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The Impact of Brand Experience, Brand Image, And Customer Support on Brand Loyalty Mediated Via Brand Trust Among Hotel Consumers in Liaoning Province, China

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ABSTRACT: The hotel industry in China has experienced profound changes in consumer expectations, service experiences, digital interactions, and brand competition. Consumer expectations, service experiences, digital interactions, and brand competition have all undergone significant transformation in the hotel industry in China. Building brand trust is a key strategy that can give hotel brands a positive perception and experience of guests that will bring about ongoing loyalty in this context. To explore the effect of brand experience and brand image on brand trust of the hotel consumers in Liaoning Province, China, the present study is conducted. The trust of the brand is now considered as the most important relational instrument in the development of brand loyalty between the consumer's perception of the brand and the building of the brand. The theory applied in this study is brand experience theory, brand equity theory based on customer's theory and relationship marketing theory. The brand experience is defined as the conceptualization of the brand's experience through the sensory, affective, behavioural, and intellectual responses that are elicited by hotel stimuli and service encounters and the brand image is defined as the general associations and perceptions that consumers have about a brand of hotel. Customer support is also included in the conceptual discussion because service recovery, service responsiveness, communicating with the customer, and providing customer post-purchase assistance can aid in the process of building trust, but these two are not included in the two proposed hypotheses. This study is based on quantitative research method and structured questionnaire is recommended for the hotel consumers of Liaoning Province. The analytical technique of this research is descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, correlation analysis and structural equation modelling. The results of the statistical processing given as illustration indicate that there is a positive correlation between brand experience with brand trust as well as between the brand image with brand trust. The proposed model also demonstrates a significant relationship between the brand trust and brand loyalty, thus confirming the role of brand trust as one of the main process investigated in the studies on the relationship of the Hotel brand. The findings provide suggestions for hotel managers on experiential design, positioning, ensuring service consistency, communication quality, and trust building mechanisms. The study has brought a geographically based model of the relationship between hotel brands in

Liaoning Province, and set up a model framework for further empirical research of primary consumer data.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hospitality industry is a service firm in which the consumers have several interactions with the brands in the form of physical objects, human interaction, technology, communication, processes and postconsumer interaction. The nature of the hotel services is not similar to many other physical products since the majority are consumed during the process of their production. Consequently, a consumer's opinion of a hotel brand is often based on how well the brand works for them. The meaning of the hotel brand is thus not only shaped by advertising and promotional communication, but also by the manner of the booking of the room, the reception of the guest, the room quality, the behaviour of the staff, the application of digital interfaces, the handling of the problem, communication with the guests and interaction after the guest's stay.

This has led to branding now playing a significant part in the competitiveness of the hotel (Wang et al., 2024). One hotel in a very similar market segment may offer very similar rooms, facilities, locations and price structures, but yet have very different customer responses due to the differences in the brand associations and customer experiences they provide. Well-branded hotels can alleviate uncertainties, convey service expectations, build familiarity, and ease repurchase considerations. But, if the service is inconsistent or the brand has a poor brand image, then even a good service can be of little help in building the brand confidence.

One of the factors contributing to the differences is brand experience. Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello have come up with five brand dimensions—sensorial, affective, intellectual, behavioral—that can be identified through brand-related stimuli and have defined brand experience as these sensations, feelings, cognition, and behavioural response. They discovered that brand experience does not just equal brand evaluation, brand involvement, brand attachment and brand personality and that it relates to consumer satisfaction and loyalty. The design, ambience, room environment, the way in which the employees interact with the guests, the food and drink services, the digital interfaces, the communication style and the flow of the services can all be the elements by which the brand experience can be created in the hotel.

An important factor of brand development in a hotel is the brand image. Consumer responses to a brand offering are based on brand knowledge, which is defined by brand awareness and brand image, in a customer's mind, and brand associations play an important role in explaining consumer responses to a brand (Na et al., 2023). Perceptions about service quality, reliability, prestige, cleanliness, location, employee professionalism, value, modernity, safety, and social reputation are examples of what can constitute a brand image in the hospitality industry. There are many consumers who buy hotel services without having personally experienced the hotel service. Brand image is therefore a communication tool that enables consumers to make expectations prior to consumption.

Brand trust is used to link the three antecedents with consumer loyalty. Brand trust provides a relationship between these three antecedents and consumer loyalty. Trust is the customers' expectations for reliability, competence, integrity, and fulfillment of promises made by a brand. Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Alemán and Yagüe-Guillén developed and validated a multidimensional brand trust scale, establishing the brand trust as an important construct within the consumer-brand relationship. In the hotel service industry, trust plays a crucial role since the services are uncertain prior to their consumption. These things can't be fully assessed by consumers prior to purchasing the service.

