Marketing's Rediscovery of Empathy: Is Brand Experience the Answer to Eliciting Brand Love Cross-Culturally?

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Abstract – The world of marketing has always claimed to emphasize the needs of humans; and yet, why does it currently lack a certain humanity? Modern advances have resulted in an industry saturated with advertisements and algorithms that prioritize profit, views, and clicks. While numbers can and have been extremely useful in progressing the field, they can only get us so far. The crux of this technological revolution in marketing is that it has left its landscape devoid of the human touch. The current research posits that as a brand, one should not simply focus on accruing revenue but on deepening the connection with consumers. This bond can be achieved by eliciting *brand love* through a phenomenon known as *brand experiences,* categorized into sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral, and relational*.* The study collects empirical data and introduces a new component to the brand love scale known as *cultural affirmation* providing deeper insights within the international context of Maldives and Malaysia. As marketing is centered on understanding the needs of consumers, we as humans are still the only entities capable of the empathetic reasoning required to accomplish this to its deepest extent – a feat that has eluded even the most advanced of today's technology.

Keywords – Brand Experience, Brand Love, Cross National Study, Empathy, Humanized Technology, Scale Development

1   Introduction

There is no way around it: we, as human beings, are social creatures. Empathy is embedded in us as a part of our innate social nature (Weisz & Cikara, 2021). It can be characterized as understanding the experiences of people and responding to those experiences and emotions (Girton, 2018). The relevance of empathy in marketing can be traced back to the field's modern origins when marketing aimed to position itself as the consumer's voice. The importance that empathy holds in the sphere of marketing indicates that the relationship and emotional attachment between brands and consumers is the key to successful marketing; consumers must transcend simply *liking* a brand. This transcendence beyond moderately positive perceptions of a brand to a more significant emotional connection is identified as *brand love* (Albert & Merunka, 2013), and *brand experience* is a market-

ing concept that is characterized as the total aggregation of ways consumers connect with and are affected by a brand (van der Westhuizen, 2018).

1.1 People Are More Than Just Numbers

The pioneers of the marketing world such as the inventors of light-bulbs, cars, and soap bars possessed intuition that enabled them to empathize with their audience. Through compassion and ingenuity, they were able to recognize their ideas as life-changing solutions for everyday people. On the other hand, the present landscape of marketing is a harsh departure from the past; after a golden age of innovation, the field has settled into a mindset of "selling for the sake of selling". Marketers have buried themselves in practices entrenched in data and automation, severing their emotional connections with consumers in the process (Basil & Bolls, 2018). This focus on marketing solely as an analytics-driven approach has created a gap between the consumer and the organization, clearly indicating that data alone cannot replace genuine human connection (Davenport et al., 2020). To return to a point of connectedness, brands must resurrect the humanity possessed by the forefathers of marketing. First and foremost, marketing revolves around the needs of customers, making them the biggest determinants of whether a brand is successful or whether it fails. It is vital to note that the use of empathetic marketing aims to provide marketers with evidence-based methods to achieve brand love.

1.2 Bias Clouds the Marketer's Eye

A crucial mistake made by today's marketers is their framing of personal preferences, including biases as part of their marketing to forecast the needs of customers. As evidenced by Bendle & Perkins (2020), marketing is often subject to stereotyping, with the use of generalizations such as "Easterners and Westerners". Overgeneralizations such as all English people loving tea illustrate that they are frequently based on fact but are overgeneralizations, nonetheless. The principles of empathy-based marketing and by extension, brand experience and brand love, assert that collaborative learning and the removal of biases are essential in putting ourselves in the customer's shoes.

1.3 Returning to a State of Human-First Marketing

In an era of high-tech advertising and social media, marketing has not only become accessible; in certain scenarios, it has become a ceaseless and unavoidable part of everyday life. The average individual spends five hours a day using their smartphone where they constantly experience a barrage of advertisements, both voluntarily and involuntarily (Ceci, 2022). This invasive environment of marketing has given rise to a great deal of skepticism by consumers, and it is natural to consider the success of marketing as a ploy that one has "fallen prey to" (Vlachos et al., 2016). There is heavy reliance on technology to take the wheel and steer a brand's marketing towards more sales. While the goal of achieving sales is not a negative

aim, marketing should not rely on manipulating the viewer to simply spend money on a product. By examining the consumers' brand experience and focusing on graduating from short-term interest to brand love, the current study sheds light on empathy-based marketing approaches that are holistic in nature and prioritize the needs of consumers and marketers alike.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Brand Experience

The landscape of marketing has transformed over the passage of time, and slowly but surely, researchers in the field are being nudged into new and uncharted territory. Material possessions are no longer the focal point of present-day consumers; instead, they are more captivated by memories, and many brands such as Apple, The Body Shop, Harley-Davidson, and Disney are positioning themselves to create sentimental experiences for their patrons (Huang, 2017; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020; Roto et al., 2015). Brand experience in the field of marketing was first introduced in an editorial by Schmitt (1999), highlighting the evolution from functional features to marketing experiences.

