

Brand Trust on Brand Love in the Automotive Industry: The Mediating Role of Brand Equity

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Abstract. *This study examines how brand trust influences brand love through the mediating role of brand equity in Indonesia's automotive industry. Drawing on Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) theory and emotional branding, data from 374 automotive consumers in Jakarta were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that brand trust significantly influences brand equity ($\beta = 0.707$, $p < 0.001$), and brand equity significantly influences brand love ($\beta = 0.762$, $p < 0.001$). However, the direct effect of brand trust on brand love is not significant ($\beta = 0.022$, $p = 0.678$). Brand equity significantly mediates this relationship ($\beta = 0.539$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that brand equity serves as a critical mechanism through which consumer trust translates into emotional attachment. The study contributes to emotional branding literature and highlights the strategic importance of strengthening brand equity to foster brand love in the automotive industry.*

1 Introduction

Indonesia's automotive industry faces increasing competition, requiring brands to establish emotional connections beyond functional product attributes. Brand trust strengthens consumer confidence, while brand equity reflects the additional value consumers associate with a brand. Although previous studies have linked brand trust to emotional attachment, the mechanism through which trust develops into brand love requires further examination in the automotive context. Drawing on Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) theory, this study investigates the direct effects of brand trust on brand equity and brand love, the effect of brand equity on brand love, and the mediating role of brand equity. The findings aim to advance understanding of how cognitive trust

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translates into emotional brand relationships and provide implications for automotive brand management.

2 Theoretical Framework

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).

2.3 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 (Karjaluoto 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 represents the added value a brand provides to a product based on consumer perception (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2003). It consists of dimensions such as brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) theory suggests that strong brand equity enhances consumers’ overall evaluation and strengthens their emotional responses. Brand equity therefore acts as a psychological bridge that connects cognitive assessments with emotional outcomes. 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.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Outer Model

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

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

Source: Processed data using SmartPLS 2025

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 Varian 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 strong correlations among the items in explaining brand love. The brand love variable showed acceptable reliability, 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 with nine valid items, with outer loadings ranging from 0.846 to 0.874, indicating strong correlations among the 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. Discriminant validity evaluation needs to be conducted using the Fornell and Lacker criteria. Discriminant validity evaluates whether variables are theoretically distinct and empirically supported.

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 exceeds the correlations between the variables.

Table 3. 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.

3.2 **Inner Model**

3.2.1 **Hypothesis Testing**

This study tests the effects of brand trust and brand experience on brand equity, considering the mediating role of brand love. The hypotheses are based on a theoretical review and prior research suggesting that brand trust and brand experience can strengthen brand equity through brand love.

In this context, the null hypothesis (H_0) states that there is no significant effect between the tested variables, while the alternative hypothesis (H_1) states that both direct and indirect effects are present. 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.

3.2.2 **Direct effect**

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

3.2.3 **Indirect Effect**

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

Tabel 4. Direct Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypotesis	Original sample(O)	Tstatistics (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 5, 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.

3.3 **Model Evaluation**

Partial Least Squares (PLS) is a variance-based analysis method for testing theoretical models, with a primary emphasis on prediction. Unlike covariance-based approaches such as Covariance-Based SEM (CB-based SEM), PLS suits research focused on prediction and model exploration, especially when data do not meet normality assumptions 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).

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).

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.

4 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that brand trust significantly strengthens brand equity, which in turn fosters brand love among automotive consumers in Jakarta. While the direct effect of brand trust on brand love is not significant, the significant indirect effect highlights brand equity as a key mediating mechanism. These findings contribute to emotional branding literature by explaining how cognitive trust develops into emotional attachment through brand equity. Managerially, automotive companies should complement trust-building initiatives with strategies that enhance perceived quality, brand associations, and overall brand value to cultivate stronger consumer–brand relationships. Future research may examine additional emotional mechanisms and broader geographic contexts to extend these findings.

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