



PROMOTION STRATEGIES IN CONSUMER PARADOX TOWARDS WORD OF MOUTH BRAND EQUITY

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Objective of the study: This study is unique because it has incorporated two concepts, brand equity, and WOM, in a model to understand how the factors assimilate and improve consumers' understanding of WOM and brand equity. The study have focused on the local allied brand.

Methodology: The study used the mall intercept method to collect data based on a self-administered questionnaire. The study distributed 415 blank questionnaires and received 403 filled questionnaires. The study have used Smart PLS for statistical analysis that included reliability and validity analyses,

Findings: The study have used Smart PLS version 3.3 for statistical analysis, and test propositions relations to the consumer psychology, the study results supported seven hypotheses. The study did not find support on (i) perceived quality and WOM and (ii) satisfaction and WOM. Similarly, of the seven indirect hypotheses, the study also did not find support for three, which are (i) Association mediates awareness and brand equity, (ii) WOM mediates perceived Quality and brand equity, and (iii) WOM mediates satisfaction and brand equity.

Theoretical Contributions: The study has tested a multi-mediating relationship which will provide more insight into the discussed phenomenon. It is the first study incorporating four drivers of WOM and four drivers of brand equity in a single study. The study adopted a holistic approach by testing seven direct, nine indirect, and one multi-mediating relationship

Significance of the study: Perhaps, this is the first study that has developed a new model containing four variables associated with brand equity and another four related WOM in one study. Past studies have examined brand image and WOM with a narrow perspective. Most of them have used about seven or eight relationships. The study has taken a holistic approach and examined nine direct and seven mediating relationships. A holistic approach is necessary as the study has four antecedents related to WOM and four related to brand equity.

Keywords: Word of mouth communication. Brand equity. Satisfaction. Commitment. Trust. Brand awareness.

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Introduction

Today's business environment is highly competitive. It has become challenging for organizations to create differentiation and maintain sustainable relationships with customers. Firms worldwide focus on different modes to serve customers and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage (Jaya, Nasir & Dewi, 2021). Many organizations rely on positive WOM communication to build strong brand equity. A positive WOM is a well-established tool for retaining existing customers and attracting new ones (Farzin et al., 2022). Past studies have documented that positive WOM is more effective than traditional advertising techniques for building a strong brand image (Gildin, 2022). WOM is a crucial factor that influences consumer buying decisions. Consumers obtain feedback on the products or brands from their peers and friends (Mahaputra, 2021). WOM is "informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and their sellers" (Ali & Anwar, 2021). It is more effective than a paid advertisement, and firms use it to change consumers' attitudes and behavior (Talwar, Dhir, Scotto, & Kaur, 2021; Yu, 2022). WOM is an "oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale" (Gildin, 2022).

A significant aspect of WOM is sharing attitude towards a brand or products with others. This attitude could be based on consumers' experience or through WOM. Consumers generally share their experiences about the product intentionally or unintentionally (Mahaputra, 2021). Past literature has documented that WOM is highly cost-effective for changing consumers' attitudes toward a brand (Ali & Anwar, 2021; Mazhar et al., 2022). Similarly, researchers believe that WOM is a tool that quickly transfers shared experiences at a low cost (Talwar, Dhir, Scutto, & Kaur, 2021). Consumers generally do not pay much attention to advertisements due to their cluttering. Therefore, WOM's importance has increased significantly (Gildin, 2022). Prayag, Consumers in the service industry tend to rely more on WOM than any other communication tool. Therefore, they give more value to this shared information (Sukhu & Bilgihan, 2021).

Šerić, Došen, and Mikulić (2022) examined the potential antecedents of WOM communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The study found perception of destination reputation affects WOM communication and trustworthiness insignificantly affects WOM engagement. The study also documented that gender moderates reputation and WOM, with a stronger effect on females

Banerjee & Sreejesh (2022) found WOM positively affects credibility and self-brand connections. And credibility mediates WOM and brand loyalty; self-brand connections mediate WOM and strong affect-laden relationships. (Banerjee & Sreejesh, 2022). A cross-culture study examined the impact of personality traits on WOM and eWOM communication. The study found that personality traits are negatively associated with online and WOM communication. The study also found that the young population in US and Germany are more susceptible to eWOM and WOM communication than the young population in France (König et al., 2022).

A study in Taiwan examined the antecedents of WOM communication in the insurance sector. The study found that functional and technical Quality, Trust, and corporate Image positively affect WOM communication. Corporate Image and Trust partially mediate (i) the functional Quality and WOM and (ii) the technical Quality and WOM communication (Yu, 2022). Based on experimental research, product anthropomorphism motivates consumers to share positive WOM communication. The study concluded that consumers speak positively about the product as they believe such behavior will create a positive impression on others. They may also think people speaking passively about the products are polite and well-mannered (Chen, Sengupta, & Zheng, 2022). A study on Spanish university Alumni found that university brand image, satisfaction, and Alumni University identifications promote positive WOM communication. The study also documented that satisfaction, Alumni University identifications mediate university brand image and positive WOM communication (Schlesinger, Cervera-Taulet, & Wymer, 2021; Kazmi et al., 2021).

Past studies have documented that WOM significantly affects brand equity (Vinh et al., 2021) Ismail & Spinelli, 2012). Moreover, Ali and Anwar (2021) suggest that WOM communication received in a face-to-face manner is considered more credible and positively influences the brand image. Past studies have concluded that WOM affects brand loyalty, brand association, and other brand equity components (Budiman, 2021). Moreover, others have also found that positive WOM positively affects brand reputation and corporate Image (Triatmanto . et. 2021; Suhartini & Pertiwi, 2021; Shahbaz et al., 2022). Over the last few decades, consumers in Pakistan have become highly brand conscious, especially in the context of apparel products. The local market is glutted with local and imported brands. Thus, given its significance, the study has focused on a local apparel brand that has achieved a unique position in the local market due to its brand image and WOM communication. We have selected the apparel industry because it provides second highest job opportunities in Pakistan. According to

an estimate, the apparel sector employs 38% of the total manufacturing workforce in Pakistan (Fashinza, 2022).

Brand image and WOM, although related, have different antecedents and consequences, and past studies have explored them separately. Perhaps, this is the first study that has developed a new model containing four variables associated with equity and another four associated with WOM in one study. Past studies have examined brand image and WOM with a narrow perspective. Most of them have used about seven or eight relationships. The study has taken a holistic approach and examined nine direct and seven mediating relationships, as it will provide more depth to the discussed phenomenon. Multi-mediating relationships bring more insight into the research phenomenon (Jalees et al. 2021). We did not find any study that has examined the multi-mediating effect in WOM studies. Given this gap, we have examined the multi-mediating effect of brand loyalty and brand awareness and found they affect brand image and brand association.

