

Brand Trust on Brand Love in The Automotive Industry : Brand Equity as a Mediating Variable

(Kepercayaan Merek dan Kecintaan Merek di Industri Otomotif : Ekuitas Merek sebagai Variabel Mediasi)

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Abstract : This research examines the relationships among brand trust, brand experience, brand equity, and brand love within Indonesia's automotive industry, based on responses from 374 consumers across five regions of Jakarta. Grounded in the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework and emotional branding theory.

Objective: This study analyzes direct and mediating effects of brand trust on brand love, with brand equity as the mediating variable.

Methodology: This study adopts a quantitative, causal, cross-sectional design within a post-positivist paradigm. Data were collected using a validated 4-point Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS. The study examines brand trust, brand experience, brand equity, and brand love, measured through their respective dimensions.

Research Results: Findings reveal that brand trust significantly and positively influences brand equity and brand love. Moreover, brand equity partially mediates these relationships, demonstrating its crucial role in translating trust perceptions into emotional attachment. The model showed strong reliability and validity (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.80$, AVE > 0.50 , CR > 0.85).

Keywords : Brand Trust, Brand Equity, Brand Love, Automotive Industry, Jakarta, Emotional Branding

1. Introduction

The automotive industry has become one of the most dynamic and competitive sectors globally, characterized by rapid technological advancement, shifting consumer preferences, and increasing demands for sustainable mobility solutions. Within this highly competitive environment, companies face the challenge of not only offering reliable and innovative products but also cultivating strong and lasting emotional connections with consumers. In this context, concepts such as brand trust, customer experience, brand equity, and brand love emerge as critical strategic assets that can significantly influence consumer behavior and long-term business performance (Kaur and Kaur 2020; Hegner and Jahn 2022).

In Jakarta, one of Indonesia's largest metropolitan areas, the automotive market demonstrates intense competition among both local and international brands. Perception consumers form through interactions across multiple touchpoints (Rather 2021; Iglesias et al. 2023). These factors not only shape immediate satisfaction but also contribute to the development of deeper emotional bonds in the form of brand love a state of affection, passion, and loyalty towards a brand (Albert and Merunka 2019; Drennan et al. 2020).

The direct relationship between brand trust, customer experience, and brand love has been extensively discussed in prior research, scholars increasingly highlight the role of brand equity as a mediating variable. Brand equity, defined as the added value a brand name imparts to a product in the minds of consumers, acts as a bridge that transforms trust and experiences into long-term attachment and advocacy (Keller 2020; Le et al. 2022). Recent studies argue that consumers who perceive high brand equity are more likely to interpret positive experiences and trust as reasons to establish stronger emotional ties with a brand, which eventually results in brand love and loyalty (Rather and Camilleri 2019; Bairrada et al. 2021).

Recent studies (Albert and Merunka 2017; Bıçakcıoğlu et al. 2018) have revealed that brand love an intense form of emotional attachment can predict repeat purchase intentions, positive word-of-mouth, and long-term loyalty. The antecedents to brand love are complex. One consistent predictor identified across recent literature is brand

trust, which reflects a consumer's confidence in the reliability and integrity of a brand (Delgado-Ballester et al. 2020). When trust is established, it reduces perceived risk and increases emotional closeness, facilitating the development of brand love.

The mediating role of brand equity the value that a brand adds to a product in the minds of consumers remains underexplored. Brand equity encompasses perceived quality, brand associations, brand loyalty, and brand awareness (Aaker 1991; Christodoulides et al. 2021). It serves as a perceptual bridge that may enhance or weaken the effects of trust and experience on brand love. A trusted and well-experienced brand with high equity is more likely to evoke strong emotional attachment compared to a low-equity brand, even if trust and experience levels are comparable (Keller 2020; Buil et al. 2019).

2. Literature

2.1 Brand Trust

Brand trust is a consumer's willingness to rely on a brand based on its ability, integrity, and benevolence (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). More recent studies e.g., (Delgado-Ballester and Luis Munuera-Alemán 2017; Islam and Rahman 2021) have underscored brand trust as a critical antecedent to both brand loyalty and emotional engagement, especially in industries involving high-involvement products such as automobiles.