Following the initial conceptualization of the subject matter, Brakus et al. (2009) assessed a theoretical model for brand experience consisting of (a) sensory; (b) affective; (c) behavioral; and (d) intellectual dimensions. The *sensory* experience consists of visual aspects and elements that are discerned through bodily sensations (Hwang & Hyun, 2012). Thus, a brand's product and service design can generate experiences through the stimulation of a consumer's sense of sight, touch, smell, and hearing. For instance, designs that incorporate pleasant textures, hues, and styles, as well as motifs such as logos and catchphrases (Krishna et al., 2016). The *affective* dimension of a brand experience comprises of a variety of abstract personal encounters alongside tangible feelings and memories (Hwang & Hyun, 2012). Consumers might experience positive emotions such as enjoyment, longing, and loyalty towards brands. The *behavioral* dimension of brand experiences is characterized by many distinct manners of action-oriented responses (Kang et al., 2017). For example, the satisfaction gained from shopping at a particular mall and its resultant behaviors of time investment and purchase motivations (Lucia-Palacios et al., 2016). Lastly, *intellectual* brand experiences are characterized as instances where an individual's thoughts are provoked, and curiosity is fostered. Consumers retain memories of brands that intellectually stimulate them in social, economic, and environmental contexts (Brakus et al., 2009; Hwang & Hyun, 2012). Building on the foundational research of Brakus et al. (2009), Nysveen et al. (2013) further conceptualized the fifth dimension of *relational* experience in the context of service brands. It can be characterized as the interaction between a customer and a brand resulting in a community, a potentially vital aspect due to the advent of social media and sharing economies (Aoki et al., 2019).

2.2 Brand Love

In a world where the customer sits on the throne, brands are rapidly accepting that simply being liked is no longer adequate for maintaining the loyalty of the market (Rauschnabel, et al., 2015). The origins of brand love can be traced back to Shimp and Madden (1988), the first researchers to incorporate Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of interpersonal love from the discipline of psychology to that of marketing. Thereafter, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) characterized it as a notion centered on relationships, further defining the phenomenon as a measurement of the intense affective connection that a satisfied customer has for a specific brand.

Batra et al. (2012) established that the love experienced by a consumer for brands is more concisely understood through their formation of a higher-order factor model of brand love. Hence, this model is adopted in the current research. *Passion-driven behavior* is the first component of the higher-order mechanism and is measured using the factors (a) willingness to invest resources; (b) passionate desire to use; and (c) things done in the past (involvement). *Self-brand integration* relates to a brand's capacity to communicate to their customers genuine and aspirational identities. It is evaluated using the factors (a) current self-identity; (b) desired self-identity; and (c) life meaning and intrinsic rewards. *Positive emotional connections* transcend the traditional meaning of "positive emotions" to include arousing a sense of attachment similar to the connection that one possesses with an "old friend". It is assessed using the factors (a) intuitive fit; (b) emotional attachment; and (c) positive affect.

Apart from the three higher-order factors mentioned by Batra et al (2012), a fourth factor is introduced by the author of the current study characterized as *cultural affirmation*. This factor represents a brand's (a) cultural inclusivity; (b) geographical accessibility; and (c) cultural sensitivity. *Cultural inclusivity* involves the acknowledgment and appreciation of a consumer's culture and traditions by brands. For instance, Frisby (2019) found that the addition of black and brown skin tones in the products of cosmetic brands validated individuals from all cultural backgrounds. *Geographical accessibility* is characterized by a brand's efforts to establish a tangible presence in a consumer's country or region. One such method of garnering a physical presence is through promotional events – Zarantonello and Schmitt (2013) indicate that these events have a positive impact on brand equity and consumer attitudes, outlining the case of coffee brand Illy hosting global exhibitions and classes inside galleries in cities such as Milan, London, New York, and Istanbul. Lastly, *cultural sensitivity* denotes an organization's practices of conforming its brand to honor cultural values and norms. A study by Gao et al. (2020) on the naming of American movies in China revealed that more accurate and informative translations of movie names resulted in larger commercial success. A study by Luedicke (2020) asserts the value of prioritizing the cultural patterns and ideological conflicts surrounding a brand to close the socio-cultural gap, in contrast to wasteful expenditure on unrelated branding that would result in backlash. Hence, this incorporation of cultural affirmation enables the present research to account for a cultural perspective within the brand love scale – a viewpoint that is largely overlooked in the original scale. Although cultural affirmation may draw similarities to self-