Some studies have examined the impact of the drivers of WOM-on-WOM communication, while others have examined the impact of antecedents on brand equity on brand equity. There is a need for studies incorporating the drivers of WOM and brand equity in a single study. Given this gap, we have incorporated four drivers of WOM and another four drivers of brand equity in our model and found they assimilated very well and brought insight into the phenomenon of WOM. The drivers of WOM and brand equity are highly correlated. Therefore, there is a need for studies with a holistic approach. Given this gap, we tested a model with seven direct, nine mediating, and one multi-mediating relationship. The remaining part of the paper is structured as follows. Initially, a conceptual framework is presented, followed by theoretical discussions on the nine direct and seven mediating relationships. Subsequently, the study has discussed methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion. It ends with implications, limitations, and scope for future research.

Literature review

Brand Equity

Researchers for decades have been examining the consequences and effects of brand equity. Although it is a controversial marketing subject, most researchers agree that any business entity's main aim is to build substantial equity (Tran, Mai, & Taylor, 2021). Many researchers have defined brand equity differently. But most researchers have extended 'Aaker's (1991) and Keller's (1993) models in their research. Aaker (1991) states it is "a set of brand

assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol. It adds or subtracts from the value provided to firms and their customers." At the same time, Keller (1993) has defined brand equity as the "differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand."

Researchers believe brand equity is "added value endowed by the brand to the product" (Gilal et al., 2019). Furthermore, researchers argue that brand equity is the customer's aggregate perception of brand value, due to which they maintain a sustainable relationship with the brand (Singh & Banerjee, 2021). This study has focused on the four drivers of brand equity which are brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, and brand image:

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is "the ability for a buyer to recognize or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category" (Aaker 1991). A brand name does not have any value without its awareness. At the same time, consumers consider and prefer brands they are aware of (Hayati, & Hansika, 2021). Researchers believe that brand awareness refers to the "brand node" in the consumers' minds that allows them to distinguish and recognize one brand from others. It also suggests how quickly brand names come into the consumers' minds (Bergkvist & Taylor, 2022).

The consumer decision-making process significantly depends on brand awareness. Extant literature suggests consumers prefer to purchase products and services from well-established brands since they believe such brands will deliver what they promise (Sun, Bellezza & Paharia, 2021). When thinking of a product category, consumers recall the brand with a strong awareness (Budiman, 2021). Rivaldo et al. (2022) stress that increasing brand awareness motivates consumers to buy the brand despite its little or no association. Thus, brand awareness is an important driver of brand equity and helps strategic brand decisions (Zia, Younus, & Mirza, 2021).

Brand Association

A brand association is consumers' perceptual association with a brand or its concepts and experience. It could be positive or negative and profoundly affect consumers' purchase decisions (Czinkota et al. 2021). Muravskii et al. (2022) assert that consumers' brand association builds over time. The precursors to the brand association are consistent brand experience, celebrity endorsement, product placement, advertisement campaigns, and brand activation. All these factors could negatively or positively impact consumers' behavioral intentions (Czinkota et al. 2021). The

brand association helps consumers recall the brand quickly and helps build brand identity (Farzin et al., 2022). Besides other advantages, brand association differentiates a brand from others (Rodrigues & Schmidt, 2021). An example of a strong brand association is Nike. When consumers see its logo or hear "just do it," they instantly relate it to Nike (Rezaei & Sharifian, 2021).

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is consumers' emotional attachment to a brand that motivates them to purchase it repeatedly. Consumers with strong brand loyalty believe that the particular brand qualities align with their expected needs. A firm with a strong, loyal customer base has a competitive edge and sustainable growth (Zia, Younus, & Mirza, 2021). Firms use market strategies, such as incentives trials and brand ambassadors, to create brand loyalty (Kassim et al., 2021). Consumers with strong brand loyalty are not price-sensitive and do not easily switch to competitors. Loyal customers often advocate the brand and voluntarily become brand ambassadors (Czinkota et al. 2021).

Brand Image

Brand image is consumers' perception of a brand in their minds. Factors contributing to brand Image are consumers' interaction with the brand, including purchasing it, watching an advertisement on social media, and exposure to its logo on different mediums. The brand image develops long-term (Dam & Dam, 2021). Brand image is inconsistent, and it varies from one consumer to another. Therefore, it is challenging for a firm to develop a consistent brand image. There are several advantages of a strong brand image. Firms generate more profit because their customer base keeps increasing. Brand extension of a firm with a strong brand image is often more successful (Haralayya, 2021). Firms with a strong brand image retain existing customers and develop a sustainable relationship with them. At the same time, they keep attracting new customers (Balmer & Podnar, 2021). Yuen, Nieroda, He, and Park (2021) believe that firms with poor brand image brand extension might not be successful.

WOM

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication dates back to the sixties, conceptualized as informal communication between senders and receivers about products or services (Loureiro, Stylos, & Bellou, 2021). Since then, it has proved to be an important tool for changing consumers' attitudes toward brands and products (Gildin, 2022). Studies found that the effect of WOM communication is far more than conventional advertising (Bhaiswar, Meenakshi, &

Chawla, 2021).. WOM communication will not replace personal selling, newspaper, and magazine advertisements. If marketers use WOM in addition to conventional advertising, it will significantly affect consumers' attitudes and behaviors ((Loureiro, Stylos, & Bellou, 2021). This study has used four drivers of WOM communication, discussed in the following sections:

Perceived Quality

Perceived Quality is different from the actual Quality of the products and services. Perceived Quality relates to customer perception of a product or service quality. Consumers' perception of Quality develops based on their experience or of friends and peers (Lee & Workman, 2021). Besides focusing on functional reliability products, business entities also focus on customer quality perception (Vinh et al. 2021). A high-quality perception gives a competitive edge to a firm and promotes sustainable relationships with customers (Iqbal et al. 2021).

Satisfaction

Customers' satisfaction measures their happiness with a product or service. Consumers have certain expectations about a product or service (Budur & Poturak, 2021). If it fulfills their expectations, they will be satisfied, and if it is below their expectations, they will be dissatisfied. Satisfied customers develop a long-term relationship with products and services and are less price sensitive. Such customers ignore random bad experiences and do not shift to competitors (Gunawan, 2022). Cognitive satisfaction has a weaker influence, and emotional satisfaction strongly impacts WOM communication (Torabi, Hamidi, & Safaie, 2021).