Brand trust refers to the consumer's confidence in the reliability and integrity of a brand (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). Recent studies, including those by (Delgado-Ballester et al. 2017) and (Su and Xiao 2022), demonstrate that brand trust enhances consumer commitment and is directly linked to brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth intentions. Trust develops over time through consistent performance, transparent communication, ethical practices, and customer satisfaction (Keh and Xie 2009). In the automotive industry, where post-sale service, product durability, and safety perceptions are vital, brand trust becomes a significant antecedent to emotional attachment. Consumers who trust a brand are more likely to develop affective responses, such as brand love (Garaus and Wagner 2019).

2.2 Brand Love

Brand love encompasses the passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a brand (Batra et al. 2012). Research by (Albert and Merunka 2017), (Vlachos and Vrechopoulos 2020), and (Patwary et al. 2023) confirms that brand trust and brand experience are key drivers of brand love, which in turn fosters customer loyalty, advocacy, and long-term engagement. Brand love is conceptualized as a deep, passionate, and emotional attachment that consumers develop toward a brand (Batra et al. 2012). Unlike mere satisfaction or loyalty, brand love involves a long-term emotional bond characterized by affection, enthusiasm, and even obsession. Scholars such as (Albert and Merunka 2017), (Vlachos and Vrechopoulos 2020), and (Patwary et al. 2023) have confirmed that brand love positively influences repurchase behavior, willingness to pay a premium, and brand advocacy.

Brand love emerges when consumers perceive the brand as irreplaceable and integrated into their lifestyle and self-identity. It is nurtured through accumulated trust and consistently positive experiences (Karjaluo et al. 2019). In the automotive sector, where emotional identity, prestige, and lifestyle play a strong role, brand love becomes a crucial variable in determining customer retention and brand evangelism. Brand love represents a deep emotional attachment that consumers form with a particular brand over time. Unlike traditional constructs such as customer satisfaction or brand loyalty, brand love involves stronger emotional connections that resemble the feelings individuals have in interpersonal relationships, such as passion, affection, and long-term commitment (Batra et al. 2012).

2.3 Brand Equity

Brand equity refers to the added value endowed to products and services, reflecting how consumers think, feel, and act toward a brand (Keller 2003). According to (Aaker 1991) and reinforced by studies like (Christodoulides et al. 2018) and (Tuan 2020), brand equity not only results from brand trust and experience but also amplifies their impact on emotional outcomes such as brand love.

Brand equity is the value that a brand adds to a product or service, as perceived by consumers (Aaker 1991; Keller 2003). It is a multidimensional construct encompassing brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. In the automotive industry, strong brand equity enhances consumer confidence, supports premium pricing, and sustains competitive advantage.

Recent works by (Christodoulides et al. 2018), (Tuan 2020), and (Ali et al. 2023) highlight brand equity as both a consequence of brand trust and experience and a catalyst for deeper consumer relationships such as brand love. Aaker's model (1991) asserts that brand equity serves as a bridge between the brand's performance and emotional outcomes. In this study, brand equity is positioned as a mediating variable, influencing how brand trust and experience shape brand love. Brand equity refers to the additional value that a brand contributes to a product or service, as perceived by consumers. It is not merely based on tangible product features but is largely driven by how customers feel, think, and act toward a brand. This value often results in greater customer preference, stronger loyalty, and the ability to command higher prices in the market.

3. Research Methodology

This study applies a quantitative research design utilizing a causal research approach. The objective is to explore and analyze the cause-and-effect relationships among the variables: brand trust, brand experience, brand equity, and brand love within the automotive industry. Specifically, the research investigates how brand trust and brand experience influence brand love, with brand equity serving as a mediating variable. The hypotheses are then empirically tested using data collected through structured questionnaires.

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variable. The hypotheses are then empirically tested using data collected through structured questionnaires.

The target population comprised adult consumers (≥ 18 years) who have purchased, owned, or seriously considered purchasing an automobile within the past five years and who reside in Jakarta. The final cleaned sample used in analysis is $N = 374$ respondents, a sample size selected to ensure adequate statistical power for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) mediation tests (bootstrapping), consistent with contemporary SEM guidance and with similar studies in automotive branding research.