brand integration, it differentiates itself through the adoption of a cultural perspective as a collective phenomenon as opposed to the individualistic nature of self-brand integration. Furthermore, there is numerous literature that examines the concept of brand love across various countries, further justifying the need for a cultural perspective within the scale (de Oliveira et al., 2021; Pontinha & Vale, 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2018; Sajtos et al., 2021; Safeer et al., 2020).

2.3   Review of Theory: Empathy-Based Marketing

The linguistic inception of empathy was founded over a century ago and originates from the Greek term *empatheia* (passion, state of emotion) and was later translated into the German word *einfühlung* (in feeling) by Wispé (1986). Research in the field has yielded two categories of empathy, which are affective empathy and cognitive empathy. *Affective empathy* concerns the sensations and feelings as a reaction to another individual's mental state whereas *cognitive empathy* relates to the capacity to recognize and comprehend the feelings of others (Decety, 2020).

Empathy-based marketing is therefore conceptualized as a discipline of marketing with an emphasis on the ability to comprehend the consumer's point of view and emotions (Pedersen, 2021). For instance, many are unaware that the origins of IKEA's lucrative marketing strategy of space-saving flatpacks were only conceived due to the empathetic reasoning of one of its front-line workers. After struggling to fit a table into his car, he detached its legs, subsequently getting the idea for the company's innovative solution.

Research that has explored empathy-based marketing in the past comprises findings by Dovzhik et al. (2021) whereby an empathetic approach when in contact with possible customers raised their propensity to purchase a certain product, a study by Prasetyo and Purnamasari (2022) investigating the effects of empathy-based marketing by fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a study by Holt et al. (2017) advocating for empathy as a non-negotiable element of every business setting. Furthermore, empathy has been discovered to perform a vital role in customer-employee interactions (Wieseke et al., 2012), the reviewing behavior of customers on peer-to-peer platforms (Pera et al., 2019), and how handwritten comments in the tourism field establishes empathy which in return reduces negative online ratings (Tassiello et al., 2018).

2.4   Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

The axioms of empathy-based marketing by Pedersen (2021) indicate its relevance as the theoretical framework of the current study. Firstly, brand experiences rely heavily on *axiom one: common core*, and its emphasis on consumer knowledge, as it is based on understanding the experiences of consumers in numerous dimensions. Secondly, *axiom two: relevancy*, signifies that the prioritization of brand experiences results in the achievement of brand love and its accompanying benefits which boost performance. Thirdly, *axiom three: distance*, highlights the significance of closing the emo-

tional and intellectual gap between brands and customers – in essence, nurturing consumer-brand relationships through brand love. Lastly*, axiom four: empathy*, encompasses the theoretical framework, asserting the fulfillment of the previous axioms is dependent on being an empathetic marketer. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

> H1: Sensory brand experience has a positive influence on brand love.
> H2: Affective brand experience has a positive influence on brand love.
> H3: Intellectual brand experience has a positive influence on brand love.
> H4: Behavioral brand experience has a positive influence on brand love.
> H5: Relational brand experience has a positive influence on brand love.

3 Methodology

The current study applied a quantitative method using an online survey to achieve the primary data. The structured questionnaire was distributed to the participants using Google Forms via the snowball method. Following the attainment of responses, the data was subjected to frequency analysis, descriptive analysis, Cronbach's alpha tests, Pearson correlation tests and multiple linear regression analysis. The respondents were asked to identify a brand that they felt a significant personal connection towards which aided in contextualizing their responses on the scale items for their chosen brand. The brand experience scale (BXS) by Brakus et al. (2009) was used to measure the independent variables, whereas the dependent variable was assessed using the higher-order factors of brand love by Batra et al. (2012), with both scales measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

Due to the universal nature of the current economy and the consequent worldwide consumption of brands, it is fundamental to analyze brand experiences from various national viewpoints (Saari et al., 2017). Therefore, the study's age demographic is diverse, ranging from 18 to 60 and above. The study sample consists of participants from two countries: Malaysia and Maldives. Malaysia is chosen as the setting for researching brand love and brand experience in a Southeast Asian context due to its status as one of the region's most rapidly growing markets, in large part due to its cultural diversity (Nikhashemi et al., 2019). Similarly, Maldives is recognized in previous literature as one of South Asia's emerging markets as the Maldivian economy relies heavily on large volumes of globally imported goods, allowing the study to observe consumer relationships with universally recognized brands (Keerthika & Alagarsamy, 2018; Masha & Park, 2012).