Commitment

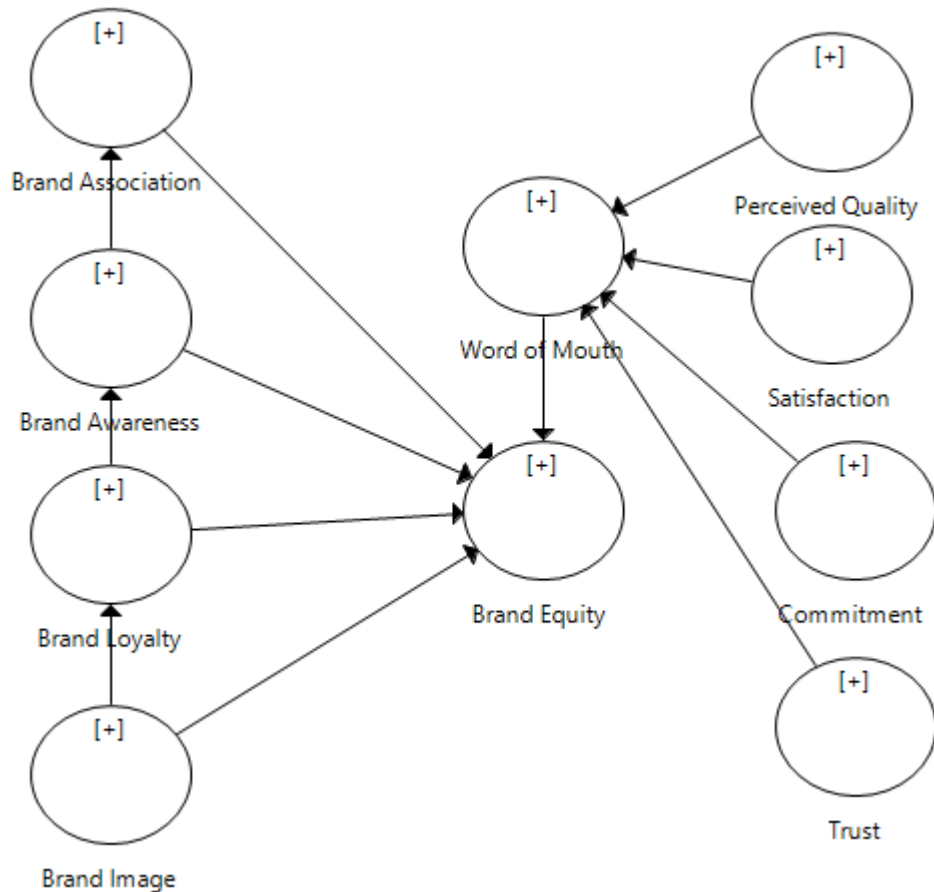
Commitment is na obligation to do something in the future (Ali et al., 2022). From a marketing perspective, it will be a commitment if customers maintain a long-term relationship with the brand (Hwang et al., 2021). Markovic, Iglesias, Singh, and Sierra (2018) believe that consumers' intention to maintain long-term relationships comes under commitment. Firms reward their committed customers through various promotional techniques, resulting in brand loyalty and positive WOM communications (Hwang et al., 2021).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is presented in Figure 1. The theoretical support for direct and indirect relationships is discussed in the following sections.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Proposition developments

Perceived quality and WOM (H1)

Consumers' perception of a brand's overall Quality is directly associated with WOM. If they believe a brand is of high Quality, they will generate positive WOM communication. Otherwise, they would generate negative WOM communication (Vinh et al. 2021). Many past studies have documented a positive association between perceived Quality and WOM (Lee, & Workman, 2021; Vinh et al., 2021). Wang, Tran, & Tran (2017) note that the correlation between WOM and perceived quality customers disseminates positive WOM. Many studies

found that perceived Quality affects WOM communication. However, a few studies observed this association is stronger in a pluralistic culture (Tercia & Teichert, 2016).

H¹: Perceived Quality and WOM are positively related.

Satisfaction and WOM (H2)

Prior literature suggests customer satisfaction affects long-term buying behavior and stimulates positive WOM communication. Many past studies found a positive association between satisfaction and WOM. Wang, Yu, Feng, and Song (2022) think that satisfied customers generate positive WOM, and unsatisfied customers negative WOM communication (Seopela & Zulu, (2022).). At the same time, a few studies believe that satisfaction and WOM have a linear and U-shaped relationship (Anderson, (1998). This relationship suggests higher or lower satisfaction level promotes high WOM. An average satisfaction level promotes low or no WOM communication (Anderson 1998). But most studies have used satisfaction as a predictor of WOM (Wang, Yu, Feng, & Song, 2022). Consumers' satisfaction is either a previous assessment or, over some time, assessment. Both affect WOM (Mai, Nguyen & Nguyen 2021). Also, cognitive and emotional satisfaction individually and collectively affect WOM. However, the effect of cognition on WOM is comparatively stronger than the emotional aspect (Mai, Nguyen & Nguyen 2021). Ginting et al. (2023) argue that a highly satisfied customer is more involved in a positive WOM, and a dissatisfied customer is more inclined toward a negative WOM.

Hennig-Thurau, Wiertz, and Feldhaus (2015) reported a positive association between tourist satisfaction and WOM. These studies also concluded that highly satisfied tourists would revisit the tourist spots and have a higher tendency to share a pleasant experience with friends and peers. On the contrary, when tourists are unsatisfied, they share negative comments with their peers and friends. Both negative and positive words affect the reputation of a brand. The former's effect is adverse, and the latter is positive (Wang et al., 2017).

H₂: Satisfaction and word-of-mouth are positively associated.

Commitment and WOM (H3)

Ali et al. (2022) argue that consumers tend to be more committed to those entities that reward them. Highly committed customers have a high intention to repurchase the brand they are committed to. They also develop long-term relationships with such a brand and promote positive WOM communication (Hwang et al., 2021; Keiningham et al., 2015). On the contrary,

Markovic, Iglesias, Singh, and Sierra (2018) suggest many unsatisfied customers maintain a favorable attitude toward a brand and generate positive WOM. They do it for consistency's sake. Consumers' commitment to a brand can be emotional or psychological. Both aspects, individually and collectively, contribute positively to a brand and WOM (Hwang et al., 2021). Many studies have documented that consumers committed to a brand generate positive WOM (Markovic, Iglesias, Singh, & Sierra, 2018;). However, positive WOM intensity depends on customers' satisfaction level. Moreover, Ali et al. (2022) believes that a highly committed consumer, whether satisfied or not, generally contributes positively toward WOM.

H³: *Commitment has a positive association with WOM.*

Trust and WOM (H4)

Consumers who trust a brand or service tend to have a favorable attitude towards it, and if satisfied, they are engaged in positive WOM (Rahayu, 2021). The two crucial components of trust are reliability and confidence. Both individually and collectively stimulate favorable attitudes and positive WOM (Kim, Giroux, & Lee, 2021). Many studies have documented that consumers who trust a brand are engaged positively in WOM (Rahayu; 2021 Fatmawati & Fauzan, 2021).

Trust in a brand or product stimulates satisfaction and repurchase intention. Consequently, it encourages customers to share their pleasant experiences with others (i.e., family, friends, and peer group members) (Majeed et al., 2022). Fatmawati and Fauzan (2021) suggest that consumers who trust a brand are more inclined to engage in WOM than others. Gu, Park, and Konana (2012) developed a model for understanding the association between customer trust and customer-brand-relationship. The study used high-involvement products as a stimulus and found that consumers had more trust in a brand whose product and corporate brand names are the same (Zia, Younus, & Mirza, 2021). Thus, researchers believe marketers should allocate their resources for brand building across the three trust aspects (i.e., designing, implementing, and monitoring) (Kim, Giroux, & Lee, 2021).