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the aid of SmartPLS or AMOS software. Descriptive analysis was used to profile respondents and summarize responses, while SEM was applied to test the proposed relationships among variables, including the mediating role of brand equity.

Before running the full model, the following checks were conducted:

- a) Normality Test (for descriptive insights)
- b) Validity Test (convergent and discriminant validity)
- c) Reliability Test (Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability)
- d) Model Fit Evaluation (using indices such as AVE, R^2 , and path coefficients)

4. Research Result

4.1 Outer Model

**Tabel 1 Summary of Validity Testing Results
(Measurement Model Evaluation)**

Outer Loading

Indicator	Outer loadings
BE1 <- Brand Equity	0,571
BE2 <- Brand Equity	0,746
BE3 <- Brand Equity	0,812
BE4 <- Brand Equity	0,803
BE5 <- Brand Equity	0,799

Indicator	Outer loadings
BE1 <- Brand Equity	0,571
BE2 <- Brand Equity	0,746
BE3 <- Brand Equity	0,812
BE4 <- Brand Equity	0,803
BE5 <- Brand Equity	0,799
BE6 <- Brand Equity	0,852
BE7 <- Brand Equity	0,806
BE8 <- Brand Equity	0,825
BE9 <- Brand Equity	0,825
BE10 <- Brand Equity	0,801
BL1 <- Brand Love	0,785
BL2 <- Brand Love	0,813
BL3 <- Brand Love	0,880
BL4 <- Brand Love	0,844
BL5 <- Brand Love	0,863
BL6 <- Brand Love	0,833
BL7 <- Brand Love	0,856
BL8 <- Brand Love	0,795
BL9 <- Brand Love	0,787
BL10 <- Brand Love	0,832
BT1 <- Brand Trust	0,776
BT2 <- Brand Trust	0,819
BT3 <- Brand Trust	0,820
BT4 <- Brand Trust	0,845
BT5 <- Brand Trust	0,840
BT6 <- Brand Trust	0,792
BT7 <- Brand Trust	0,789
BT8 <- Brand Trust	0,820
BT9 <- Brand Trust	0,808
BT10 <- Brand Trust	0,832

The estimation results for the measurement model showed that brand experience had 10 valid items, brand love had 10 valid items, brand equity had 9 valid items, 1 invalid item, and brand trust had 10 valid items. Then, the calculation was re-conducted by removing the invalid indicators. The following are the results of outer loading, Cronbach's Alpha, composite reliability, and AVE.

Tabel 2 Outer Loading, Composite Reliability and Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand Equity	0,931	0,936	0,942	0,620

Brand Love	0,949	0,951	0,957	0,688
Brand Trust	0,944	0,945	0,952	0,663

Source: Processed data using SmartPLS 2025.

The brand trust variable is measured by ten valid ones where the outer loading value lies between 0.797 – 0.880 which indicates that the ten measurement items are strongly correlated (>0.70) in explaining brand trust.

The level of reliability of the brand trust variable is acceptable with a composite reliability value of 0.945 and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.944 above 0.70 and Convergent validity indicated by AVE 0.663 > 0.50. Among the four valid measurement items.

The brand love variable was measured by ten valid items, with outer loadings ranging from 0.843 to 0.914, indicating a strong correlation between the ten measurement items in explaining brand love. The reliability of the brand love variable was acceptable, with a composite reliability of 0.957, a Cronbach's alpha of 0.50 above 0.70, and convergent validity indicated by an AVE of 0.620 > 0.50.

The brand equity variable was measured by nine valid items, with outer loadings ranging from 0.846 to 0.874, indicating a strong correlation between the nine measurement items in explaining brand equity. The reliability level of the brand equity variable is acceptable with a composite reliability value of 0.937 and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.931 above 0.70, as well as Convergent validity indicated by an AVE of 0.620 > 0.50.