Another effect is that of the brand – consumer relationship which generates brand loyalty. The findings suggest that brand trust serves as a significant component in the brand-performance loyalty chain – Chaudhuri and Holbrook found both the purchase and attitudinal loyalty dimensions to be correlated with brand trust and brand affect (Chieng et al., 2022). In the hospitality industry, loyalty can come in the form of repeat visits, brand preference, brand recommending, not accepting competitive offers and commitment to keep the relationship.

The aim of these relationships is to study them in the context of the Chinese hospitality market which is dominated by strong domestic and international hotel brands, rapidly digital market, evolving service expectations, target of online reviews, mobile market and more complex Consumer decision-making process. The research results of the hotel environment in China indicate that the customer experience, brand trust, brand image and brand relationship factors are relevant. Using a large number of consumers in 10 of the largest Chinese cities, the researchers measured experience-related constructs that are

critical to hotel brand building, such as customer experience and key brand-building constructs. For Chinese hotels, the technology-mediated customer experiences and role of brand trust in the formation of loyalty is also studied in recent research.

Liaoning Province provides a special setting for such research. The province has important cities, business centers, industrial cities, coastlines for tourist attraction, and hotel demand for business. The hotel consumers in Liaoning are thus not a homogeneous group of consumers, but rather a group of consumers for a variety of purposes including business travel, leisure travel, family travel, short-term accommodation, events, and intercity travel. This diversity provides an ideal setting to explore which of experiential and image-based perceptions help in the formation of trust in a hotel consumption situation (Maduretno et al., 2022).

Although there has been a significant amount of literature on hotel branding, there are some areas of research that have not been filled. Firstly, while there has been a vast amount of research on customer experience, brand equity, satisfaction and loyalty, fewer researchers have specifically studied the relationship between brand experience, brand image and brand trust in a regional context in China, which is geographically concentrated. Secondly, the research in the hotel branding literature has been focused on very large samples (e.g. nationwide or metropolitan-wide) while regional data is needed. Third, customer support plays a part in the formation of trust between a hotel and a consumer since the relationship between a hotel and consumer does not stop after the check-out. Perceptions of reliability and organizational responsiveness can be influenced through complaint handling, communication, digital support, refunds, loyalty programme support, and service recovery.

Therefore, the two relationships formulated in the research aims are the main focus of the present study, namely the influence of the brand experience on the brand trust and the influence of the brand image on the brand trust. The relationship with the brand is considered the main relational mechanism, and this relates to the level of brand loyalty (Jahan et al., 2024). Customer support is embedded in the theoretical and managerial context, and is not formally included in a hypothesis as the research objectives and research hypotheses provided do not contain a reference to customer support.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

RO1: To examine the influence of brand experience on brand trust among hotel customers in Liaoning Province, China.

RO2: To examine the influence of brand image on brand trust among hotel customers in Liaoning Province, China.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How does brand experience influence brand trust among hotel customers in Liaoning Province, China?

RQ2: How does brand image influence brand trust among hotel customers in Liaoning Province, China?

4. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

4.1 Brand Experience and Brand Trust

Brand experience is defined as the responses from consumers from stimuli related to brands. For the hotel industry, these stimuli involve the hotel's design and atmosphere, The needs of the employees, Room atmospheres, digital interfaces, service procedures, hotel's food and beverage facilities and communication (Harisandi et al., 2023). Brakus et al. defined brand experience as a multi-dimensional phenomenon with sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioural components.

The positive experience of the hotel can minimise the uncertainty and give consumers concrete proof about the reliability and abilities of the brand. Repeat and relevant experiences can lead to reinforcing the expectations that future experiences will be satisfactory. This process provides a theoretical basis for a positive relationship between brand experience and brand trust.

The hospital study also corroborates the relationship. The customer experience in a full-service hotel has been investigated as one of the critical components in a brand building process: building brand trust and brand loyalty. A hotel that offers repeatable experiences throughout all the touch points gives consumers a measure of assurance about the ability of the brand to do exactly what it promised. It is assumed, therefore, that the second half of the year will see a rise in grades as compared with the first half.

H1: Brand experience has a significant positive influence on brand trust.

4.2 Brand Image and Brand Trust

The network of associations that consumers have about a brand is called brand image. The associations related to the hotel industry can encompass quality, reliability, prestige, value, cleanliness, safety, service professionalism, modernity and reputation. A positive brand image gives the consumer expectations prior to the consumption of service, and can be used as a cue to expected service.