H⁴: *Trust has a positive association with WOM.*

Word-of-mouth and brand equity (H5)

Many studies have reported that WOM and brand equity are highly correlated (Vinh, et. 2021; Farzin et, 2022; Farzin et al., 2022). The studies also suggested that marketers spend

considerable resources building a brand image as they know it is a significant factor in building strong brand equity. Carù and Cova (2015) found that consumers in Malaysia go to restaurants due to WOM and brand equity. Thus, they inferred that WOM and brand equity are positively associated. The study also reported that WOM affects other determinants of brand equity. Gul et al. (2021) found that a positive WOM helps build a strong association between customers and brands. Furthermore, the study suggested that WOM is more effective than other mediums. Budiman, 2021 argues that customers value the information received through WOM channels more. The acquired information through WOM positively influences brand equity and its components. Moreover, Vinh et. (2021) also reported that WOM significantly affects brand image and consumers' purchase intentions. Besides, Japutra, Ekinici, and Simkin (2018) documented that WOM is a vital predictor of brand reputation. These findings are consistent with Budiman (2021), who also found that WOM contributes significantly to corporate reputation. Similarly, Carù and Cova (2015) also concluded that WOM significantly affects brand equity dimensions (i.e., brand awareness, brand image, brand loyalty, and brand association).

H⁵: *WOM has a positive association with brand equity.*

Direct effect on brand equity

Brand association and brand equity (H6)

Consumers store information related to a brand in their memory. Brand association helps consumers differentiate one brand from another (Madadi, Torres, & Zúñiga, 2021). Thus, all the stored information of a brand in a consumer's mind is directly associated with brand recall and brand equity (Keller, 1993; Lim & Guzmán, 2022). Higher brand associations in consumers' minds suggest they remember the brand and develop a sustainable relationship with it. Many past studies have documented a positive linkage between brand association and brand equity (Nguyen-Viet, & Nguyen-Anh, 2021).

H⁶: *Brand association positively affects brand equity*

Brand awareness and brand equity (H7)

Consumers' association with a particular brand enhances their awareness and affects its equity (Zia, Younus & Mirza, 2021). A brand communicates with consumers through marketing channels, including electronic and print mediums. This communication process helps establish

a sustainable relationship between consumers and brands (Tian, Lu, & Cheng, 2021). Brand awareness and brand image are aligned. This alignment reduces consumers' risk in evaluating, selecting, and buying (Aaker, 1996). Many past studies have documented that brand awareness positively affects brand equity (Nguyen-Viet, & Nguyen-Anh, 2021).

H⁷: *Brand awareness positively affects brand equity.*

Brand image and brand equity (H8)

Brand image is how consumers relate to a brand reflecting their symbolic consumption, identity, and self-expression (Zia, Younus, & Mirza, 2021). Consumers generally have a high-quality perception of a reputed brand (Pandiangan, Masiyono, & Atmogo, 2021), resulting in a sustainable relationship between a brand and its consumers. A strong brand image helps firms increase current brands' sales and motivate consumers to buy new brands (Dada, 2021). Many past studies have documented that a strong brand image positively affects brand equity (Zia, Younus, & Mirza, 2021; Pandiangan, Masiyono, & Atmogo, 2021). Integrated marketing and WOM communication affect brand image (Shanti & Joshi, 2022).

H⁸: *Brand image positively affects brand equity*

Brand loyalty and brand equity (H9)

Consumers loyal to a brand have a strong emotional attachment to it and consistently buy the same brand (Parris & Guzmán, 2022). Integrated marketing communication is a precursor to brand loyalty and equity (Zia, Younus, & Mirza, 2021; Šerić, Došen, and Mikulić). Consumers maintain a sustainable relationship with a brand with strong equity, helping them in social recognition. Consumers developed loyalty toward a brand positively affects its brand equity (Bhanot, 2021).

H⁹: *Brand loyalty positively affects brand equity*

Mediating effect on brand equity

Brand awareness and brand association

Brand awareness, brand association, and brand equity (H10)

Brand awareness, association, and other brand-related variables, directly and indirectly, affect consumer buying behaviors (Keller, 1993). Past studies have documented that consumers' brand awareness and association have a bidirectional relationship (Pranata & Permana, 2021; Vomberg, Homburg & Bornemann, 2015). Additionally, brand awareness, besides being a key

determinant of brand equity, also affects consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Gómez, Lopez, & Molina, 2015). Aaker (1996) argues that one must assess brand awareness before assessing brand equity. Moreover, brand association and brand equity are significantly correlated. The brand association also helps consumers recall a brand name (Aaker, 1991). A high brand awareness stimulates brand association, creating positive effects on brand equity. This process helps customers with brand familiarization and stimulates purchase behavior (Gómez, Lopez, & Molina, 2015). Based on the above discussions, one can infer a logical interrelationship between brand awareness, brand association, and brand equity. Therefore, we argue that brand awareness indirectly (through brand association) will affect brand equity.

H¹⁰: *Brand association mediates brand awareness and brand equity.*

Loyalty, awareness, and brand equity (H11)

Brand awareness helps consumers remember and recall a brand (Aaker, 1991). A consumer with strong brand loyalty towards a brand tends to purchase the same brand over some time (Zia, Younus, & Mirza, 2021). Past studies argue that when customers are positively aware of a brand, they will also have strong brand loyalty towards the same brand (Tian, Lu, & Cheng, 2021; Vomberg, Homburg & Bornemann, 2015). Similarly, brand awareness, loyalty, and equity also have a bidirectional relationship. At the same time, brand equity is "a deeply held commitment to rebury or re-patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future" (Shanti & Joshi, 2022). Moreover, Japutra, Ekinci, and Simkin (2018) think that brand equity's ultimate objective is to build sustainable and viable brand loyalty. Because of the above-discussed theoretical grounding, we argue that brand loyalty indirectly affects brand equity. Thus, we hypothesized

H¹¹: *Brand loyalty mediates brand association and brand equity.*

Brand image, brand loyalty, and brand equity (H12)

Brand loyalty positively influences the customer's purchase decision but prevents them from shifting to competitive brands (Zia, Younus, & Mirza, 2021). At the same time, consumers are generally loyal to a brand because of its strong brand image. Parris and Guzmán (2022) argue that brand loyalty creates sustainable customer patronage and affects brand equity. Consequently, brand loyalty is an essential determinant of brand equity. Whereas Dada (2021) suggests that brand image is a precursor of brand equity besides loyalty. Based on the above discussion, we argue that brand loyalty through brand image affects brand equity.

