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Impact of nation brand experience on nation brand loyalty, and positive WOM in a changing environment: the role of nation brand love

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Abstract

Purpose – Nation brand building is a complex task as it involves multiple stakeholders. In the context of globalisation, a strong nation brand has important implications not only for attracting foreign businesses and tourists but also for the brands originating from that country. This study examines the role of nation brand experience in enhancing a nation's global reputation.

Design/methodology/approach – The relationships between nation brand experience, nation brand love, nation brand loyalty and positive word of mouth (WOM) were examined by analysing 334 survey responses collected from foreign tourists in India. Structural equation analysis was carried out as part of the analysis.

Findings – The results confirmed that international visitors' sensory and affective nation brand experiences significantly enhance brand love for a nation, leading to national brand loyalty and positive WOM among them. The findings are expected to help practitioners understand consumer buying behavior related to nation brand and develop innovative strategies for improving brand values.

Originality/value – Understanding a developing nation brand experience and how it converts to brand loyalty through the mediation effect of nation brand love from the lens of foreign tourists is the novelty of this study.

Keywords Nation brand experience (NBE), Nation brand love (NBL), Nation brand loyalty (NBLT), Word of mouth (WOM), Brand experience

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Consumer evaluation and response to branding practices have been a matter of scholarly research in recent decades (Gürhan-Canli *et al.*, 2018; Aril *et al.*, 2020; Su and Tong, 2020; Joshi and Garg, 2021). A truly global brand has a presence in all major markets globally, which it creates by applying an integrated approach to standardisation across markets (Talay *et al.*, 2015; Hao *et al.*, 2021). Having a positive nation brand image is important for nations to attract foreign clients and tourists (Diamantopoulos *et al.*, 2019). Nation branding holds multiple implications, for instance, attracting tourists, encouraging skilled and semi-skilled immigrants, generating a positive perception towards products and services originating from that nation (Paul and Dhiman, 2021), and attracting overseas investments (Lee and Lee, 2021). Surprisingly, nation branding gained minimal attention from researchers, tourism managers and international marketing managers (Steenkamp, 2021). Nations were traditionally ranked on their gross domestic product, population and arsenal scales. Still,

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when the world is changing rapidly in today's age, do traditional measures of nation ranking and assessment justify as a means? Therefore, nation as a brand needs to be examined in detail for its conventional and unconventional methods of branding.

Branding techniques have helped nations and organisations gain a competitive brand advantage over rivals (Anholt, 2011; Sodergren, 2021). Nation branding can be defined as a process that allows nations to build or modify their image and monitor, evaluate and actively manage it before the global community (Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2016; Bartsch *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, Dinnie (2016) describes it as "the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provides the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences". Nation branding can be considered an application of various marketing and branding strategies to promote a nation's image. To function effectively, nation branding has to inculcate cultural, political, sport and diverse business activities. Further, nation brand can be explained as a country stereotype which carries with it cultural or other intangible assets with experience or influence (e.g. history, language, social institutions and picture/image) that depends upon the context of where it is placed without linkage to products of origin (Fan, 2006). Therefore, experiences and intangible influences open new avenues for further research towards nation branding.

Many nation brand campaigns have established their vigour in the past such as: "Malaysia, Truly Asia", "Emerald Isle/Green Island" (Ireland) and "Turkey: Discover the Potential". A Study by Hussin (2018) helped understand the position and commitment of both customary foods and performing arts in branding and promoting the Malaysian travel industry under the brand "Malaysia Truly Asia". Ireland is widely known as the "Emerald Isle/Green Island", making it an effectively established nation brand (Lodge, 2002; O'Leary and Deegan, 2003). Alparslan (2017) assessed Turkey's nation branding components and its efforts in 2015, under the motto "Turkey: Discover the Potential".

Prior studies (Anholt, 1998; Kotler and Gertner, 2002) have shown establishing nation as a brand. According to Anholt (2006), travellers consider and evaluate a nation by its various cultural settings. Hence, national policymakers and marketers need to set up positive connections with travellers and build a positive brand image (Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). Therefore, to craft suitable nation branding strategies, it becomes imperative to consider cultural and other intangible experiences into the overall equation. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand the tourist's authentic experiences of interaction with different nation brands. A successful brand must stand true to travellers' expectations about the offerings (Barnes *et al.*, 2014). To date, limited studies have investigated the brand experience to estimate an individual tourist's behavior towards a nation (Kim and Chung, 1997; Barnes *et al.*, 2014; Jiménez-Barreto *et al.*, 2020, 2019; Mandler *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the study uses brand experience as key antecedents for evaluation of a nation brand, i.e. Nation Brand Experience.

Prior research stated that affective and cognitive destination brand image leads to positive word of mouth (WOM) and visiting intentions among tourists (Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2018). International visitors' emotions towards a nation have also been assessed by studying elements of place attachment (Chen *et al.*, 2018; Zenker *et al.*, 2017; Zenker and Rütter, 2014). Few researchers have explored brand love's linkage with nation branding (Aro *et al.*, 2018; Jiménez-Barreto *et al.*, 2020; Lee and Hyun, 2016; Swanson, 2017; Yalkin, 2018). Prior studies suggest that information, content and messages are more likely to go viral if they induce emotions (Chen *et al.*, 2018; Reichstein and Brusch, 2019); therefore, prestige and brand love can significantly affect the promotion and implementation of nation brand with the right experience (Paul, 2018, 2019; Kumar *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, feelings, emotions, attachment or love towards a nation brand is considered as nation brand love.