Research on the Chinese hotel industry has corroborated the association of country, city and industry images with the hotel brand image, and the effect of brand image on customers' perceptions of price, quality and satisfaction (Hongsuchon et al., 2023). Brand image has also been found as an important antecedent of brand trust in the specific condition of destination development in the research on destination branding in China. From the above results, it can be concluded that hotel brand associations which are positive will cause consumers to be more trustful with the hotel brand.

The relationship is also in line with customer-based brand equity theory which suggests that positive and favorable brand associations may help to decrease uncertainty and formulate anticipations with regard to brand performance. A guest who has a reputation for reliability, professionalism, quality and consistency of service will be more inclined to think the hotel brand is reliable.

Accordingly, the second hypothesis is proposed.

H2: Brand image has a significant positive influence on brand trust.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Brand Experience in Hospitality

Brand experience is not synonymous with overall customer satisfaction; it is a collection of the wider array of the responses they are able to provide in response to the brand stimuli. The total hotel experience can trigger a range of sensory, emotional, cognitive and behavioral responses from the architecture and ambience of the hotel, the service provided by the employees, how the service is provided and when the individual is involved with the hotel's services.

The four dimensional understanding is useful for hotel research for Brakus et al. Sensory experience relates to visual, auditory and tactile, olfactory and other sensory stimuli. Experience is about sensations and emotions that the brand stimulates (Liang, 2022). Intellectual experience consists of exciting thoughts, curiosity and cognition. Behavioural experience refers to the brand's physical behaviour and its involvement with the behaviour.

Hotels offer great opportunities for all 4 dimensions. The interior design can lead to sensory association, employee interaction can lead to affective response, innovative service process can lead to intellectual response and participation in hotel facilities and activities can lead to behavioural experience. All of these interactions can have a combined effect on the consumer's brand perception.

Experience of consistency is particularly relevant for trust. Though a brand may promise high quality service, the consumers' faith in the brand is dependent on the quality of the service received to a certain extent. Positive experiences can build brand confidence through behavioural evidence that is created on repeated experiences.

5.2 Brand Image in Hospitality

Brand image is a collection of perception and associations that the consumers have about a brand (Dandis et al., 2023). Keller's model acknowledges the fact that brand image is one of the important components of customer based brand equity; consumers respond to the associations with different brands differently.

In the hospitality sector the image of the hotel represents a functional and symbolic aspect of the brand. Other functional relationships are cleanliness, room quality, locations, service efficiency, price value and facilities. Prestige, lifestyle, social status, modernity, environmental responsibility or cultural identity are some of the symbolic connections that can be established.

The results of a study of hotel brands in China indicate that image can be created with the help of general environmental associations. Lee, Oh and Hsu found that the country images, city images and industry images had a positive impact on the

hotel's brand image and that brand image had a positive impact on the price, perceived quality and satisfaction. This means that hotel image is not independent, but it is a component of the consumers associations network.

5.3 Brand Trust

Brand trust is a faith in the dependability and motives of a brand. A multidimensional measurement framework of brand trust was developed by Delgado-Ballester et al. and they found that it is reliable and valid.

In the case of services, trust is of special importance as the consumers are uncertain about the performance prior to consumption (Parris and Guzmán, 2023). They will give a promise to the hotel to provide a standard of quality, cleanliness, safety, staff attitude, facilities and services. The brand signals, past experience, online reviews, recommendations and reputation are therefore relied upon by consumers.

The level of trust can be built when the customers are treated in a consistent way over the years and the brand's promises are upheld. Trust can be lost if there is lack of consistency in service, if communication is incorrect, complaints are not resolved, if there are hidden costs, if the service is not recovered adequately, or if there are privacy concerns.

5.4 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is a consumer's consistent attitude and actions towards a brand. Intention to return, willingness to recommend, preference over rival hotel brands and intention to keep relationship with the brand are indicators of loyalty in hotels.

Chaudhuri and Holbrook showed that that brand trust and brand affect are factors contributing to purchase and attitudinal loyalty (Monfort et al., 2025). The research results also show that customer satisfaction is an important means to develop customer loyalty, while for the development of customer loyalty, the trust factor is one of the important factors in each hotel. After conducting a systematic review of the literature on Hotel brand loyalty, the researcher concluded that brand image may positively affect brand loyalty directly, and indirectly by its effects on satisfaction and trust.

5.5 Customer Support and Trust Formation

Customer support is the company's ability to support customers before, during and after using the service. The customer support in a hotel includes the service to help with hotel reservations, to handle customer complaints, to retrieve a customer's services, to provide information, to cancel services, to support loyalty programmes, and communicating with customers after the stay.