H¹²: Brand loyalty mediates brand image and brand equity relationship.

Mediating effect of WOM on brand equity (H13 to H17)

In the above sections, we provided the theoretical support for the following relationships: (i) commitment affects WOM (Keiningham et al., 2015), (ii) perceived Quality affects WOM (Wang, Tran, & Tran, 2017), (iii) satisfaction affects WOM (Ginting et al. (2023)), and (iv) trust affect WOM (Fatmawati, & Fauzan, 2021). We also provided theoretical support on the association of WOM and Brand equity (Japutra, Ekinci, & Simkin, 2018). Thus, we have formulated the following indirect relationships

H¹³: WOM mediates commitment and brand equity

H¹⁴: WOM mediates perceived Quality and brand equity

H¹⁵: WOM mediates satisfaction and brand equity

H¹⁶: WOM mediates trust and brand equity

Methodology

Participant and procedure

The study has taken a holistic approach to understand consumers' attitudes toward WOM and brand equity. The developed model is unique as it has nine direct and seven indirect relationships. The study's minimum sample size was 387, calculated based on a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. However, we have distributed 415 questionnaires and received 403 filled questionnaires. The study has focused on a local apparel brand as consumers in Pakistan (Karachi) have become highly brand conscious, due to which various local and international brands are available in the local market. Karachi is the metropolitan City in Pakistan, and many researchers have named it mini-Pakistan, as all ethnicities reside here (Pervez et al., 2020). We have targeted the leading shopping malls of Karachi: Dolmen Mall, The Forum Shopping Mall, Ocean Mall, Lucky One Mall, and Atrium Mall.

We have recruited five enumerators from the graduate class of a private university to collect the data. The enumerators visited the selected malls of Karachi on weekdays and weekends. They visited in the morning and late evening. The questionnaire was not translated into native *Urdu* as the target population is well-versed in English. Before handing the questionnaire to the respondents, the enumerators asked whether they felt comfortable filling out the questions in English. On receiving an affirmative answer, the enumerators gave them the questionnaire. The respondents' Profile is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Respondent Profile

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	245	58%
Female	110	42%
Age		
18- 30 Years	0	35%
30-40 years	174	34%
40 - 50 years	156	15%
50 Plus years	14	16%
51 and above	11	
Qualifications		
Intermediate	43	57%
Bachelor's	110	34%
Master's	53	9%
Income Level		
50,000 PKR or below	75	15%
50,001 - 100,000 PKR	216	64%
100,001 - 150,000 PKR	42	10%
150,001 - 200,000 PKR	4	8%
200,001 PKR and above	18	3%
Marital Status		
Single	18	42%
Married	7	58%

Scale and measure

The questionnaire used in this study has ten constructs. It examined nine direct relationships and seven mediating effects. Each construct in the questionnaire had four items based on a five-point Likert scale. We have used a five-point Likert Scale as it helps in increasing the response rate, enhances the Quality of response, and decreases respondent frustration level (Dawes, 2008; Mubarik et al., 2021).

Perceived quality scale

Perceived Quality refers to the "consumer's perception of the attributes of a brand," with a price premium, brand usage, and WOM (Aaker, 1991). We adopted the perceived Quality from Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000). Respondents with a high mean average were inferred to have a high perceived quality level.

Satisfaction scale

"Consumers' assessment of the actual and expected performance of a product or service relates to satisfaction level." If actual performance exceeds consumers' expected performance, customers will be highly satisfied and participate positively in WOM (Budur & Poturak, (2021).

The scale is adapted from Ribbink et al. (2004). A high mean score reflects a higher satisfaction level.

Commitment scale

Commitment is "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship" (Ali et al., 2022). Consumers who are highly committed to a brand tend to have a sustainable relationship (Ali et al. 2022). A high mean score reflects a higher commitment level. The scale is adopted from Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2010).

WOM Scale

According to Keiningham et al. (2015), WOM (WOM) is an "informal s directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers" The Scale is based on Ismail and Spinelli (2012). A high mean score reflects a higher commitment level.

Brand association scale

The brand association helps consumers remember and recall a brand. Consumers with strong brand loyalty towards a brand tend to purchase the same brand (Zia, Younus, & Mirza, 2021) consistently. A high mean score reflects a higher commitment level. The scale is adapted from Kim et al. (2008).

Trust scale

Trust refers to consumers' confidence in the reliability of a brand or service. Consumers who trust a brand or service tend to have a favorable attitude toward it (Zia, Younus, & Mirza, 2021) A high mean score reflects a higher commitment level. The scale was adapted from Ribbink et al. (2004).

Brand image scale

A brand image is a "perception about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Dam & Dam, 2021). The brand image Scale was adapted from Kim et al. (2008). A high mean score reflects a higher commitment level.

Brand equity scale

Markovic, Singh, Iglesias, and Sierra (2018) have defined brand equity as "concerning marketing effects that are attributed to a brand." The brand equity Scale was adapted from Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000). A high mean score reflects a higher brand equity level.

Study results

Descriptive analysis

We have presented means, standard deviation, Skewness, Kurtosis, and VIF results in the descriptive analysis section. We initially checked the normality and the reliability of individual items of each construct and then of each variable. The result suggests that the Skewness and Kurtosis values were within the acceptable range (of ± 3.5 (Hair Jr. et al., 2014), And Cronbach's Alpha values were within the acceptable range of at least 0.60 ((Hair Jr. et al., 2014). Subsequently, we examined the normality, reliability, and VIF for the variables used in the study, presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive Results

	Reliability Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Std. Dev.	Skewness	Kurtosis	VIF
Brand Association	0.69	4.52	1.27	-0.14	-0.52	1.81
Brand Awareness	0.82	4.45	1.42	-0.36	-0.52	2.39
Brand Equity	0.89	4.79	1.60	-.60	-0.49	-
Brand Image	0.86	4.65	1.03	-0.17	-1.05	2.20
Brand Loyalty	0.76	4.38	1.26	-0.32	-0.29	1.35
Commitment	0.83	4.18	0.97	-0.89	-0.89	1.75
Perceived Quality	0.82	4.74	1.03	-0.19	-0.91	1.74
Satisfaction	0.77	3.47	1.30	-0.43	-0.23	1.90
Trust	0.91	4.86	1.46	-0.65	-0.30	1.50
WOM	0.88	4.97	1.60	0-.55	-0.64	-

The results show that the highest Skewness value is for commitment (Mean= 4.18, SD=0.97, SK=-0.89), and the lowest is for brand association (Mean= 4.52, SD=1.27, SK=-0.14). The highest Kurtosis value is for perceived Quality (Mean= 4.74, SD=1.03, KR=-1.51), and the lowest is for satisfaction (Mean= 4.47, SD=1.30, KR=-0.23). All these values are within ± 3.5 , confirming univariate normality requirements.