Recently, researchers highlighted that domestic tourists exhibit brand love through emotional and behavioural effects towards a destination leading to a surge in behavioural

and attitudinal loyalty and positive WOM (Aro *et al.*, 2018). To better understand the aforementioned relationships, this study aims to investigate the impact of nation brand experience on nation brand loyalty and WOM by incorporating the mediation effect of nation brand love. The conceptual framework for the study is outlined in Figure 1.

In subsequent sections, the theoretical background is presented followed by the hypothesised relationships as shown in Figure 1. Later, a description of the methodology adopted is provided. The results generated are followed by the discussion and implications sections, culminating with the study's conclusions. The limitations of the study and directions for future research are then offered.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Nation brand experience

A person's experience with products, services or brands is known to influence the propensity of travel to the country of origin of the product, service or brand (Lee and Lee, 2021). For product brands, the brand experience lies in its ability to let the consumer assess the brand comprehensively. Searching for, obtaining and consuming brands are all components of brand experience (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). Further, sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli are other important brand experience attributes (Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Jiménez-Barreto *et al.*, 2020; Jiménez Barreto *et al.*, 2019). Notably, the brand experience construct is different from other dimensions of the brand, such as brand love, brand personality, brand trust and brand attachment. Barnes *et al.* (2014) and Brakus *et al.* (2009) emphasise that brand experience is a superior construct to these as it is more comprehensive and a more significant determinant of brand equity and brand loyalty.

For instance, attitudes towards brands present a limited scope and consider only the disposition and evaluation of a brand. Similarly, a brand personality that claims to be inferential fails to describe the emotional, mental and behavioural responses associated with customer evaluations of a brand. In this sense, brand experience is the most comprehensive construct (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). Evaluating "brand experiences in retail settings", Singh *et al.* (2020) discovered that human experiences could be categorised into five dimensions: sense,

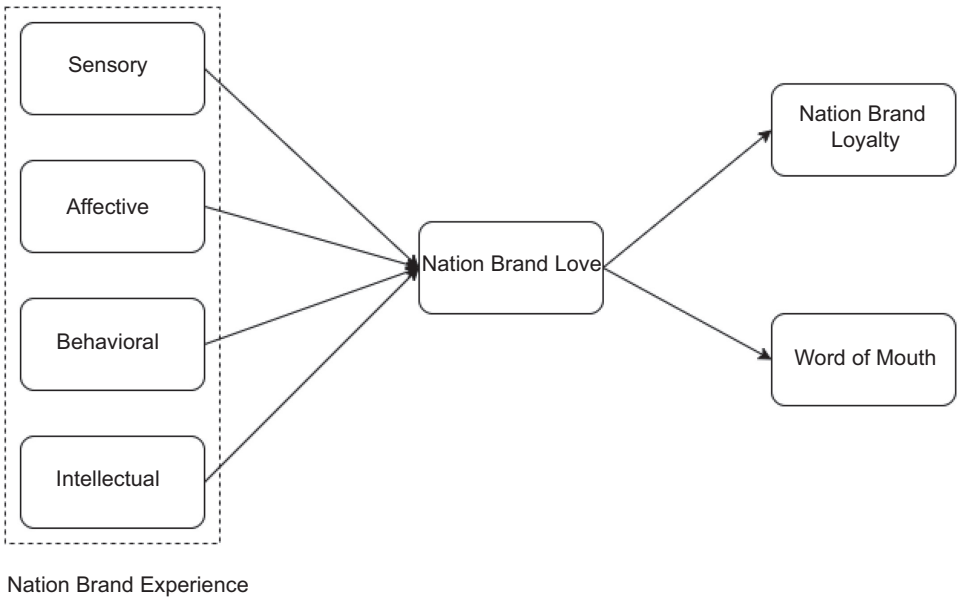


Figure 1.
The nation brand experience framework

feel, think, act and relate. Based on a rigorous review of consumer experiences in other fields, the brand experience scale provides a holistic assessment of the brand through a composition of different experiences (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). The brand experience scale draws on the works of Pine and Gilmore (1999) and Schmitt (1999) on a variety of brands to understand the five prime dimensions of consumers' experiences and is described as follows: "feel experience comprises of moods and emotions; 'think' comprises of imaginative and rational thinking; 'act' is referred to as motor deeds and behavioural affairs and finally, 'relate' is referred to as social affairs". The brand experience scale was developed and tested on six brands from various industries like LEGO, Clinique, Sudoku, iPod, Tropicana and J.W. Hotels; the scale has not been tested in the context of the tourism industry. Hence, this study utilised a final scale that comprised of four dimensions – (1) sensory brand experience, (2) intellectual brand experience, (3) affective brand experience and (4) behavioural brand experience – to apply the scale to the tourism industry context. These dimensions are described below:

(1) Sensory brand experience – the bodily experiences based on visual, gustatory, aural, olfactory and tactile experiences (e.g. taste of the food or smell of the hotel);

(2) Intellectual brand experience – relates to thoughts, arousal of curiosity and problem-solving (e.g. participating in a thought-provoking seminar);

(3) Affective brand experience – refers to emotions, sentiments and feelings (e.g. evoked emotions while visiting an attached destination); and finally

(4) Behavioural brand experience – relates to the bodily experiences with physical actions behaviours (e.g. inclination to drink while visiting a night club).