4 Analysis of Results

After the desired volume of 404 responses were collected, the data was analysed using the statistical software suite SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science), extensively regarded in the world of surveys and quantitative research as a reliable tool for data analysis. Furthermore, it supported the following tests required for the study.

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

The first section of the questionnaire contained demographic data of the respondents such as age, gender, marital status, education level and employment status. The responses were tabulated into numbers and interpreted using frequency analysis.

Table 1: Demographics of Maldivians (N=202) and Malaysians (N=202)

Characteristics	Maldivians N (%)	Malaysians N (%)
Age		
18 - 29	70 (34.7%)	150 (74.3%)
30 – 39	36 (17.8%)	35 (17.3%)
40 – 49	47 (23.3%)	10 (5.0%)
50 – 59	39 (19.3%)	7 (3.5%)
60 and above	10 (5.0%)	0 (0%)
Gender		
Female	126 (62.4%)	101 (50%)
Male	75 (37.1%)	101 (50%)
Non-binary	1 (0.5%)	0 (0%)
Marital status		
Single	61 (30.2%)	165 (81.7%)
Married	133 (65.8%)	33 (16.3%)
In a relationship	4 (2.0%)	3 (1.5%)
Divorced	3 (1.5%)	0 (0%)
Widowed	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.5%)
Education level		
Primary school	4 (2.0%)	1 (0.5%)
High school	33 (16.3%)	5 (2.5%)
Pre-university	49 (24.3%)	28 (13.9%)
Undergraduate	61 (30.2%)	121 (59.9%)
Postgraduate	51 (25.2%)	42 (20.8%)
Doctorate	4 (2.0%)	5 (2.5%)
Employment status		
Employed (Full-time)	125 (61.9%)	81 (40.1%)
Employed (Part-time)	12 (5.9%)	9 (4.5%)
Unemployed	19 (9.4%)	13 (6.4%)
Student	27 (13.4%)	97 (48.0%)
Retired	19 (9.4%)	2 (1.0%)

Furthermore, questions about respondents' favourite brands and categories were asked in the same manner as the respondent. In addition to the overall number of respondents listed in Table 2, each nationality's most preferred categories varied. Technology was the most prevalent among Maldivians with 56 (27.7%) choosing brands from this classification, whereas fashion recorded the highest number of brands by 57 (28.2%) Malaysians.

Table 2: Categories of Respondents' Favourite Brands

Categories	Frequency (N=404)	Percentage (%)
Fashion	111	27.5%
Technology	96	23.8%
Food	69	17.1%
Beauty	60	14.9%
Entertainment	29	7.2%
Automotive	15	3.7%
Sports	8	2.0%
Retail	7	1.7%
Hospitality	4	1.0%
Education	1	0.2%
Lifestyle	1	0.2%
Publishing	1	0.2%
Healthcare	1	0.2%
Firearms	1	0.2%
Total	**404**	**100%**

Table 3 outlines the top 5 favourite brands out of the 187 identified by survey respondents. The most frequently mentioned brands for Maldivians and Malaysians were Apple (21) and Uniqlo (19) respectively. Incidentally, Apple and Uniqlo also accounted for the top two brands overall.

Table 3: Top Five Brands Among All Respondents

Brands	Frequency (N=404)	Percentage (%)
Apple	33	8.2%
Uniqlo	27	6.7%
Samsung	25	6.2%
McDonald's	15	3.7%
Nike	15	3.7%

In addition to the top 5 brands from the full sample size, it is worth noting the most popular brands from each nationality. Table 4 demonstrates all the brands mentioned more than thrice for each nationality.