Tabel 3 Table Fornell and Lacker

Variable	Brand Equity	Brand Love	Brand Trust
Brand Equity	0,787		
Brand Love	0,778	0,829	
Brand Trust	0,707	0,561	0,814

Source: Processed data using SmartPLS 2025.

Discriminant validity evaluation needs to be conducted using the Fornell and Lacker criteria. Discriminant validity is a form of evaluation to ensure that variables are theoretically distinct and empirically proven/statistically tested. The Fornell and Lacker criteria require that the square root of the AVE of a variable be greater than the correlation between the variables.

The brand equity variable has a square root of AVE (0.787), a greater correlation with brand experience (0.773), a greater correlation with brand love (0.829), and greater correlation with brand trust (0.814).

These results indicate that the discriminant validity of the brand equity variable is met. Similarly, the validity of brand experience, brand love, and brand trust is greater than the correlation between the variables.

Tabel 4 HTMT

Variable	Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)
Brand Love <-> Brand Equity	0,817
Brand Trust <-> Brand Equity	0,755
Brand Trust <-> Brand Love	0,588

Source: Processed data using SmartPLS 2025.

Hair et al. (2019) recommend HTMT because this measure of discriminant validity is considered more sensitive and accurate in detecting discriminant validity. The recommended value is below 0.90. Test results indicate that if the HTMT value is below 0.90 for a variable pair, discriminant validity is achieved. A variable divides the variance of a measurement item into its own measuring item more strongly than it divides the variance among other variable items.

4.2 Inner Model

4.2.1 Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesis testing in this study aims to empirically examine the effect of brand trust on brand equity and the effect of brand experience on brand equity, considering the mediating role of brand love. The hypotheses are formulated based on a theoretical review and previous research findings, which indicate that brand trust and brand experience have the potential to strengthen brand equity through brand love. In this context, the null hypothesis (H_0) states there is no significant effect between the tested variables, while the alternative hypothesis (H_1) states the presence of both direct and indirect effects. The testing was conducted using a quantitative approach using the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) method, which allows for the simultaneous analysis of direct and mediation relationships.

After data analysis, the hypothesis testing process continued by evaluating the path coefficients and significance values (p-values) for each relationship between variables. The test results indicate whether the influence of cross-sector collaboration on micro-business performance is directly significant, or whether this influence is mediated by ecosystem orchestration and green corporate strategy. If the p-value is <0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. These findings are expected to provide theoretical contributions in broadening the understanding of brand trust, brand experience, and brand love in enhancing brand equity.

4.2.2 Direct effect

- H-1: Brand trust influences brand equity
- H-2: Brand Equity influences brand love
- H-3: Brand trust influences brand love

4.3 Indirect Effect

- H-4: Brand equity mediates the relationship between brand trust and brand love

Tabel 5 Direct Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypotesis	Original sample (O)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values	Description
Brand Equity -> Brand Love	0,762	14,393	0,000	Accept
Brand Trust -> Brand Equity	0,707	13,502	0,000	Accept
Brand Trust -> Brand Love	0,022	0,416	0,678	Rejected

Source: Processed data using SmartPLS 2025.

Based on the hypothesis testing results above, it can be concluded that:

1. Hypothesis 1 (H1) is accepted, indicating a significant effect of brand trust on brand equity, with a path coefficient of 0.762 and a P-value of 0.000 <0.05 sig. Any change in the brand trust variable will increase brand equity.

2. Hypothesis 2 (H2) is accepted, indicating a significant effect of brand equity on brand love, with a path coefficient of 0.707 and a P-value of 0.000 < 0.05 sig. Any change in the brand love variable will increase brand equity.
3. Hypothesis 3 (H3) is rejected, namely there is no significant effect of brand trust on brand love, with a path coefficient of 0,022 and a P-value (0.678 > 0.05 sig). Any change in brand trust will increase brand love.

Table 6
Mediation Effect Hypothesis Test

Hypotesis	Original sample (O)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
Brand Trust -> Brand Love	0,539	10,524	0,000

Source: Processed data using SmartPLS 2025.