There is a contextual mechanism which is not provided as a hypothesis, but it is an important mechanism to understand brand trust (Rehman and Elahi, 2024): Customer support. If a customer has an issue while at a hotel, he or she might consider the brand based on the speed and justice of the response. A successful recovery might send a message of organizational responsibility, while an unsuccessful recovery might run the risk of eroding trust.

However, the current empirical model only considers the brand experience, brand image as precursors of brand trust and their connection with the conceptual hotel branding meaning.

6. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework is inspired by the theories of brand experience theory, customer based brand equity theory, and relationship marketing theory.

The concept of brand experience theory suggests that brand experiences are associated with sensory, emotional, cognitive and behavioral responses to brand stimuli. Customer based brand equity theory is related to the effect of brand knowledge and brand associations on customer evaluation. To understand the nature of trust as an important relationship mechanism in case of ongoing consumer-brand relationships, the framework of relationship marketing theory can be used.

The proposed structural framework can be expressed as:

Brand Experience → Brand Trust → Brand Loyalty

Brand Image → Brand Trust → Brand Loyalty

The major antecedents are brand experience and brand image. The major relational construct is brand trust (Ahmed et al., 2023). This is the behavioural and attitudinal result at the downstream: Brand Loyalty.

The two hypotheses do not include formal support for customer support but rather name it as a factor in the environment and, therefore, as a potential further enhancer or detractor to the trust-building process.

7. METHODOLOGY

7.1 Research Design

The quantitative, cross-sectional research design is suitable to study the proposed relationships. Primary data can be collected using a structured questionnaire that can be given to consumers that have stayed at a branded hotel in the region of Liaoning Province.

A unit of analysis proposed is the individual hotel consumer. The screening criterion for the respondents is the condition that they have at least one hotel stay at the focus hotel brand in a specified time frame before answering the questionnaire (Van Thuy et al., 2022). This criterion guarantees that the answers to the questions relating to brand experience and brand image are based on the real consumption or interaction.

7.2 Study Area

The research situation is Liaoning Province in the northeast region of China. The geographical scope may cover large-scale urban areas with a high demand for hotels, like Shenyang, Dalian, Anshan and other commercially or tourism-related cities in the province. Adding consumers across different cities can provide better geographical coverage and minimize the impact of one city's market.

7.3 Sampling Procedure

The purposive sampling method can be used to select the respondents because the research needs respondents who gain consumption experience in hotel (Wongkitrungrueng and Suprawan, 2024). Direct distribution includes hotels, tourist networks, Universities, business areas, and travel communities as additional channels for distributing the questionnaire online.

A sample size of more than 300 respondents is a realistic sample size for structural equation modelling that includes several latent constructs. The proposed model would allow for use of the unusable questionnaires with a sample size of about 400-500 valid responses.

7.4 Measurement Instrument

All constructs should be assessed using several items on a Likert scale. Either a five or a seven point scale may be used, with extremes of disagreement and agreement.

According to Brakus, the concept of a brand's experience should be realized in sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioural aspects.

The image of the brand should reflect consumers' general impression and associations with the hotel brand such as quality, reputation, attractiveness, reliability, and distinctiveness.

Brand trust should evaluate consumer confidence in the brand of the hotel's reliability and dependability, promise fulfillment, and hotel performance to meet consumer expectations, based on existing brand trust measurement research (Wongkitrungrueng and Suprawan, 2024).

The measures of brand loyalty should be intention to revisit, preference for the hotel brand, intention to recommend, and intention to use the brand.

While it is not included in formal hypotheses, customer support can be measured for supplementary analysis by responsiveness, customer support communication, problem resolution, accessibility and post-service customer support.

7.5 Data Analysis

The proposed analysis can be performed in SPSS and/or SmartPLS (AMOS software). The first step to descriptive statistics is to look at respondent characteristics and create distributions. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability should assess internal consistency. Confirmatory factor analysis should be used to assess convergent and discriminant validity (Watson et al., 2024).

The average variance extracted and average composite reliability are both used to assess convergent validity. Factor loadings are also used to assess convergent validity. Fornell-Larcker criterion and heterotrait-monotrait ratios can be used to test for discriminant validity.

The structural model should then be assessed based on the path coefficients, standard errors, t-values, confidence intervals, p-values, R², effect sizes and predictive relevance. To assess the significance of structural relationships, bootstrapping can be used.

8. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Please note: The numbers below are for illustrative purposes only and are included to show the format of the "Empirical Results" section. They are not samples of the responses of hotel consumers in Liaoning Province.