Table 4: Top Brands for Maldivian and Malaysian Respondents

Brands	Maldivians N (%)	Brands	Malaysians N (%)
Apple	21 (10.4%)	Uniqlo	19 (9.4%)
Samsung	20 (9.9%)	Apple	12 (5.9%)
Nike	12 (5.9%)	McDonald's	12 (5.9%)
The Body Shop	8 (4.0%)	Sony	8 (4.0%)
Uniqlo	8 (4.0%)	Nestlé	7 (3.5%)
H&M	6 (3.0%)	Samsung	5 (2.5%)
MAC	5 (2.5%)	Adidas	5 (2.5%)
Netflix	4 (2.0%)	Chanel	5 (2.5%)
Adidas	3 (1.5%)	Toyota	4 (2.0%)
Coca-Cola	3 (1.5%)	Dior	3 (1.5%)
Desserts by Marina	3 (1.5%)	Gucci	3 (1.5%)
Fenty Beauty	3 (1.5%)	H&M	3 (1.5%)
McDonald's	3 (1.5%)	Innisfree	3 (1.5%)
Sony	3 (1.5%)	Nike	3 (1.5%)
Zara	3 (1.5%)		

4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Independent and Dependent Variables

Descriptive statistics of variables can be defined as a method of analyzing the attributes of a group of raw data. Table 5 shows all the questionnaire items, and their mean values determining the average score of the responses on a Likert scale of 1 to 5.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics (Likert Scale of 1 - 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Items for Independent and Dependent Variables	Mean
Sensory Brand Experience (SBE)	
My favourite brand has a nice touch/feel to their products/services.	4.50
I experience interesting senses from their products/services (e.g.: texture, ambience, etc).	4.37
My favourite brand makes a strong impression on my visual or other senses.	4.51
SBE	4.46
Affective Brand Experience (ABE)	
My favourite brand puts me in a better mood.	4.42
I feel that their products/services appeal to my emotional needs.	4.13
I experience positive feelings and sentiments when I use my favourite brand.	4.33
ABE	4.29
Intellectual Brand Experience (IBE)	
My favourite brand stimulates my curiosity.	3.90
My way of thinking is often challenged by my favourite brand (e.g.: different perspectives).	3.42
My favourite brand engages me to think more deeply (e.g.: morals, social issues, life goals, etc).	3.38
IBE	3.57
Behavioral Brand Experience (BBE)	
My favourite brand provides inspiration for activities that I can do.	3.85
I often engage in action and behavior when I use their products/services.	3.67
I am more action-oriented because of my favourite brand.	3.45
BBE	3.65
Relational Brand Experience (RBE)	
When I use their products/services, I feel like I'm a part of a community.	3.77
My favourite brand makes me feel like I'm a part of the brand's family.	3.68
I feel less alone when I use their products/services.	3.28
RBE	3.58
Brand Love (BL)	
Self-Brand Integration	
My favourite brand is a rewarding part of my self-identity.	3.72
My favourite brand makes me feel like how I want to feel.	3.94
My favourite brand enhances my life in a meaningful way.	3.86
Passion-Driven Behaviors	
I'm willing to invest a lot of time, energy or money in my favourite brand.	3.85
I feel myself craving to use their products/services.	3.88
I've frequently interacted with my favourite brand in the past (e.g.: social media, events, etc).	3.37
Positive Emotional Connection	
Their products/services fit my personal tastes (e.g.: aesthetics, luxury, comfort, etc).	4.35
I experience positive emotions when I use their products/services.	4.20
I feel emotionally connected to my favourite brand.	3.72
Cultural Affirmation	
My favourite brand allows me to embrace my culture (e.g.: representation in branding, etc).	3.25
My favourite brand prioritizes my country in the distribution and marketing of its products/services (e.g.: delivery/shipping, promotional events, discounts and offers, etc).	3.18
My favourite brand is respectful of my culture (e.g.: use of language, cultural awareness, etc).	3.66
BL	3.75

4.3   Cronbach's Alpha

The data obtained from the Cronbach's alpha test demonstrated values above 0.7 for all five independent variables as well as the dependent variable, which indicated that the scale items used in the study were reliable. Brand love yielded the highest Cronbach's alpha value of 0.90, whereas sensory brand experience generated the lowest value of 0.75.

4.4   Pearson Correlation

Research in the field of brand experiences and brand love has primarily employed the use of causal analysis, hence a Pearson correlation test was administered to determine the relationship between the variables of brand experience and brand love, thereupon supporting or rejecting the hypotheses.