2.2 Nation brand love

Brand love is an important outcome of the interaction between consumers and brands (Gürhan-Canli *et al.*, 2018). Brand love can be described as "intimate relations" that consumers develop with brands (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015). Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) were the first to define brand love, describing it as the degree of passionate attachment that a satisfied consumer holds for the brand. The researchers asserted that brand love goes beyond liking and involves integrating the brand into the individual's identity. This brand love manifests itself in self-brand integration and reflects consumer investment in the brand, even at a premium price. As a result, the consumer sees the brand as highly likeable and highly valued (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Batra *et al.*, 2012). Huber *et al.* (2015) further claim that brand love is significantly associated with consumers' inner and social self.

In recent years, tourism products and services are becoming branded to attract customers. This has increased the need for brand-related research to discover novel ideas for promoting the brand and positive WOM in the context of tourism and its allied sectors (e.g. hospitality and travel) (Brakus *et al.*, 2009; De Rosa *et al.*, 2019; Jiménez-Barreto *et al.*, 2020; Jiménez Barreto *et al.*, 2019; Richards *et al.*, 2020; Hamzah *et al.*, 2021). A positive, memorable experience with a tourism brand may lead to positive WOM (Abubakar and Ilkan, 2016; Moliner-Velázquez *et al.*, 2019; Wong and Li, 2015). Further, some people integrate a place as a sub-dimension of their self-identity (Alshamaila *et al.*, 2013; Usakli and Baloglu, 2011). Emotional bonding with a destination and attachment can exist for both visitors and residents (Steenkamp *et al.*, 2003; Hosany *et al.*, 2017). The origin of the brand, popularised as the country-of-origin in branding literature, is also known to determine the degree of emotional bonding or brand love that consumers are likely to develop (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2008). Aro *et al.* (2018) described the love that consumers experience concerning a destination as "a complex mix of love for the place itself and love for the brand values associated with the place". This reflects a generalisation of brand love in the context of place or destination.

2.3 Nation brand loyalty

Kim *et al.* (2015) stated that customer retention is cheaper than the acquisition of new ones. Therefore, a sustainable competitive advantage can be attained by achieving higher customer loyalty (Makanyeza, 2015). Brand loyalty can be described by two approaches: deterministic view and stochastic. First, the deterministic view describes it as a function of external influence, i.e. repeated or frequent purchase behaviour (Makanyeza and Chikazhe, 2017; Rungie *et al.*, 2013). Second, a stochastic view describes it as independent of any external influence, i.e. a willing attitude to recommendation (Makanyeza and Chikazhe, 2017; Rungie *et al.*, 2013). The second approach gives importance to the internal processing and cognitions of the consumer. Thus, it emphasises consumer attitudes and other behavioural outcomes (Krystallis, 2013). This study attempts to bridge the gap in prior research by modelling behavioural and attitudinal dimensions of brand loyalty (Kabiraj and Shanmugan, 2011; Moliner-Velázquez *et al.*, 2019).

3. Hypotheses development

3.1 Nation brand experience and nation brand love

Marketers invest heavily in branding their destinations by providing unique experiences to their customers. This opens up an entire spectrum of branding concepts in the context of tourism – especially tourism brand experience (Buhalis, 2000; Ivars-Baidal *et al.*, 2019; Jovicic, 2019). In the tourism sector, marketers are increasingly creating products that consider the feedback they receive from previous customers. Experiential marketing is the foundation for progressive marketing firms today (Ahn *et al.*, 2019; Chanavat and Bodet, 2014). Prior research has proven that a positive brand experience takes the customer through the journey of satisfaction that eventually leads to delight. In branding, this experience can lead to loyalty. Experiences that impact brand loyalty are sensory, affective, behavioural and intellectual (Iglesias *et al.*, 2019; Singh *et al.*, 2020). Consumers' experiences with brands have played a vital role in determining brand love for various products and services in previous studies (Bagozzi *et al.*, 2017; Batra *et al.*, 2012; Roy *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the initial hypotheses for the study are derived as follows:

H1a. Sensory nation brand experience has a positive influence on nation brand love

H1b. Affective nation brand experience has a positive influence on nation brand love

H1c. Behavioural nation brand experience has a positive influence on nation brand love

H1d. Intellectual nation brand experience has a positive influence on nation brand love

3.2 Nation brand love and nation brand loyalty

Brand loyalty is described as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or patronise a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour" (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, Roy *et al.* (2013) assert that the association between satisfaction and loyalty may not be straightforward and proposed that brand love has a mediating effect on the relationship between customer satisfaction and loyalty. They further state that brand love reinforces brand loyalty, which is supported by other studies (e.g. Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Langner *et al.* (2016) and Palusuk *et al.* (2019) state that brand love brings out positive emotions in consumers, developing an enduring relationship between the consumer and the brand. Thus, we posit the third hypothesis as.