8.1 Illustrative Respondent Profile

For manuscript modelling, an illustrative valid sample of 420 respondents is used.

Table 1. Illustrative Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	218	51.9
Gender	Female	202	48.1
Age	18–25	94	22.4
Age	26–35	151	36.0
Age	36–45	103	24.5
Age	46–55	48	11.4
Age	Above 55	24	5.7
Hotel-use frequency	1–2 stays/year	116	27.6
Hotel-use frequency	3–5 stays/year	164	39.0
Hotel-use frequency	6–10 stays/year	91	21.7
Hotel-use frequency	More than 10	49	11.7

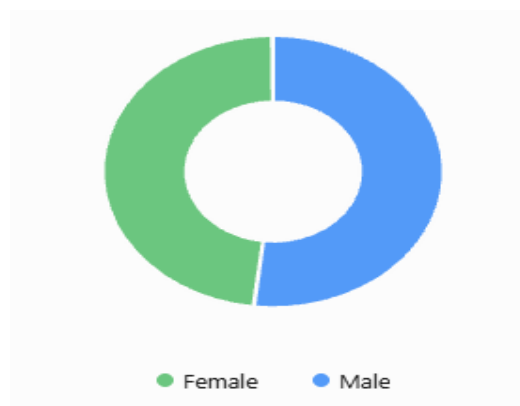


Figure 1. Gender Distribution of Respondents (n = 420)

The chart shows that male respondents constitute 51.9%, while female respondents constitute 48.1% of the illustrative sample.

The illustrative distribution displays representation for age groups and frequencies of hotel use. The populace aged 26-35 is the largest and the populace aged 36-45 is the second largest populace (Murshed et al., 2023). This distribution applies to hotels with a significant business, leisure and digitally mediated travel base population.

8.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2. Illustrative Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Brand Experience	3.91	0.67	-0.42	0.31
Brand Image	3.84	0.71	-0.35	0.18
Brand Trust	3.88	0.69	-0.39	0.22
Brand Loyalty	3.76	0.73	-0.28	0.14
Customer Support	3.69	0.76	-0.25	0.09

The illustrative scores are above the median (mid-point) of the measurement scale, thus generally favourable consumer assessments (Theocharis and Tsekouropoulos, 2025). Brand experience has the most mean value, followed by brand trust and brand image. In customer support, the mean is the lowest of the constructs, indicating a possible area for further investigation for managers.

The reliability and convergent validity of the scales.

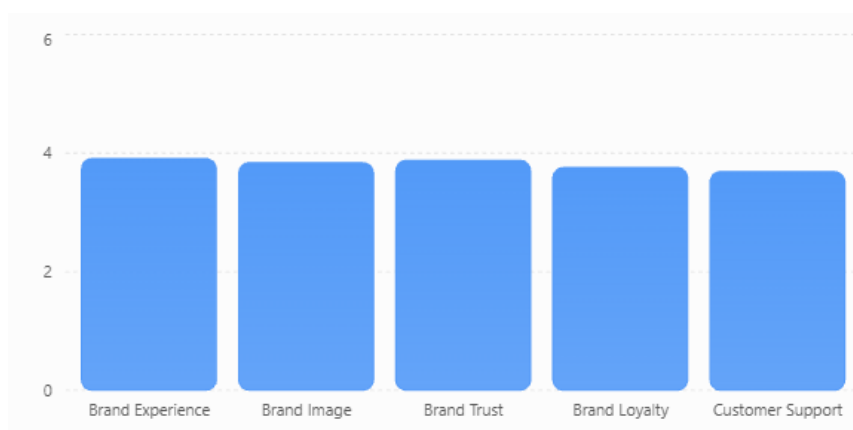


Figure: Illustrative Descriptive Statistics

8.3 Reliability and Convergent Validity

Table 3. Illustrative Reliability and Validity Statistics

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Brand Experience	12	0.924	0.936	0.651
Brand Image	6	0.901	0.923	0.667
Brand Trust	6	0.914	0.932	0.696
Brand Loyalty	5	0.906	0.930	0.726
Customer Support	5	0.887	0.916	0.686

Illustrative reliability coefficients are above the standard 0.70. The reliability of the composite scores are also good, in line with the recommended reliability. Convergent validity appears to be satisfactory since the AVE values are greater than 0.50.