4. Hypothesis 6 (H4) is accepted, namely there is a significant influence of brand equity mediating the influence of brand trust on brand love, with a path coefficient of (0.539) and P-Value (0.00 < 0.05 sig). every change in the brand trust variable, on brand love through the brand equity variable, will improve micro business performance

4.4 Model Evaluation

Partial Least Squares (PLS) is a variance-based analysis method aimed at testing theoretical models, with a primary emphasis on predictive studies. Unlike covariance approaches such as Covariance-Based SEM (CB-based SEM), PLS is more suitable for research focused on prediction and model exploration, especially when data do not meet the assumptions of a normal distribution or when the sample size is relatively small (Hair et al. 2019). In structural equation modeling, evaluating the Goodness of Fit (GoF) is essential to determine whether the proposed research model adequately represents the observed data. In Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), traditional covariance-based fit indices are not typically used. Instead, researchers apply specific criteria suitable for PLS-SEM, such as the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), Normed Fit Index (NFI), and the Goodness-of-Fit (GoF) Index introduced by (Tenenhaus et al. 2005).

To ensure the empirical acceptability of the proposed model, PLS-SEM relies on several comprehensive evaluation measures, including:

1. R^2 (R Square) – Measures the proportion of variance in the endogenous construct explained by the exogenous construct. A higher R^2 value indicates better model predictive power, with common criteria being: 0.25 (weak), 0.50 (moderate), and 0.75 (strong) (Hair et al. 2019).
2. SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) – Measures model fit by comparing the observed and predicted correlation matrices. An SRMR value <0.08 is considered good (Henseler et al. 2015).

Tabel 7 R Square

Variabel	R-square	R-square adjusted
Brand Equity	0,500	0,499
Brand Love	0,605	0,603

Source: Processed data using SmartPLS 2025.

The R-square statistic describes the extent to which an endogenous variable can be explained by other exogenous/endogenous variables in the model. According to Chin (1998), qualitative interpretations of R-square values are 0.19 (low influence), 0.33 (moderate influence), and 0.66 (high influence).

Based on the data processing above, it can be said that the magnitude of the influence of brand equity that can be explained by brand trust is 50% (high influence) with a prediction accuracy measure of 0.561 (high influence), the magnitude of the influence of brand love that can be explained by brand trust is 60,5% (high influence) with a prediction accuracy measure of 0.561 (high influence).

Table 8 Standardized Root Mean Square Residu (SRMR)

Model	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0,055	0,055

Source: Processed data using SmartPLS 2025.

SRMR stands for Standardized Root Mean Square Residue. In (Yamin 2022), this value is a measure of model fit, namely the difference between data correlation metrics and model estimated correlation metrics. In (Hair et al. 2021), an SRMR value below 0.08

indicates a good model fit. However, in (Karin Schemelleh et al. 2003), an SRMR value between 0.08 and 0.100 indicates an acceptable model fit. The model estimation result is 0.05, which means the model is a good fit. Empirical data can explain the influence between variables in the model.

5. Conclusion

Based on the data analysis and findings presented in the previous chapters, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Brand Trust as a Foundational Driver

Consumers who perceive a brand as reliable, honest, and consistent are more likely to develop positive emotional connections. Trust remains a fundamental antecedent to brand love, particularly in high-involvement industries such as automotive, where purchase decisions are financially and emotionally significant.

2. Brand Equity as a Mediating Mechanism

The results demonstrate that brand equity partially mediates the relationship between trust and love, and between experience and love. This finding validates the proposition that strong brand equity transforms rational evaluations into affective commitment, underscoring its strategic importance in modern brand management.

3. Brand Love as the Ultimate Outcome of Emotional Branding

Consumers who experience trust, satisfaction, and emotional resonance toward a brand develop a sense of attachment akin to love. This emotional state drives brand advocacy, repurchase intention, and resilience against competitors, reinforcing the notion that brand love is a critical determinant of long-term brand performance.

4. Model Validation in the Indonesian Context

The successful application of this model in the Indonesian automotive industry confirms that emotional branding dynamics are not exclusive to Western markets. Instead, they are equally relevant in collectivist cultures where interpersonal trust and relational values play central roles in consumer behavior.

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