H2. Nation brand love positively influences nation brand loyalty

3.3 Nation brand love and positive word-of-mouth

Consumers invest time, energy and resources in the brand they love that reflects their perceived self (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2016; Vernuccio *et al.*, 2015). This harmony between brands and the consumer's perceived self drives their WOM about a nation brand (Black and Veloutsou, 2017; Essamri *et al.*, 2019; Ruane and Wallace, 2015). Of course, WOM can be negative as well as positive; however, this study focuses on positive WOM as an outcome of brand love on contrary to a study by Elsharnouby *et al.* (2021) assesses resilience to negative information. In an earlier study on consumer-packaged goods, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) found that brand love significantly influences WOM. Using similar conceptualisations, later studies confirmed the link between brand love and positive WOM for other consumer brands (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, we posit that:

H3. Nation brand love positively influences WOM for a nation.

3.4 Mediating effect of nation brand love

Using Keller's (2013) brand resonance model, Karjaluoto *et al.* (2016) conceptualised that nation brand loyalty and community engagement – i.e. WOM (brand resonance) – are achieved via emotions – i.e. nation brand love (imagery and feelings) – and for all of this to happen, marketers are required to build the right brand experience (2016). The customer's experiences are unique, and a strong brand experience creates strong associations (Sen *et al.*, 2015). Past studies stated that brand customers' experiences further drive their brand association, including attachment, loyalty and commitment (Cardinale *et al.*, 2016; Huaman-Ramirez and Merunka, 2019). Brand love includes different emotions such as positive attitude, passionate attachment, liking, and commitment (Albert and Merunka, 2013; Cardinale *et al.*, 2016; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). Strong customer association of love then transcends to an elevated feeling of loyalty and community engagement, i.e. WOM (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Lee and Hyun, 2016). This phenomenon can be related to deterministic loyalty, whereby the customer exhibits loyalty by making a product recommendation. As analysed by Albert and Merunka (2013), brand love in the French consumer market shows a strong relationship with brand loyalty and WOM intentions. Tsai (2014) empirically validated that different brand love dimensions strongly affect customers' switching resistance loyalty. Thus, the next hypotheses are:

H4. Nation brand love mediates the relationship between nation brand experience and nation brand loyalty.

H5. Nation brand love mediates the relationship between nation brand experience and WOM.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research context

For this study, India is selected as a nation brand. India's nation brand equity can be best represented through the tagline: "Unity in Diversity". This diversity is represented by India's different languages and religions and the various destinations and experiences it offers. Popular Indian tourist destinations include numerous temples, rivers, mountains, heritage monuments, forests and beaches. Additionally, India provides tourists with diverse experiences, including cultural, pilgrimages, adventure, medical and eco-tourism. In recent years, India as a tourist brand has grown a great deal with an average yearly growth of 6.9%, contributing to 9.2% of the country's GDP. The Indian tourism industry is likely to generate

USD 450 billion by 2028 (IBEF, 2019; UNWTO, 2021). Therefore, studying the experience, love, loyalty and advocacy attributes of tourists towards India as a nation brand is of significant importance.

4.2 Data collection

The study was conducted using on-site surveys at major hotels and resorts of Delhi, plus its satellite towns, namely Gurugram, Ghaziabad and Noida, comprising the National Capital Region (NCR) region of India. Data collection was completed through a structured paper-and-pencil survey. Resort and hotel tourists above the age of 18 participated in this study. The survey included a preliminary screening of questions to identify respondents' competence to represent the set sample. Tourists were also asked to identify their number of visits to the country (India) and their repeated visits to those places within the last 3 years. A total of 337 respondents met the criteria for participation. The sample size was determined as per Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) population sample size identification table. Every respondent was briefed to reflect on India in a nation brand context when responding to the questionnaire items. They were further briefed to indicate the extent of India as a Nation Brand on all assessed variables. Respondents were further asked to provide their home/origin country as it is important to ascertain the NBE perspective by tourists of various nationalities. A complete list of all respondents' home/origin countries is shown in Table 1.

4.3 Questionnaire design

The measurement scales of each construct were adapted from previous studies: nation brand experience (sensory, intellectual, affective and behavioural) from Brakus *et al.* (2009) and modified further by Barnes *et al.* (2014) in the context of tourism; nation brand love (Bagozzi *et al.*, 2017; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006); nation brand loyalty (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Tsai and Wang, 2017); and positive WOM (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). In addition, the language of the constructs was adjusted slightly to fit into this study's context. All of the scales were originally written in English. Each item was assessed using a five-point Likert scale with endpoints of "strongly disagree (1)" and "strongly agree (5)."