Similarly, the highest 'Cronbach's value is for Trust (Mean=4.86, SD=1.46, $\alpha= 0.91$), and the lowest is for brand association (Mean=4.52, SD=1.27, $\alpha= 0.69$). All the Cronbach's Alpha values for the constructs are greater than 0.70, indicating that the constructs have internal consistency (Hair Jr. et al., 2014).

The VIF values are the highest for the brand image (Mean= 4.65, SD=1.03, VIF=2.20) and the lowest for brand loyalty (Mean=4.38, SD=1.26, VIF=1.35). Therefore there is no issue of multicollinearity with the constructs (Hair Jr. et al., 2016).

Convergent validity

Convergent validity examines the theoretical association between constructs and their indicator variables (Sarstedt, et. 2022). We examined the convergent validity through composite reliability and average extracted. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Convergent Validity

	Composite Reliability	AVE	Mean	St. Dev.
Brand Association	0.80	0.45	4.52	1.27
Brand Awareness	0.87	0.58	4.45	1.42
Brand Equity	0.92	0.70	4.79	1.60
Brand Image	0.90	0.63	4.65	1.03
Brand Loyalty	0.84	0.52	4.38	1.26
Commitment	0.88	0.60	4.18	0.97
Perceived Quality	0.87	0.58	4.74	1.03
Satisfaction	0.83	0.50	4.47	1.30
Trust	0.93	0.73	4.86	1.46
WOM	0.92	0.68	4.97	1.60

The results show that all the composite reliability values are at least 0.70, and the values of average variance extracted are higher than 0.40, confirming that the constructs fulfill the requirements of convergent validity.

Discriminant validity

The study has used Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criteria to assess whether the used constructs are unique and distinct. Table 4 depicts the summary of the results.

Table 4

Discriminant Validity

	Association	Awareness	Equity	Image	Loyalty	Commitment	Quality	Satisfaction	Trust	WOM
Association	0.67									
Awareness	0.66	0.76								
Equity	0.42	0.61	0.83							
Image	0.47	0.61	0.74	0.79						
Loyalty	0.32	0.44	0.50	0.46	0.72					
Commitment	0.29	0.47	0.70	0.60	0.36	0.78				
Quality	0.45	0.57	0.68	0.64	0.43	0.49	0.76			
Satisfaction	0.45	0.59	0.69	0.63	0.71	0.54	0.58	0.71		
Trust	0.46	0.74	0.75	0.71	0.44	0.61	0.58	0.61	0.85	
WOM	0.30	0.52	0.76	0.64	0.40	0.86	0.52	0.56	0.67	0.83

The results show that the square root of average variance explained values depicted diagonally are higher than the rest of the values, which are correlation values. This analysis confirms that all the study constructs are unique and distinctive (Fornell & Larker, 1981).

Hypothesis Results

We have developed a new model that has several direct and indirect relationships. For hypotheses one to four, we have one endogenous variable, i.e., WOM, and four exogenous variables, i.e., perceived quality satisfaction, commitment, and trust. In hypothesis five, the model has used WOM as an exogenous model and brand equity as an endogenous variable.

We have formulated four direct hypotheses on brand equity. In these hypotheses, brand equity is the endogenous variable, and association, awareness, Image, and loyalty are exogenous variables.

The study empirically tested nine direct and seven mediating hypotheses using SMART PLS Version 3.3. The measurement and structural model are presented in Figure 2 and Figure 3, respectively. To check the significance of the model and mediating effect of the variables, we initially selected a sub-sample of 2000, and for the final assessment, we used 10,00 sub-samples (Sarstedt et, 2022). Table 5 depicts the summary of the results. Of the nine direct hypotheses, our results support all the hypotheses except (i) the association between satisfaction and WOM and (ii) brand association and brand equity. The results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

Path Coefficients of Direct Effects

	Hypotheses	Path	T-value	P-value	Result
1	Perceived Quality -> WOM	0.04	1.04	0.30	Rejected
2	Satisfaction -> WOM	0.04	0.97	0.33	Rejected
3	Commitment -> WOM	0.70	18.22	0.00	Accepted
4	Trust -> WOM	0.20	4.69	0.00	Accepted
5	WOM -> Brand Equity	0.43	8.16	0.00	Accepted
6	Brand Association -> Brand Equity	0.004	0.069	0.472	Rejected
7	Brand Awareness -> Brand Equity	0.129	2.131	0.017	Accepted
8	Brand Image -> Brand Equity	0.336	5.652	0.00	Accepted
9	Brand Loyalty -> Brand Equity	0.123	2.951	0.002	Accepted

Hypothesis 1 found that "perceived quality and WOM are insignificantly associated" ($\beta=.04, t=1.04, p=0.30>.05$). **Hypothesis 2** result suggests that "satisfaction and WOM are insignificantly associated" ($\beta=.04, t=0.97, p=0.33 >.05$). **Hypothesis 3** found that "commitment and WOM are positively associated" ($\beta=.70, t=18.22, p=0.00 <.05$). **Hypothesis 4** concluded that "trust and WOM are positively associated" ($\beta=.20, t=4.69, p=0.00 <.05$). **Hypothesis 5** found that "brand equity and WOM are positively associated" ($\beta=.43, t=8.16, p=0.00 <.05$). **Hypothesis 6** suggests that "brand association and brand equity are insignificantly associated" ($\beta=.004, t=0.069, p=0.472 >0.05$). **Hypothesis 7** found that "brand awareness and brand equity are positively associated" ($\beta=.129, t=2.131, p=0.017 <.05$). **Hypothesis 8** suggests that "brand image and brand equity are positively associated" ($\beta=.336, t=5.652, p=0.00 <.05$). **Hypothesis 9** found that "brand loyalty and brand equity are positively associated" ($\beta=.123, t=2.851, p=0.002 <.05$).

Indirect effects

The study, in addition to nine direct hypotheses discussed earlier, has tested seven indirect hypotheses. Of these seven, our results do not support three hypotheses. The summarized results are presented in Table 5. **Hypothesis 10** concludes that "brand association insignificantly mediates awareness and brand equity" ($\beta=.002, t=0.069, p=0.945 >.05$). **Hypothesis 11** suggests "that brand awareness mediates loyalty and brand equity" ($\beta=.057, t=2.032, p=0.042 <.05$). **Hypothesis 12** results suggest that "brand loyalty mediates brand image and brand equity" ($\beta=.058, t=2.0581, p=0.01 <.05$). **Hypothesis 13** empirical results suggest that "WOM mediates brand commitment and brand equity" ($\beta=0.297, t=7.052, p=0.00 <.05$). **Hypothesis 14** found that "WOM insignificantly mediates perceived quality and brand equity"



($\beta=0.017$, $t=1.011$, $p=0.156>.05$). **Hypothesis 15** found "WOM does not mediate satisfaction and brand equity ($\beta=0.017$, $t=1.011$, $p=0.156>.05$). **Hypothesis 16** results found "WOM mediates trust and brand equity" ($\beta=0.086$, $t=4.158$, $p=0.00<.05$). The results are summarized in Table 6 and Table 7