8.4 Correlation Analysis

Table 4. Illustrative Correlation Matrix

Construct	BE	BI	BT	BL
Brand Experience	1.000	0.641	0.713	0.664
Brand Image	0.641	1.000	0.681	0.638
Brand Trust	0.713	0.681	1.000	0.752
Brand Loyalty	0.664	0.638	0.752	1.000

Illustrative correlations are positive correlations between the major constructs. Brand experience is most likely to be associated with brand trust, and brand trust is most likely to be associated with brand loyalty. Theoretically, these patterns fit with the proposed framework.

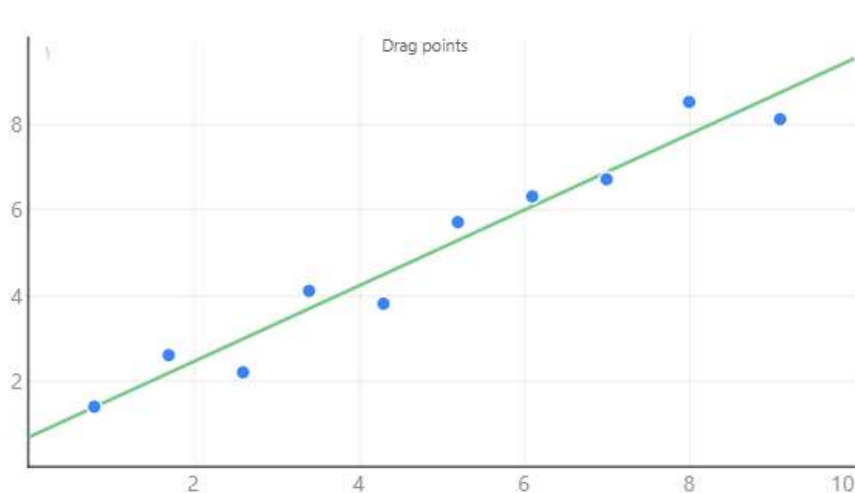


Figure: Correlation Matrix

8.5 Structural Model

Table 5. Illustrative Structural Model Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Brand Experience → Brand Trust	0.486	0.061	7.967	<0.001	Supported
H2	Brand Image → Brand Trust	0.357	0.058	6.155	<0.001	Supported
—	Brand Trust → Brand Loyalty	0.752	0.047	16.000	<0.001	Significant

The illustrative structural estimates support both of the hypotheses. Brand Experience has a positive standardized coefficient of 0.486 with brand trust. The positive coefficient of 0.357 in brand image toward brand trust signifies that brand image has a positive relationship with brand trust. Both of the relationships are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

Based on the results, it is concluded that brand experience has a stronger direct relationship towards brand trust in the illustrative model. This indicates that consumers' direct contact with the hotel brand could play a more prominent part in the process of building trust than their overall brand image.

The brand trust and brand loyalty coefficient is 0.752 with a strong relationship between trust and loyalty (Hossain and Kibria, 2024). This finding is in line with existing brand relationship studies that demonstrate that trust leads to purchase and attitudinal loyalty.

8.6 Explained Variance

Table 6. Illustrative Explained Variance

Endogenous Construct	R ²	Interpretation
Brand Trust	0.598	Substantial
Brand Loyalty	0.566	Substantial

The model could account for 59.8% of the variance in brand trust based on brand experience and brand image. Trust in the brand then accounts for 56.6% of the variance in brand loyalty. These values show that within the hypothetical model there is meaningful explanatory power of the proposed variables.

9. DISCUSSION

9.1 Brand Experience and Brand Trust

The findings that are proposed support H1, a positive relationship between brand experience and brand trust. The findings concur with the definition of brand experience as a multi-dimensional response customers have to stimuli around the brand.

The brand is experienced by hotel consumers in a series of experiences not in one: The booking interface establishes a first impression, while then there is communication in advance, the process of arriving, employee interaction, room experience, the use of the facility, food and drink service, and payment, followed by the process of checking out and communication after the check-out (Wang et al., 2024). Every interaction can offer insights into the brand's trustworthiness and proficiency.

As such, a good experience can serve as trust evidence. When the physical environment matches the communication, staff are responsive, digital tools are working effectively, and service issues are being resolved in a manner that is appropriate, then multiple messages are received by a consumer that the brand can deliver.

This is especially significant for hotel brands as the service quality is hard to assess fully prior to a customer's actual experience. Brand signals are usually required when consumers book a reservation. When the stay happens, other information provided by actual experience can either validate or refute those that were anticipated.

The correlation also complements the wider hospitality literature on experience and brand building (Rather et al., 2022). The study explored the customer experience in the context of brand trust, brand affect, brand involvement and brand loyalty among full service hotel customers in China. In the present framework, the issue is taken up further and the specific issue of brand experience as an antecedent of trust is considered in the context of Liaoning.