Measure	Criteria	Proportion	Percentage
Total		334	100
Gender	Male	171	50.1
	Female	163	48.9
Age (years)	18–25	157	47.0
	25–34	97	29.1
	Over 35	80	23.9
Education	High School	117	35.2
	College Degree	150	44.8
	Other	66	20.0
Reasons for travelling	Leisure	150	45.0
	Business	100	30.0
	Adventure	33	10.0
	Religion	51	15.0
Nationality	Europe (including UK)	100	30.0
	America and Canada	63	19.0
	Russia	60	18.0
	Australia and New Zeland	74	22.0
	Asia (Except India)	37	11.0

Table 1. Sample profile

4.4 Procedural remedies for bias

As all constructs were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, this increases the odds of common method variance (CMV), which results from constructs sharing common measurement techniques (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). As with every self-reported survey that includes the same respondents answering all of the constructs under study, the risk towards CMV is increased, affecting the independent variable (IV) and dependent variable (DV) relationship (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). CMV causes bias within results as the technique itself is the cause of considerable and nontrivial variation amid observed and true relations (Fuller *et al.*, 2016). Podsakoff *et al.* (2003) recommend certain techniques to limit the risks. Initially, the questionnaire consisted of a cover letter that provided the purpose of the study, estimated time to answer the survey and contact information of the researcher for further queries. The planned, logical flow and control over the survey allowed easy measurement of IV and DV at proximity and temporal segregation. Also, surveyors/students were briefed and instructed not to reveal any information related to the model or framework; respondents were not informed of the questions related to either the IV or the DV. These procedural remedies were applied to attenuate common method bias.

4.5 Demographic characteristics

A total of 337 responses were collected; however, three responses were eliminated due to missing values. Therefore, a total of 334 responses were analysed. Table 1 reports the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

The sample data comprises 50.1% males and 49.9% females. The majority population is young tourists in the 20–25 years age group (47%); 25–34 years were 29.1%; 23.9% were above 35 years old. A total of 35.2% of the sample respondents have completed high school, while 44.8% have completed a college degree. The respondents were from 19 nations: 30% are residents of Europe (including the UK), 19% America and Canada, 18% Russia, 11% Asia (except India) and 22% Australia and New Zealand (see Table 1).

5. Results

5.1 Measurement model test

The study conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the measurement model towards assessing goodness-of-fit indices (Bentler and Bonett, 1980). The results of the study shown a good model fit with an acceptable indices score (χ^2 = 192.4; def. = 90; RMSEA = 0.059; CFI = 0.96; GFI = 0.95). Sample data is tested against factor structure arrangement and measurement adequacy. To begin, standardised factor loadings for all survey items are assessed to confirm that item's weight in their construct. The study used Nunnally's (1978) parameters to assess substantial composite reliability (CR) or internal consistency for construct scales through Cronbach's alpha (CA). Table 2 shows that the CA value for all construct scales is above a substantial value of 0.70. Convergent validity was assessed using Hair *et al.* (2010), i.e. assessment of standardised factor loadings greater than 0.60, scale reliability (SR) greater than 0.70, and average variance extracted (AVE) to be greater than 0.50. Data analysis found factor loadings were above the threshold value (0.70), with scale reliability (0.6–0.85) and AVE (0.5) also meeting requirements, verifying the strength of data. The study assessed discriminant validity for the measurement model by using Fornell and Larcker's (1981) guidelines, i.e. comparing AVEs for each construct with squared multiple correlations amongst pairs of the construct. AVE values for every construct were greater than the squared multiple correlations amongst constructs exhibiting discriminant validity (Table 3).

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	FL	CA	SFL	CR	AVE
Sensory NBE				0.723		0.93	0.77
SNBE1	3.73	0.87	0.77		0.762		
SNBE2	3.56	0.96	0.73		0.806		
SNBE3	3.59	1.01	0.78		0.753		
Affective NBE				0.661		0.91	0.78
ANBE1	3.69	0.93	0.77		0.605		
SNBE2	2.91	1.13	0.71		0.738		
SNBE3	3.34	9.64	0.81		0.756		
Behavioral NBE				0.674		0.91	0.81
BNBE1	3.8	0.911	0.67		0.499		
BNBE2	3.41	0.942	0.71		0.671		
BNBE3	3.5	1.014	0.72		0.628		
Intellectual NBE				0.753		0.91	0.82
INBE1	3.23	1.002	0.82				
INBE2	3.54	1.03	0.85				
INBE3	3.62	1.1	0.73				
Nation Brand Love				0.849		0.93	0.84
NBL1	3.98	0.85	0.88		0.773		
NBL2	3.93	0.82	0.88		0.796		
NBL3	3.45	0.89	0.85		0.590		
NBL4	3.83	0.98	0.75				
Nation Brand Loyalty				0.832		0.94	0.82
NBLT1	3.76	0.87	0.86		0.627		
NBLT2	3.8	0.91	0.81		0.674		
Word-of-Mouth				0.772		0.95	0.86
WOM1	3.92	1.023	0.79		0.816		
WOM2	3.7	0.94	0.76		0.798		
WOM3	3.87	0.85	0.77				

Note(s): NBE: Nation Brand Experience; CA: Cronbach's Alpha; SFL: Standardised Factor Loading, CR: Composite Reliability; AVE: Average Variance Extracted; FL: Factor Loading

Table 2. Psychometric values of constructs

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Sensory NBE	0.88						
2. Affective NBE	0.61	0.89					
3. Behavioural NBE	0.56	0.66	0.91				
4. Intellectual NBE	0.42	0.57	0.62	0.87			
5. NBL	0.63	0.56	0.59	0.57	0.86		
6. NBLT	0.59	0.62	0.54	0.48	0.53	0.86	
7. WOM	0.53	0.63	0.56	0.55	0.54	0.58	0.88

Note(s): NBE: Nation Brand Experience; NBL: Nation Brand Love, NBLT: Nation Brand Loyalty; WOM: Positive WOM

Table 3. Inter-construct correlations and the square root of AVE

5.2 Structural model testing

The study followed the structural equation modelling (SEM) approach to assess the proposed model. This approach enables researchers to examine a complex framework that involves various independent and dependent variables. SEM provides a holistic means to assess and modify conceptual frameworks consecutively as it offers more sophistication than other multivariate statistical methods (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). SEM is conducted through two model testings: measurement and structural.