Table 6

Results of Mediating Effects

	Hypothesis	Path	T value	P Values	Resulted
10	Awareness -> Association -> Brand Equity	0.002	0.069	0.945	Rejected
11	Loyalty -> Awareness -> Brand Equity	0.057	2.032	0.042	Accepted
12	Image -> Loyalty -> Brand Equity	0.058	2.581	0.01	Accepted
13	Commit. -> WOM-> Brand Equity	0.297	7.052	0.00	Accepted
14	Per. Qual -> WOM -> Brand Equity	0.017	1.011	0.156	Rejected
15	Satisfaction -> WOM -> Brand Equity	0.017	0.974	0.165	Rejected
16	Trust -> WOM -> Brand Equity	0.086	4.158	0.00	Accepted

Table 7

Results of Multi-Mediating Effects

	Hypothesis	Path	T value	P Values	Resulted
17	Br. Image -> Br. Loyalty ->Br.Awareness ->Br. Association	0.131	4.033	0.00	Accepted

We found brand loyalty and brand awareness have a multi-mediating effect on trust and brand equity

Figure 2

Measurement Model

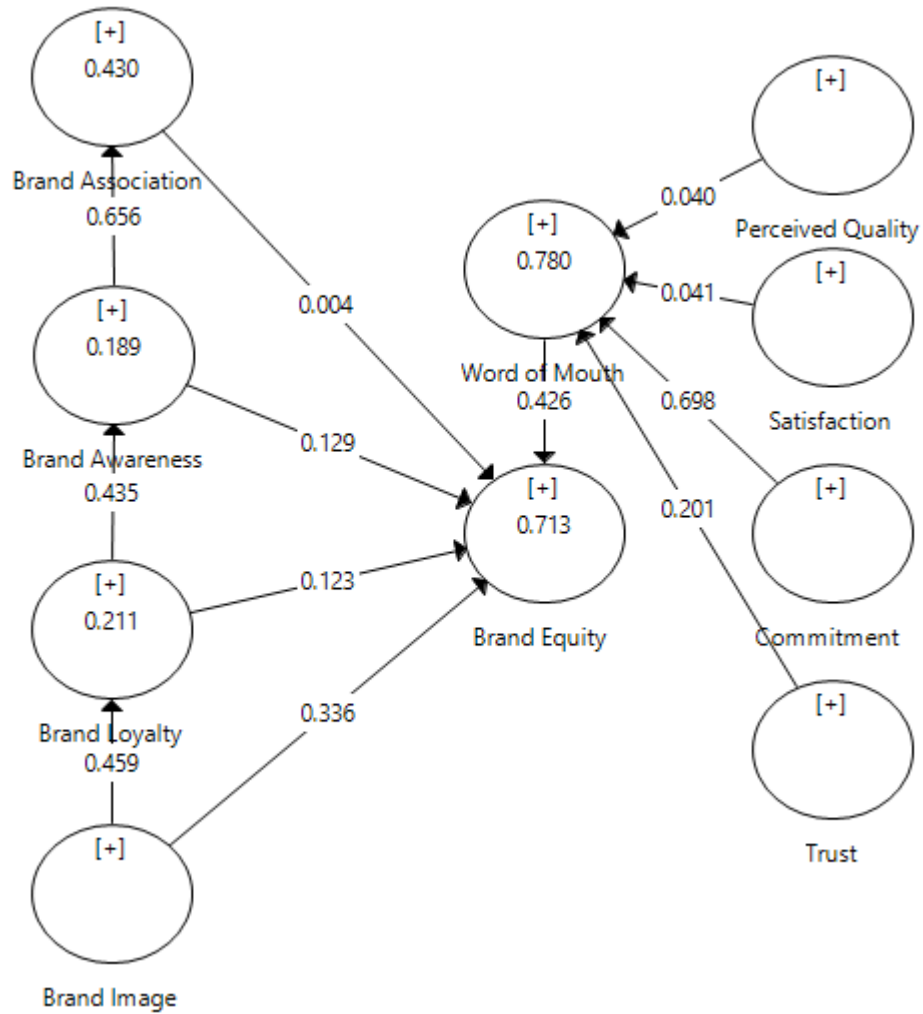
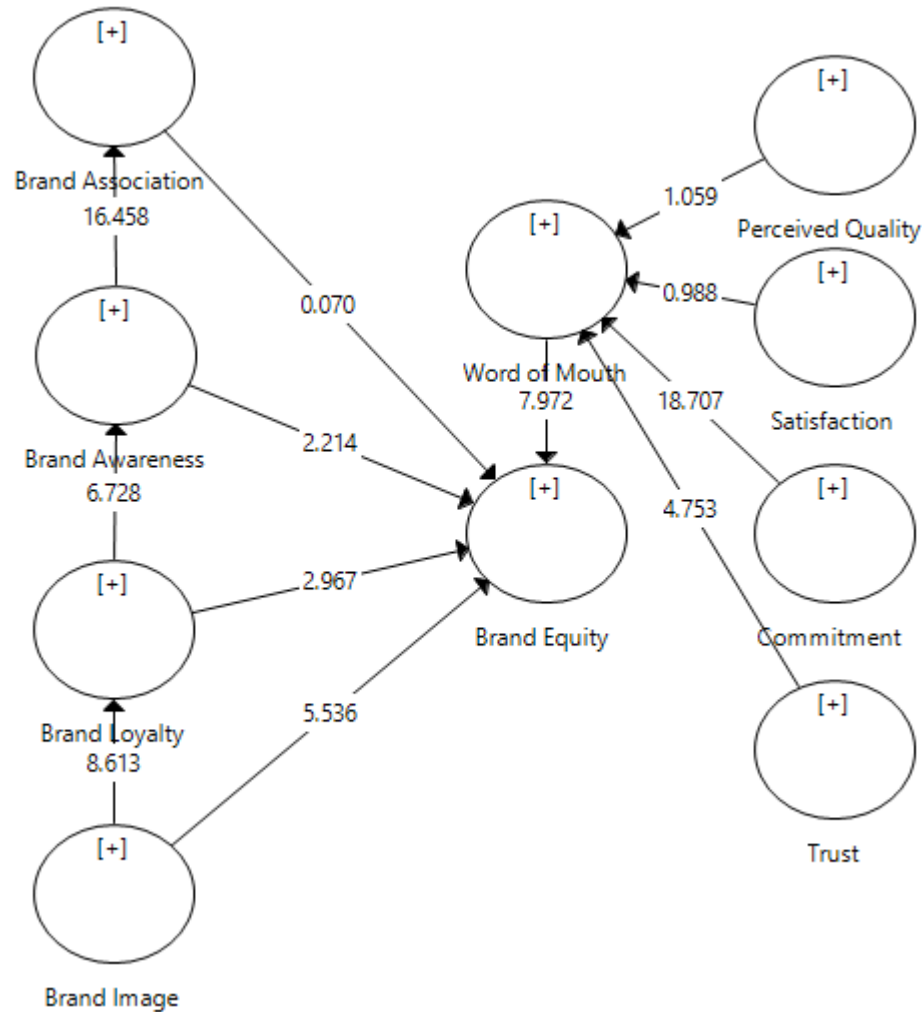


Figure 3

Structured Model



Discussion and Conclusion

The study developed a new model with nine direct and seven indirect relationships. The study has discussed the results and their relevance with earlier studies in the following sections.