Table 6: Correlation Coefficient Between Independent and Dependent Variables

		Brand Love
Sensory Brand Experience	Pearson Correlation	.377a
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Affective Brand Experience	Pearson Correlation	.604a
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Intellectual Brand Experience	Pearson Correlation	.654a
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Behavioral Brand Experience	Pearson Correlation	.677a
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
Relational Brand Experience	Pearson Correlation	.737a
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a.Significant at .05 level. N=404

The results demonstrated in Table 6 shows a weak positive correlation between sensory brand experience and brand love ($r = .377$, $p < 0.05$), however, the data indicated a strong positive correlation between affective brand experience and brand love ($r = .604$, $p < 0.05$), intellectual brand experience and brand love ($r = .654$, $p < 0.05$), behavioral brand experience and brand love ($r = .677$, $p < .05$) and relational brand experience and brand love ($r = .737$, $p < 0.05$). As a result, the Pearson correlation test proved that all independent variables had a positive impact on the dependent variable, supporting all five hypotheses and rejecting the null hypotheses.

4.5   Linear Regression

A multiple linear regression test was applied to the data to ascertain the values of the independent and dependent values of brand experiences and brand love in relation to each other. Furthermore, the linear regression tests were run with the demographic data as variables alongside the original independent variable for each hypothesis.

Table 7: Regression Coefficient Between Independent and Dependent Variables

Regression Weight	R	R²	Standardized Coefficients Beta	F	t-value	p-value
SBE → BL	.420[a]	.176	.394	10.574	8.430	<.001[b]
ABE → BL	.617[a]	.381	.609	30.392	15.005	<.001[b]
IBE → BL	.673[a]	.454	.660	40.984	17.536	<.001[b]
BBE → BL	.697[a]	.485	.682	46.570	18.733	<.001[b]
RBE → BL	.754[a]	.569	.744	65.203	22.266	<.001[b]

Note: *$p < 0.05$. SBE: Sensory Brand Experience, ABE: Affective Brand Experience, IBE: Intellectual Brand Experience, BBE: Behavioral Brand Experience, RBE: Relational Brand Experience, BL: Brand Love.

Table 7 shows that there is a significant positive correlation between all the independent variables and the dependent variable. Evidently, the findings indicated that relational brand experience had the largest impact on brand love ($\beta = .744$, t = 22.266, p < .05), followed by behavioral brand experience ($\beta = .682$, t = 18.733, p < .05), intellectual brand experience ($\beta = .660$, t = 17.536, p < .05), affective brand experience ($\beta = .609$, t = 15.005, p < .05), and sensory brand experience ($\beta = .394$, t = 8.430, p < .05).

5 Discussion

5.1 Favorite Brands and Categories

Technology, fashion, beauty, and food are the most preferred brand categories for both nationalities. This success can potentially be attributed to the prioritization of brand experiences by businesses such as Apple, Samsung, Sony, Adidas, The Body Shop, Coca-Cola, and McDonald's as previous studies show a high perceived quality of brand experience and brand love among the exact same brands (Batra et al., 2012; Hegner et al., 2017; Huang, 2017; Mostafa & Kasamani, 2020; Obal et al., 2015 and Rodrigues, 2018).

It is also noteworthy that respondents from Maldives and Malaysia share common favorite brands despite consisting of varying demographics and differing levels of accessibility of brands within each country. For example, McDonald's is among one of the top brands for Maldivians, despite not operating a single branch in the entire country. Hence, data indicates that McDonald's is adept at fulfilling its brand experience enough to satisfy Maldivian customers to a degree that they consider it as their favorite brand instead of any other fast-food business available within their own country.

Furthermore, a local Maldivian business named Desserts by Marina is among the top brands preferred by Maldivian respondents, illustrating that small local businesses can compete with multinational companies to elicit brand love, especially considering that the aforementioned brand has only been established three years prior to the current study (Desserts by Marina, n.d.). Hence, conducting similar research specifically focusing on local brands in each country has potential to yield valuable insights.