For the SEM, AMOS was applied to assess the structural model fit using the goodness of fit for the assessed model and proposed research hypotheses. The model fit indices suggested an acceptable model fit to data ($\chi^2 = 189.4$; d.f. = 90; RMSEA = 0.062; CFI = 0.95; GFI = 0.94). Path analysis coefficients for each research claim are reported in Table 4. According to the results of the study, two antecedents (sensory and affective) of NBE positively and significantly influence NBL – Sensory (H1a): $\beta = 0.306$, $p < 0.001$ and affective (H1b): $\beta = 0.271$, $p < 0.001$. Further, H1c and H1d, which claim a positive influence of behavioral and intellectual factors on NBL, were not supported, with results of $\beta = 0.221$, $p = 0.411$ and $\beta = 0.223$, $p = 0.062$, respectively. All in all, the results provide partial support for H1 based on the results of H1a and H1b. Furthermore, for H2, the significant positive influence of NBL on NBLT was confirmed ($\beta = 0.289$, $p < 0.001$). Likewise, the results supported the acceptance of H3, which claims that NBL positively and significantly influences WOM ($\beta = 0.225$, $p < 0.001$).

This study used Baron and Kenny's (1986) mediation approach to assessing the proposed mediating effect of NBL in the conceptualised model. Baron and Kenny (1986) recommended four necessary conditions for testing mediation. First, each independent variable (NBE) should significantly influence the mediating variable (NBL). Second, the mediating variable should significantly influence dependent variables (in this study, NBLT and WOM). As shown in Table 4, both conditions were fulfilled. Third, dependent variables (NBE) should directly influence dependent variables (in this study, NBLT and WOM). To inspect the third condition, the study assessed the direct influence of NBE on NBLT and WOM. The results of the study reveal that sensory and affective NBE affect both NBLT ($\beta1 = 0.248$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta2 = 0.277$, $p < 0.001$) and WOM ($\beta1 = 0.289$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta2 = 0.281$, $p < 0.001$). The fourth and final condition, path coefficients of independent variables to dependent variables, may either be reduced (partial mediation) or are insignificant (full mediation) as the mediating variable is brought into the model. The study results revealed that the path coefficient for sensory and affective NBE with NBLT achieved statistically significant results ($\beta1 = 0.136$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta2 = 0.109$, $p < 0.001$ respectively), causing partial mediation. Unexpectedly, path coefficients from sensory and affective NBE to WOM showed an insignificant relationship ($\beta1 = 0.102$, $p = 0.135$; $\beta2 = 0.075$, $p = 0.226$), suggesting a full mediation. Therefore, NBL establishes partial mediation between NBE and NBLT while causing full mediation between NBE and WOM (acceptance of H4 and H5). Table 5 presents the results of mediation.

6. Discussion

The conceptual framework was designed to assess the extent of relationships among NBE, NBL, NBLT and WOM in the nation branding context. The results provide support for the acceptance of three research claims while providing partial support for one claim. The brand experience was considered as the main variable, and its effect on tourists' behaviour towards

Hypotheses	Path			SC	*t*-value	Supported (Yes/No)
H1a	Sensory NBE	→	NBL	0.306	9.523**	Yes
H1b	Affective NBE	→	NBL	0.271	6.203**	Yes
H1c	Behavioural NBE	→	NBL	0.221	1.483	No
H1d	Intellectual NBE	→	NBL	0.223	1.783	No
H2	NBL	→	NBLT	0.289	8.235**	Yes
H3	NBL	→	WOM	0.225	6.540**	Yes

Table 4. Hypotheses test

Note(s): **significant at *p*-value < 0.01, NBE: Nation Brand Experience; NBL: Nation Brand Love, NBLT: Nation Brand Loyalty; WOM: Positive WOM, SC: Standardised Coefficient

Hypotheses	IV	DV	Direct	Indirect	Mediation
H4	Sensory NBE	NBLT	0.248**	0.136**	Partial
	Affective NBE	NBLT	0.277**	0.109**	Partial
	Behavioural NBE	NBLT	0.093	0.042	No
	Intellectual NBE	NBLT	0.056	0.023	No
H5	Sensory NBE	WOM	0.289**	0.102**	Full
	Affective NBE	WOM	0.281**	0.075	Full
	Behavioural NBE	WOM	0.076	0.038	No
	Intellectual NBE	WOM	0.039	0.009	No

Note(s): Significant at p-value < 0.01, NBE: Nation Brand Experience; NBL: Nation Brand Love; NBLT: Nation Brand Loyalty, WOM: Word of Mouth; IV: Independent Variable; DV: Dependent Variable

Table 5. Mediation effects of NBL

the nation brand was evaluated. As different nations provide a distinct experience of their own; therefore, every antecedent may not significantly determine tourists' behaviour towards different nations.