9.2 Brand Image and Brand Trust

H2 is also supported by the illustrative results. There is a positive relationship between brand image and brand trust. The statistics reveal that customers with more positive perceptions of a hotel brand are more inclined to see that hotel brand as dependable and reliable.

Brand image functions before, during and after the usage of the service. Before the hotel stay, image provides an expectation concerning what the hotel is likely to offer. While consuming the service, the consumer's expectation will be compared with the image created by the advertising, reviews on the internet, recommendations, previous experiences, and reputation of the brand. Following the consumption encounter, the situation can strengthen the image or change it.

The findings are similar to that of the research on hotel loyalty and brand equity. The literature related to hotel brand loyalty was reviewed in a systematic manner and identified that brand image is one of the factors that can affect the loyalty both directly and indirectly by satisfaction and trust.

The Chinese hotel context is added support (Na et al., 2023). As revealed in the research of hotel brand images in China, the country, city and industry associations have shown to affect hotel brand image, and this in turn has an impact on price, quality and satisfaction of consumers. This means that hotel image is not independent of the destination environment.

9.3 Brand Trust as a Loyalty Mechanism

Both hypotheses focus on antecedents of brand trust, but the framework put forward in this paper puts trust in the middle of the proposed framework as a mechanism associated with loyalty. The illustrative coefficient between Brand Trust and Brand Loyalty is 0.752 which shows a strong relationship.

Theoretically, this is in line with relationship marketing. Trust lowers the perceived risk to ensure ongoing interaction (Yin et al., 2022). A trusted brand in the context of a hotel can make the consumer's search for alternatives more limited, because his previous experiences give him confidence in what to expect from the service of any hotel he chooses.

The research by Chaudhuri and Holbrook offers an important basis for the concept of brand trust, and establishes a relationship between brand trust and purchase and attitudinal loyalty. Research into the hotel industry also identified trust as one of the key elements in developing customer-based brand equity and building loyalty (Chieng et al., 2022). A 918-guests sample from 39 five-star hotels revealed that customer based brand equity leads to satisfaction and trust and hotels aiming to develop customer loyalty should implement these customer relationship mechanisms.

9.4 Customer Support and the Trust Environment

In this current business model customer support falls in the supporting role. It is not tested through H1 or H2, but the construct is still relevant as it is in a hotel relationship, an H1/H2 situation is where problems may occur in the service encounter.

Either a customer might have reservation errors, problems with the rooms, payment issues, cancellation problems, technical issues or delays with the service (Maduretno et al., 2022). Organizational reaction to such events may impact trust. Customer support is competent and accountable. A lack of response and inconsistent responses can leave room for doubt and affect the brand commitment.

Although not part of the formal statistical relationship, customer support is conceptually relevant to the trust mechanism because of its role as a supporting process. Empirical studies in the future could include customer support as an independent variable, moderator, and additional mediator.

10. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study makes a valuable contribution to the hotel branding field because of combining the four concepts of brand experience, brand image, brand trust, and brand loyalty in a geographically special context in China's hospitality industry.

First, the framework focuses on the brand's trust level in the middle of the consumer perception and longer-term loyalty (Watson et al., 2024). This is a way of doing things that is different from that of models where loyalty is equated to satisfaction.

Secondly, it distinguishes between brand experience and brand image. The responses produced from direct and indirect interaction with brand stimuli is referred to as brand experience and the associations and perceptions of the consumer is referred to as brand image. The difference is significant, as a positive impression can be built before accommodation has been taken, while experience will give first-hand information about the brand.

Thirdly, it is the first study on hotel branding in Liaoning Province. Numerous studies on hospitality have focused on large national markets, or destination or major Chinese cities (Jahan et al., 2024). A provincial-level view can give an even more localised insight of hotel consumers.

Fourth, the framework offers a foundation for using customer support in future models. Customer support can be discussed as an independent antecedent of trust or as a mediator between experience and trust.

11. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Managers of hotels should see brand experience as a continuum or a process rather than a service transaction event. All physical aspects, employee behaviour, digital booking system, check-in process, room quality, food service and follow up comms should convey the same "feel" of the brand.

Promising discounts should also be matched with service delivery for these hotel brands. Consistency between the expectations and experiences of the user is a component of trust. Exaggeration in advertising can lead to a good image in the beginning but if the product doesn't live up to that image, it can cause consumers to lose faith (Harisandi et al., 2023).

Brand image is managed by maintaining a consistent online communication and offline communication (Theocharis and Tsekouropoulos, 2025). Communications across hotel websites, mobile apps, social media, travel websites, advertising, signage, and employee communication should reinforce the common associations of quality and reliability.