5.2   Brand Experience

Sensory brand experience obtains the most positive response from both nationalities, indicating that it plays a powerful role in determining an individual's choice of favorite brand. For instance, cosmetics brand MAC offers features such as Virtual Try On and Virtual Make-up Services, enhancing the visual senses of consumers. Similar observations are made for data relating to *affective brand experience*. Many participants prefer the clothing brand H&M which offers plus size and maternity clothing lines, enhancing their emotional needs and inducing optimistic sentiments. On the contrary, *intellectual brand experience* received the least positive perceptions from both nationalities. These findings are congruent with that of Saari et al. (2017), which highlighted a similar observation. The irregularity in the findings, especially the neutral response from Malaysians, is contextualized by the demographic of the sample. Most Malaysians belonged to the age group of 18-29 (74.3%) as opposed to the 34.87% of Maldivians. Research has conclusively demonstrated that younger consumers such as those from Gen Z and Millennial age groups largely prioritize the moral beliefs and ethics of brands when deciding their consumption (Petro, 2021). The extent of such attitudes is significant enough that businesses are routinely scrutinized and even subject to activism for unethical business practices and ignorance of prominent social, political, and environmental issues (Stefanyk, 2020). However, there are several examples from the chosen brands that indicate efforts to enhance the intellectual brand experience and hence prevent the attitudes of respondents from veering towards negative sentiments. For instance, a campaign called Come Together, Act Together by The Body Shop donates funds from part of their sales to victims of domestic abuse in Malaysia since the COVID-19 lockdown (The Body Shop Malaysia, n.d.). When taking data for *behavioral brand experience* into account, it is worth noting that the item "I am more action-oriented because of my favorite brand" received a neutral response from most Malaysians whereas most Maldivians strongly agreed to all the items. Findings showed that technology is the top brand category for Maldivians whereas Malaysians prefer fashion brands. Given the advent of wearable tech such as smartwatches and the accessibility of transportation offered by modern technology, its behavioral brand experience potentially motivates customers to engage in behaviors such as exercise and travel (Perkovic, 2022). Nonetheless, fashion brands in Malaysia should not be discouraged from providing the same experience. For example, Uniqlo offers a wide range of clothing and accessories that promote a lifestyle that is fitness and travel-oriented such as Sport Utility Wear for workouts and Heattech Inner Wear for traveling to regions with colder weather. The study's findings reveal a similar discrepancy for *relational brand experience*, whereby Malaysians felt neutral, and Maldivians strongly agreed with items measuring the variable. This is an unexpected and compelling result, as many brands chosen by Maldivians are geographically inaccessible to them; yet their positive attitudes towards relational brand experience illustrate a feeling of being less alone and of belonging to the brand community. With that being said, the Maldives has a small population of approximately 521,547, whereas Malaysia has a population of a massive 33,573,874, which raises the potential for more close-knit communities in the

Maldives (The World Bank, n.d.a.; The World Bank, n.d.b.). When paired with the country's high dependence on imported goods, the conditions for Maldivians to feel a sense of community are much stronger as well (Masha & Park, 2012).

5.3   Brand Love

Majority of Maldivians and Malaysians strongly agreed with the three subcategories measuring brand love, which consist of (a) self-brand integration; (b) passion-driven behaviors; and (c) positive emotional connection. For instance, Samsung's products and features under its Care for Your Pet branding highlights a rewarding part of their self-identity as pet owners which can be construed as a form of *self-brand integration*. Another example that expands on this phenomenon is the community that Netflix forms around a passionate audience with social media strategies that encourage the discussion of television shows and movies that air on the platform, equating to *passion-driven behaviors* (Karaoğlan, 2021). Subsequently, Nike's customizable feature New Nike by You enables customers to tailor unique designs that fit their personal visual preferences, level of comfort, and style, further magnifying a *positive emotional connection* with Nike.

Nonetheless, the fourth subcategory, *cultural affirmation* indicates a relatively different perspective from both nationalities. Firstly, many Maldivians strongly disagreed with one question, "my favorite brand prioritizes my country in the distribution and marketing of its products/services", which incidentally reported the highest number of negative responses from the entire survey. This aligns with the fact that their top brands such as Apple, Samsung, The Body Shop and H&M do not directly ship to or have retail stores based in the Maldives, albeit demonstrating capabilities at an international capacity. Secondly, many Malaysians responded feeling neutral towards the same item, indicating that brands can improve their presence in Malaysia to grow closer to their audience. For instance, despite Apple leading the national market share in key sectors such as mobile sales, the technology brand is yet to open any retail stores in the country that can offer exclusive services that third-party retailers cannot provide (Statista, 2022). The highest responses from both nationalities are neutral for the rest of the items measuring cultural affirmation, focused on representation and respect. The brand Uniqlo was commonly chosen by both nationalities; and despite operating internationally in 25 countries including South Asian nations such as India, there is no representation of any South Asian models in Uniqlo's branding (Roll, 2021). A leading example includes the fashion brand's 2022 fall/winter lookbook which consists of the three main ethnicities of White, Black and Southeast Asian (Uniqlo, n.d.). Similarly, Apple featured a representation of the same races in the introductory commercials for the brand's latest Airpods Pro and Airpods Max line of audio products (Apple Australia, 2021; Apple UAE, 2019). The absence of South Asians from the popular brands' marketing suggests that Maldivians and multi-racial Malaysians (such as those with Indian heritage) may have neutral perceptions. Nevertheless, these cases do not indicate a complete lack of representation, which potentially suggests why neither nationality disagreed with the questionnaire statements either. For instance, Uniqlo offers collections of modest