Although brand love is not a new concept, it is rarely assessed from a nation brand context. A thorough understanding of various variables affecting tourists' psychological reactions and relations in the context of a nation is important for nation brand marketers. Therefore, the study findings offer a few interesting insights. First, sensory and affective NBEs are the main drivers of NBL. Second, sensory and affective NBEs mainly drive customers' NBLT and WOM, while behavioural and intellectual NBEs do not affect WOM while mediated by NBL. Most importantly, this study finds that NBL has a mediating effect on the relationship between NBE, NBLT and WOM. One possible reason is that sensory and affective NBEs form a cognitive element that creates short-lived psychological reactions.

Sensory NBEs occurred through the interaction of tourists' senses with nation stimuli such as auditory, tactile, olfactory and gustatory. For example, this interaction effect might occur due to sound in the environment, fragrances around gardens, the feeling of seeing snow resting on peaks, enjoying the taste of cuisines or taking in natural scenic beauty. However, affective NBEs in a nation brand occur due to various sentiments, emotions or feelings of tourists triggered during a visit to a nation. Affective NBE was found to be the second most significant element that increases WOM. This could be due to higher historical, religious or cultural values experienced by tourists in India.

Behavioural outcomes of NBL were assessed through their effect on NBLT and WOM. The findings indicate that WOM and NBLT are directly affected by love towards a nation. The results suggest that tourists with elevated feelings of love for a particular nation show higher loyalty, which leads them to talk/advocate more positively about that particular nation than others. However, as supported by the findings on sensory and affective NBEs, tourists only choose to act if they felt that the nation communicated in the message is, to some extent, an expression of themselves. This behaviour is fuelled by the interaction of visitors' senses and a feeling of belongingness or affection. Furthermore, a positive evaluation of the nation brand creates a halo effect that potentially leads to the brand having global status and causes other brands, products and services emerging from that nation to be perceived as providing superior performance (Davvetas *et al.*, 2020).

7. Theoretical implications

This study takes a holistic approach by conceptualising NBE and NBL alongside NBLT and WOM by keeping NBE as an antecedent to NBL and using NBLT and WOM as dependent variables. A comprehensive test and validation of the brand experience scale developed by Brakus *et al.* (2009) were undertaken in the context of nation brand and tourism. The study

results confirmed scale validity and reliability in the context of India as a nation brand. This scale proved to be an all-inclusive and effective tool in identifying tourists' behaviour. Additionally, through quantification of different NBE components' impacts on tourists' behavioural outcomes, the study contributes to the nation brand literature (Avraham, 2018; Barnes *et al.*, 2014; Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). Specifically, the study assesses the collective effect of NBE and NBL on identifying outcomes for tourists, i.e. NBLT and WOM towards destinations. The study highlights the important antecedents of sensory and affective NBEs over intellectual and behavioural NBEs in influencing such tourists' behaviour.

The study strongly advises nation brand marketers to stress the sensory and affective elements of NBE. The study results show that both these elements (sensory and affective) are crucial in planning a nation's overall experience for travellers, leading to favourable tourist perceptions. For example, the design of a national promotional campaign should be focused explicitly on affective experiences that invoke emotional elements regarding the nation, therefore forming a strong emotional bond or attachment between nation and tourist. Markwell (2004) put forward that sensory experience provides tourists with the feeling of "being there", which surpasses the practice of "gaze". Sensory experience has the highest effect on loyalty and WOM advocacy, as it brings thrill, excitement and enjoyment to the visit. Hence, marketers and managers must cautiously create and forward campaigns to provide excitement, thrill, enjoyment and interest. Additionally, while promoting the nation and its campaigns, marketers and managers must emphasise varied, entertaining programs and exciting environments. Thus, marketers and managers need to develop tourism campaigns in a way tourists become co-producers in their NBE. In the case of tourism, tourists gain such nation experiences through sight, touch, taste, smell and sound at explicit places. To create these experiences, marketers must organise unique, nation-specific events catering to customer experiences, as this increases customers' delight and their nation visit value, which further drives their positive advocacy for the nation on various platforms. Overall, the results reveal that a customer's different experiences and affection/love positively affect their loyalty and WOM advocacy, thereby offering novel insight into the tourism context.

8. Managerial implications

Therefore, this study has numerous implications for practitioners and academics, with potential for extension to other contexts such as hotels, professional services or education. This study highlights many implications for managers concerning NBEs that act as catalysts for feelings of brand love/affection towards a nation in the hearts of tourists. Marketers must strategically create communication programs focusing on sensory and affective elements of NBE to measure and monitor tourists' affection (love) towards a nation as a brand. Therefore, nation brand marketers must formulate various online communities and fan clubs specific to a nation's appeal as brand schema also has a significant effect on their ability to engage consumers (Puligadda *et al.*, 2021). In such virtual communities, tourists can communicate, exchange information and provide information about various destinations while fostering social interaction. Specifically, the study suggests that marketers must focus on different touchpoints between tourists and brands to foster a nation brand experience as done through brand–consumer interaction study on Facebook and Nike for targeted consumers (Qin, 2020). This will assist in leveraging numerous benefits through building emotional brand love with a brand to propel customer loyalty and WOM.