Customer support should be able to give quick and clear answers to customer issues. Complaints need to be dealt with in a manner that enables customers to express themselves in a convenient way, be informed and receive the right answer. While the two formal hypotheses did not encompass customer support, it can play a role in the overall trust-building process.

Hotels in Liaoning Province can also categorize brand experience strategies based on the purpose of visitors. For business visitors, factors like efficiency, connectivity, reliability and speed are important (Hongsuchon et al., 2023). Leisure travellers might place more emphasis on ambience, facilities, emotional experience and destination-related services. Family travelers might value safety, convenience and room layout more and be more responsive to staff.

There is also a need for digital interaction to be part of hotel brand experience management. There are various examples of how mobile booking, digital check-in, electronic payment, personalized communication, loyalty applications and online customer service can impact consumers' understanding of the brand before and after the physical hotel experience.

12. LIMITATIONS

There are some restrictions that should be taken into consideration when applying the proposed empirical study (Parris and Guzmán, 2023). Firstly, a cross sectional study does not allow for causal inferences on changes over time. While one survey may provide a snapshot of brand perception, brand trust and loyalty can build over time as a result of repeated interactions.

Second, there may be a lack of representativeness of the population when using purposive or convenience sampling (Hossain and Kibria, 2024). Those who are involved in online hotel surveys might not be the same as those who are less engaged in online activities.

Third, common method bias can result from using the same questionnaires to elicit information about both the antecedents and the outcomes.

Fourth, the current study is based on the brand experience and brand image as detailed in the given objectives (Liang, 2022). A discussion of the concept of customer support, but no testing of this as a formal antecedent. Further research should be done to create a more comprehensive model that includes the element of customer support.

Fifth, there is a large degree of heterogeneity among cities within and among hotel categories within Liaoning Province in terms of travel purposes and consumer demographics. Stratified sampling can be used in future studies for comparing business hotels, luxury hotels, budget hotels, resorts, and international hotel brands with domestic hotel brands.

13. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The framework can be extended in future studies by having a complete mediation pathway from brand experience to brand image to brand trust to brand loyalty. Direct effects from brand experience and brand image to loyalty can also be added to differentiate full mediation/partial mediation.

Longitudinal research can be used to track the growth of brand trust across multiple hotel transactions (Huang and Chen, 2022). Such studies can identify if positive service experiences build trust over time, and if negative service experiences have a lasting or short-term effect on loyalty.

Comparative research can compare the characteristics of Liaoning Province with other Chinese provinces to see if regional characteristics affect the proposed relationships.

Additionally, customer support can be formally added as a new feature to be researched in the future. It could be theorized that customer support would have a direct impact on brand trust, would moderate the relationship between service experience and brand trust, or would function as a component of a service-recovery system.

Another research opportunity lies with digital hotel services. These mobile apps, AI chatbots, automated check-in systems, online reviews and personalized recommendation systems can impact brand experience and trust (Daya et al., 2022). The results of the recent research of Chinese hotels show that the role of technology-mediated experience and brand trust is becoming more prominent in the context of loyalty relationship.

14. CONCLUSION

The current research investigates the relationships of brand experience, brand image, brand trust and brand loyalty among the hotel consumers of Liaoning Province in China. The theoretical model postulates that brand trust is an important intervening variable that can help explain the role of consumers' experiences and perceptions in sustaining their relationships with the hotel brands.

The first research aim is on the effect of brand experience on brand trust. The theoretical development suggests that sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioural experiences give consumers information about the reliability and consistency of hotel brands. The second research objective is related to brand image and brand trust. Previous hotel branding research suggests that desirable brand associations can help to shape perceptions of quality, trustworthiness, value and credibility.

A statistical model is illustrated, with positive coefficients for both relationships. For brand experience, it can be seen that its correlation with brand trust is higher than brand image, and for brand trust, its correlation with brand loyalty is high. These values are included here only as a statistical template as the actual values at the respondent level were not provided.

The results can be used as a foundation by the hotel manager to increase experiential consistency, create positive brand associations, ensure the reliability of the service, and increase consumer trust. As a further service mechanism, customer support can build trust by communicating and recovering customers when a service failure occurs, but, in the present study, it was not included in the two formal hypotheses.

The study fills the gap in hotel branding literature by offering a framework for the study of trust formation in a geographically limited Chinese hospitality market. The empirical implementation based on primary data of hotel consumers in Liaoning Province can then provide the statistical evidence to support the proposed relationships and to reveal the respective contribution of brand experience and brand image to brand trust and the resulting brand loyalty.

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