We found that perceived Quality has no association with WOM. The result contradicts past literature (Wang, Tran, & Tran, 2017). Quality perception about a product, especially in a collective society like Pakistan, depends upon consumers' experience about a product and friends' and peers' opinions. Perhaps, consumers in Pakistan did not receive a positive perception of the brand; therefore, they did not generate positive WOM communication.

The results suggest that satisfaction insignificantly affects WOM communication, which contradicts past studies. Wirtz and Chew (2002) assert that satisfaction may generate positive word of mouth when a firm offers incentives. Perhaps the respondents are not generating positive word of mouth as they feel that local brand does not offer sufficient incentives.

The results suggest that commitment, trust, and brand equity stimulate WOM communication, which aligns with earlier studies (Fatmawati & Fauzan, 2021); Gu, Park, & Konana, 2012). Highly committed consumers tend to develop a sustainable relationship with the brand and become their spokesperson (Hwang et al., 2021 Keiningham et al., 2015, Ali et al. (2022). Consumers' trust is an important precursor to WOM communication. A brand that earns the reliability and confidence of consumers will have a sustainable relationship with them. Consequently, such consumers would generate positive WOM communication (Fatmawati & Fauzan, 2021).

The study found that, besides brand association, brand awareness, brand image, and brand and brand loyalty stimulate brand equity. All the results are consistent with earlier studies except for the relationship between association and brand equity. This result is again surprising results. Consumers store information about a brand in their minds, which helps them differentiate one brand from another. This study collected responses on Pakistan's leading allied apparel brand. Since the local brand price is significantly higher than the other brands, consumers could not draw a link between the brand association and brand equity (Emari et al., 2012).

The study tested seven indirect hypotheses, of which our results do not support the following three hypotheses (i) brand association mediates brand awareness and brand equity. (ii) WOM mediates perceived quality and brand equity (iii) WOM mediates satisfaction and brand equity. The above mediating hypotheses got rejected because we did not find support for the following direct hypotheses (1) association and brand equity, (ii) perceived quality and brand equity, and (iii) satisfaction and brand equity.

Our study found support for the multi-mediating relationship stating brand loyalty and brand awareness have multi-mediating effects on brand image and brand association.

Conclusion

The study has developed a new model in which we have tested two separate concepts, WOM and equity-related components. Comparatively, past studies used concepts related to brand equity or WOM. Past studies have taken a narrow approach to brand equity and WOM. A holistic approach is necessary when studies have multiple variables which are highly interrelated.

Contrarily, we have taken a holistic approach by examining nine direct and seven indirect relationships. The results support six of the nine direct hypotheses. We found that perceived Quality and satisfaction have an insignificant relationship with WOM. We also found that brand association does not stimulate brand equity. These results are surprising as they are contrary to the extant literature. However, these findings cannot be generalized. The other researchers can examine whether these relationships are cultural or product-specific. However, consistent with earlier studies, we found commitment and trust stimulate WOM communication. Similarly, in line with extant literature, we found brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty are significant precursors to brand equity.

We have also empirically tested nine mediating relationships. Of these, our results support six and do not support the rest three hypotheses. Our results did not find support for (1) mediating effect on brand awareness and brand equity, (11) mediating role of WOM on perceived Quality and brand equity, and (111) mediating role of WOM on satisfaction and brand equity. These insignificant results are contrary to the earlier studies. However, generalizing such insignificant relationships at this stage will be premature. Future researchers must see if these insignificant relationships are cultural or product category-specific. However, we found support for the rest mediating relationships. We found (1) awareness mediates loyalty and brand equity, (II) and loyalty mediates Image and brand equity. The results also suggest that (1) WOM mediates commitment and brand equity, and (11) WOM mediates trust and brand equity

Theoretical implication and significance of the study

Multi-mediating relationships bring more insight into the research phenomenon (Jalees et al. 2021). We did not find any study that has examined the multi-mediating effect in WOM studies. Given this gap, we have examined the multi-mediating effect of brand loyalty and brand awareness and found they affect brand image and brand association.

Some studies have examined the impact of the drivers of WOM on WOM communication, while others have examined the impact of antecedents on brand equity on brand equity. There is a need for studies incorporating the drivers of WOM and brand equity in a single study. Given this gap, we have incorporated four drivers of WOM and another four drivers of brand equity in our model and found they assimilated very well and brought insight into the phenomenon of WOM. The drivers of WOM and brand equity are highly correlated.

Therefore, there is a need for studies with a holistic approach. Given this gap, we tested a model with seven direct, nine mediating, and one multi-mediating relationship.

Managerial implications

WOM and brand equity are necessary for a brand's growth and sustainability. The study found that brand association, Quality do not affect WOM communication. Despite these findings, we believe they are important drivers of WoM, and firms should focus on them. Commitment and trust significantly affect WOM communication. Therefore, firms must focus on them as well. We will also recommend that the firms must focus on improving the drivers of brand equity which are trust, brand association, brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty, despite the fact we did not find any relationship between the brand association and brand equity.

Limitations and future research

The study has some limitations which may give direction to future researchers. The study found that perceived quality and satisfaction have no relationship with WOM communication. The study also found that brand association does not stimulate brand equity. These results are contrary to earlier studies. The possible reasons for these inconsistent results could be the product category, which was high involvement in products and cultural aspects. Therefore, we suggest that more studies on these relationships are needed in diversified cultures and domains. Future studies can also explore whether consumer attitudes and behavior towards WOM and brand equity changes from high to low-involvement products. Demographic factors always affect consumers' attitudes and behaviors, which we did not cover in this study. Future studies can explore these aspects.

Authors' contribution

Contribution	Jalees, T.	Alam, S.H.	Zaman, S.I.	Qabool, S.
Conceptualization	X	X	-----	-----
Methodology	X	-----	-----	-----
Software	-----	X	-----	-----
Validation	X	X	-----	X
Formal analysis	X	X	-----	-----
Investigation	-----	X	-----	X
Resources	X	-----	X	-----
Data Curation	X	X	X	X
Writing - Original Draft	X	-----	-----	-----
Writing - Review & Editing	-----	X	X	-----
Visualization	X	X	-----	X
Supervision	X	-----	X	-----
Project administration	X	-----	X	-----
Funding acquisition	-----	-----	-----	-----

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