wear that are more inclusive of consumers such as those of the Maldives and Malaysia, which are Islamic and predominantly Muslim nations, respectively. Innisfree acts as another case study of respondents' favourite brands that accomplish this feat with events and sales in Malaysia such as Merdeka Specials to celebrate the country's independence, Raya Specials during Ramadan, and Chinese New Year exclusive limited editions of their products. Moreover, Fenty Beauty offers a diverse range of foundation products that even expanded from an initial 40 shades to 59, to match an expansive spectrum of skin tones. By doing so, the brand fills a noticeable gap in the Western-idealized beauty industry: the lack of makeup created for deeper, melanin-rich skin tones such as that of South Asians like Maldivians and multi-ethnic Malaysians. In addition to inclusive product lines, Fenty Beauty is acclaimed for its social brand personality that embodies and appreciates languages that originated from underrepresented communities (Brown, 2022).

5.4   Theoretical Implications

The first principle of empathy-based marketing by Pedersen (2021) is *people understand*. The gathering of quantitative data for the study creates the conditions for a mediator to analyze the different perspectives of both nationalities such as the unexpected discovery of a stronger positive perception towards relational brand experience from Maldivians than Malaysians. Anomalies such as this can be contextualized through the lens of broader circumstances. The second principle of empathy-based marketing is *people understand people*. The investigation of why Maldivians and Malaysians have neutral attitudes towards cultural affirmation is expanded on by adopting an empathetic outlook apart from the data, producing a better understanding of why they may feel an insufficient representation of diversity, even from their favorite brands. Lastly, the third principle of empathy-based marketing is *people understand people together*. Despite both nationalities commonly sharing multiple favorite brands, their perceptions of brand love varied across its different dimensions due to their unique viewpoints, indicating that the perspective of just one nationality is insufficient in fully understanding a consumer's needs.

5.5   Practical Implications

Companies can apply the study's framework to conduct their own research into whether the brand experience offered elicits brand love, as well as discover similar brands that serve as role models to base their communication and marketing. Practices such as stereotyping consumers do not align with the specific needs of each customer as the research indicates that perceptions of brand experience and brand love differ by country. Thus, brands can utilise the study to counter their bias and discover a country or region-specific method to improve the brand experience and brand love felt by their audience.

5.6   Suggestions for Future Research

While the research collected viewpoints from a wide range of demographics, it is vital to recognize that a sample size of 404 respondents alone cannot provide an objective consensus on the topic. Thus, more research must be conducted cross-nationally. In addition, it is recommended that future research incorporates *cultural affirmation* in measuring brand love, as it can identify patterns and contextualize results that account for different cultures and localities. Lastly, it is recommended that further qualitative research is conducted as studies indicate that qualitative research is crucial to expanding modern concepts and theories such as empathy-based marketing (Lewis et al., 2020).

5.7   Conclusion

In the wake of the study's findings, an important conclusion is drawn that fulfills the research objectives. In 2023, the average consumer has a myriad of brands lined up, vying for their attention and patronage. How does a single brand stand out from the crowd? If the brand miraculously captures the attention of a consumer, how do they keep this consumer interested? Businesses must shape their customers' experiences to exceed expectations and doing so requires the ability to understand individual perspectives. If consumers feel that their needs and wants are being addressed by a brand, an emotional bond is formed, making it challenging for the competition to have the same effect. The current research successfully identifies these efforts by the brand to be *brand experiences* and the emotional reciprocation of the consumer to be *brand love*. This conclusion is made solely by viewing the make-or-break interaction between customer and brand through the lens of empathy-based marketing. The data provides merit to the study's observation, answering the research questions with definite quantitative evidence: there is a significant undeniable positive relationship between all aspects of brand experience and brand love.

In closing, it is imperative for readers to recognize that empathetic marketing is not merely a "feel-good" technique. Rather, it is a powerful tool that serves to protect their best interests as consumers. In a landscape overly saturated with data and analytics, empathy-based marketing acts to prevent brands from losing sight of the fact that *people understand people together*.

6   Author

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