The findings further hold strategic significance for nation marketers concerning consumer experience design, emphasising the development of nation-based affective and sensory experiences. To build consumer experience, marketers can provide plenty of detailed information such as interactive exhibits on the various historical developments of a country. Providing personalised content during the travel process would also be beneficial. Besides,

advertising campaigns should be designed following sensory experiences and aspects that delight tourists. From an affective experience viewpoint, nation marketers should consider the emotional aspects of a nation for the branding campaign. Additionally, building and sharing nation brand stories through social media platforms would assist tourists in making their decisions. Innovative technological environments have the potential as a means to increase consumer experience. For instance, virtual reality is a possibility for engaging tourists by simulating significant events in the life of the nation, such as historically relevant events (e.g. battles, wars, etc.). Virtual-reality-based technologies foster heightened product and service experiences that are very similar to a nation visit. Therefore, nation brands shift to sensory experience-based technological environments that take sensory inputs into an online framework (Ahn and Back, 2018; Harrigan *et al.*, 2018).

For practitioners, it is crucial to recognise the factors that further tourists' loyalty and WOM (advocacy) rather than focusing only on building up brand relations, implanting a positive brand association and creating brand differentiation (He *et al.*, 2021a; Talay *et al.*, 2015). Brand-owned social media content marketing generates a positive effect on consumer brand attitude, therefore firms need to create a differing effect through personalized and focused content (He *et al.*, 2021b). WOM is deemed as an efficient and effective mode of relationship building; hence, understanding how to maximise nation brand engagement and communication would provide a competitive advantage. Motivating tourists' advocacy, ambassadorship and positive WOM also contribute to reducing advertising costs. Overall, the results of this study are important for nation branding practitioners, particularly in developing economies with rising consumption of social media by customers.

9. Limitations and directions for future research

Although this study contributes significantly to industry understanding of brand love in the tourist context, it suffers from some limitations, which can be addressed through future research. The first limitation is that only international tourists were surveyed in this study. Thus, it would be interesting to include domestic and international tourists in future research. Secondly, the findings were based upon India as a nation brand. Following prior studies (Paul and Mas, 2016, 2020), future researchers could perform a cross-country analysis to improve the generalizability of the research findings. Thirdly, the data for the research was collected during India's Winter season (i.e. January) and thus attracted only a limited number of respondents; therefore, the odds of sample bias existing are high. Further, the respondents' experiences in reading a message or watching a video related to India could have been affected by many other existing relations with the nation, which were not part of the questionnaire. Future researchers conducting similar studies are advised to add in other associations or measures like message-type moderation and also use particular control variables to isolate the actual message effect.

10. Conclusion

Understanding nation brand and the implementation of nation brand building activities is a complex task as it is multifaceted and involves a variety of stakeholders, faces enormous competition and holds the capacity to sway national interests. Nations are continuously improving their experiential services to gain a competitive advantage, not only to increase tourism revenues but also to project soft power. This study assessed tourists' nation brand love as a mediator between the relationship of nation brand experiences and nation brand loyalty and travellers' positive WOM. Sensory and affective nation brand experiences were found to be the major drivers of nation brand love, loyalty and WOM. Meanwhile,

behavioural and intellectual experiences were not found to have much effect on the studied relationships. Brand love was identified as a key driver in building nation brand experience, loyalty and related communication. The novelty of this study lies in the fact that no previous study has examined distinctive nation brand experience dimensions and their relation to positive WOM. Furthermore, the study assesses the role of nation brand love as a mediator between the relationships of nation brand experience, nation brand loyalty and travellers' positive WOM. The results emphasised the inclusion of sensorial and affective stimulations towards building a stronger nation brand and brand love. These findings will assist institutions and organisations tasked with enhancing and promoting a nation's brand image. This is critical in presenting that nation as a preferred global destination to attract foreign tourists, foreign investment, etc. It is also important in creating a positive country of origin (COO) image for various products, services and brands from the respective country.

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Appendix
Survey instrument items

Sensory NBE (Brakus et al., 2009; Barnes et al., 2014)
This [nation] makes a strong impression on my senses, visually and in other ways
I find this [nation] interesting in a sensory way
This [nation] does not appeal to my senses

Affective NBE
This [nation] induces feelings and sentiments
I do not have strong emotions for this [nation]
This [nation] is an emotional area

Behavioral NBE
I engage in physical activities and behaviors when I am in this [nation]
This [nation] gives me bodily experiences
This [nation] is not activity-oriented (*r*)

Intellectual NBE
I engage in a lot of thinking when I am in this [nation]
This [nation] does not make me think
This [nation] stimulates my curiosity and problem-solving

Nation Brand Love (Adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006)
This is a wonderful [nation]
Being in [the nation] makes me feel good
Being in [the nation] makes me very happy
I love [the nation]

Positive Word-of-Mouth (Adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006)
I have recommended [the nation] to a lot of people
I "talk up" [the nation] to my friends
I try to spread the good word about [the nation] in general

Nation Brand Loyalty (Adapted from Chen and Tsai, 2007 and Oppermann, 2000)
I will likely revisit this [nation] in the future
I will likely recommend this [nation] to my family and friends

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