0.45	0.04	0.37	0.85		
Partially standardized indirect effect(s) of brand experience on brand loyalty						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
Total	0.50	0.02	0.46	0.55		
Brand love	0.21	0.25	0.16	0.26		
Brand image	0.29	0.03	0.24	0.35		
Completely standardized indirect effects(s) of brand experience of brand loyalty						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
Total	0.61	0.03	0.55	0.66		
Brand love	0.25	0.03	0.19	0.31		
Brand image	0.36	0.33	0.29	0.42		
Note: Number of bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals are 5000, and level of confidence for all confidence intervals in output 95 %.						

Discussion and Conclusion

The paper set out to examine the mediating effects between brand experience and brand loyalty among car consumers. To tackle this, brand love and brand image were employed as mediating variables. This follows the advocate of Santini et al. (2018) who emphasize more attention is needed to emotional and memory variables such as brand image and brand love to advance the understanding of the relationship. All hypothesized relationships were accepted, thus, brand love and brand image explain what's happening in-between brand experience and brand loyalty.

Further, prior research has conceptually linked brand experience with various consumer-brand relationships (Zha et al. 2020; Andreini et al. 2018; van der Westhuizen, 2018). This indicates that the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty can be strengthened by consumer attachment and held brand associations. To the extent of our knowledge, the mediating effect between brand experience and brand loyalty has not been examined and tested earlier. Brand love and brand image were found to mediate the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. Although the results show a significant positive relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty in isolation, the proven current mediating effects are interesting. Pine & Gilmore (1998) emphasise a memorable experience tends to stick in the consumer's mind, leading to a positive brand outcome. Based on the results, brand experience becomes memorable and elicits brand associations when consumers have an emotional connection through a close and intimate relationship with the brand. Thus, brand love and brand image does not only strengthen the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty but also strengthen the personal relationship between the brand and the consumer.

Compared with prior research that examined the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty (Brakus et al. 2009; Santini et al. 2018; van der Westhuizen, 2018), the present results suggest brand-related stimuli in the car's interior are the catalysator for the brand experience, which subsequently impacts brand loyalty. The findings capture the dynamic nature of brand experience, as emphasized by Zha et al. (2020). This suggests that brand experience is continuously formed every time consumers drive the vehicle by exposure to brand-related stimuli located in the car's interior embedded by the manufacturer.

Finally, research on brand experience studied various brands (Brakus et al. 2009; Francisco-Maffezzolli et al. 2014; Iglesias et al., 2011), this paper examined brand experience from a car's interior. In contrast with prior research, for example, the brand experience from perfume and bath soaps (Francisco-Maffezzolli et al. 2014) occurs in a given moment when using the brand, consumers are continuously exposed to brand-related stimuli from the car's interior every time the vehicle is driven. It alludes that brand experience is formed over space and time, with brand loyalty as a positive outcome. Subsequentially, the relationship is strengthened by the consumer's brand love and brand image of the car brand.

Theoretical Implications

The paper provides several implications. The results contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty from an experiential perspective, as inquired by prior research (Obiegbu et al. 2020; Zha et al. 2020). The findings confirm the necessity of manufacturers to provide consumers with a positive brand experience, which impacts both brand love and brand image. Although the results confirm prior research, it advances the theoretical understanding by broadening the perspective with mediating variables. The findings contribute to branding literature by providing insights that brand love and brand image mediate the already inquired relationship between experience and brand loyalty. Further, it

broadens the perspective of brand love and brand image as being influenced by experiences, which subsequentially impact brand loyalty. Thus, this paper advances the knowledge on consumer brand-relationship by demonstrating novel linkages between brand experience and brand loyalty as brand love and brand image deepen the understanding of what is happening inside the relationship.

Managerial Implications

By departing in brand experience managers can gain knowledge and understand how to strengthen brand loyalty. To succeed managers, need to invest in identifying suitable brand-related stimuli, which form the brand experience and ultimately contribute to brand loyalty. Thus, managers must carefully plan and design for which brand-related stimuli that are most suitable to have an emotional attachment on a deeper level with consumers and their held associations to ensure brand loyalty.

Brand experience plays a significant role in influencing brand love, and brand image, strengthening the outcome of brand loyalty. The findings of the paper can be used for managers to understand the mediators between cause and effect. Manufacturers should provide consumers with a superior brand experience to strengthen brand loyalty to increase sales. Especially, in the automotive industry, where the brand is imperative in a crowded marketplace with fierce competition. To strengthen brand loyalty, managers should therefore tailormade the brand experience to facilitate consumer attachment and feelings to evoke brand associations in the memory. Thus, rather than focusing solely on consumer retention and repurchase intention, managers need to consider the effect of brand love and brand image on brand loyalty. The paper shows that considering these concepts result in a stronger effect on brand loyalty, which already is highly valued by managers and firms.

Limitations and Future Research

The paper has several limitations. First, is the scope of the sample drawn from Swedish automotive consumers. Another limitation may be the gender perspective in the sample. It should be duly noted that the purpose or intention was not to examine the gender perspective among car consumers. However, various control variables aside from gender were included in the questionnaire. Nevertheless, scholars are suggested to consider the gender perspective in future research. Third, the sample consisted of consumers in a broad age range. It is assumed that consumer preference of the constructs may vary between age categories.

The paper alludes to future research. First, it would be interesting to examine the differences and similarities between premium and non-premium car brands. Second, examine consumers in different cultures and countries. Third, future research is inquired to examine other high-involvement brands such as luxury watches. Fourth, other consumer brand-relationship constructs related to brand meaning and value creation deserve further analysis, which may help to advance brand experience and brand loyalty relationship further. Fifth, no actor is solely responsible for creating experiences. Further research should explore other actors' roles in brand experience. It would be interesting to know more about how manufacturers plan and design for offering consumers a brand experience based on brand-related stimuli.

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