

Brand Hate as a Mediator: The Study of Brand Image and Brand Relationship Quality in Virtual Brand Communities

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Abstract. The goal of this study is to look at the relationship between the independent variable brand image, mediated by brand hate, and the dependent variable of brand relationship quality (BRQ) in a virtual brand community. This study adopts a quantitative design using the random stratified sampling method to select 340 Xiaomi cell phone users in China to fill out a questionnaire to collect empirical collection and analyze the interrelationships between the constructs based on PLS-SEM. The results show that of the three dimensions of brand image (functional, symbolic and experiential) in relation to BRQ, only symbolic image has a non-significant relationship with BRQ. Brand hate played a significant mediating role in the relationship between brand image and BRQ. The theoretical and practical contributions are explained for insight enhancement toward the variables involved and further support existing literature. Brand image composition and brand hate composition are closely related to BRQ. In particular, this study aims to determine the factors that affect BRQ in the virtual brand community (VBC) according to the VBC characteristics. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the maintenance of brand image, reduce brand hate, and improve the BRQ in the cell phone VBC.

Keywords: Brand image, Brand hate, Brand relationship quality, Virtual brand community.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the pursuit of competitive advantage, the emphasis on nurturing consumer brand relationships (CBR) stands as a paramount marketing imperative in today's landscape. Brand relationship quality (BRQ) serves as a pivotal metric to gauge the state of the CBR and is instrumental in evaluating this relationship. Notably, robust BRQ diminishes marketing expenditures, facilitates customer acquisition, and fosters enhanced customer loyalty (Blackston, 2000). Hence, the significance of BRQ for organizations is undeniable, yet scant attention is paid by brand managers to BRQ in the emerging markets of developing nations. To bolster BRQ, companies must adopt a diverse array of strategies, wherein virtual brand communities emerge as a vital platform in the digital economy's evolution.

The main questions addressed in this study are what relationship exists between brand image and brand relationship quality in virtual brand communities of cell phone brands in developing countries (China) and what role brand hate plays between them. In previous literature on virtual brand communities, there is almost no research on the relationship between these three variables.

Many factors influence the quality of brand relationships; for example, Fernandes and Moreira (2019) argue that customers may contribute to the quality of their relationship with a brand due to functional motivation. Brand image is an association that consumers have with a brand (Aaker & del Blanco, 1996).

Brand image can have an impact on brand relationship quality, and favorable brand image makes consumers of Xiaomi cell phones behave positively toward the brand (Arjuna & Ilmi, 2020; Dwitama, 2021). Brand image is closely related to the quality dimensions of brand relationships (trust, commitment, satisfaction, and communication) (Ledikwe & Roberts-Lombard, 2022).

In China, Xiaomi was the first company to establish a virtual brand community. The introduction of the virtual brand community drew a significant number of consumers to join, propelling Xiaomi's sales to the top of China's domestic cell phone brands. However, according to market research firm Canalys, Xiaomi cell phones accounted for only 13% of China's cell phone market share in the first quarter of 2023, a year-on-year decline of 22.9%, and the data on user participation in Xiaomi's virtual brand community is not encouraging. Due to the unique characteristics of virtual brand community, such as anonymity and group heterogeneity, the lack of consumer intimacy with the brand, difficulty in forming interdependence, and the lack of partner quality have emerged in Xiaomi's virtual brand community, which undermines the quality of BRQ. Therefore, in order to solve this problem, there is a need to explore how to improve BRQ in virtual brand communities (Wang & Huang, 2023; Zhang, Qi, & Lyu, 2021).

Numerous factors influence BRQ, with brand image closely intertwined (Ledikwe & Roberts-Lombard, 2022). Consumers derive pleasure and satisfaction from a brand's image, fortifying the BRQ. While positive relationships prevail, negative sentiments such as brand hate can surface, necessitating an exploration of brand hate's role in the consumer-brand dynamic.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Virtual Brand Community (VBC)

Muniz Jr and O'Guinn (2001) first defined brand community as "a special group of people who use the same branded product or service based on social relationships, regardless of geographical location". The term "brand community" was first defined in 2001. Brand communities and virtual communities have also gradually evolved and developed with the support of internet technology, merging with each other to become a new and special organizational form—virtual brand communities—which combines the characteristics of both types of communities. A virtual brand community is a platform for brand enthusiasts from all over the world to communicate and share brand experience through the internet (Kozinets, 2002). A platform where community members can communicate with other brand enthusiasts through a network provided by a company is called a virtual brand community (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008).

In recent years, scholars have selected different industries or product types of virtual brand communities to carry out empirical research. As an

emerging effective and low-cost brand promotion method, virtual brand communities have been researched relatively late in China. Thus, related theoretical studies are poor, and enterprises lack theoretical guidance (Shang, 2021). Therefore, this study selects virtual brand community as the research background to study the relationship between brand image, brand hate, and BRQ.

2.2 | Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ)

Brand relationship quality was initially introduced by Fournier (1994), who subsequently refined the concept and its dimensions, enriching the understanding of BRQ (Fournier, 1998). Fournier's seminal work illuminates how BRQ, while rooted in brand loyalty, transcends traditional loyalty paradigms by unveiling nuanced consumer-brand relationships. BRQ humanizes the brand-consumer dynamic, imbuing brand management practices with a more anthropomorphic essence.

A pivotal definition of BRQ was advanced by Fournier (1998), positing BRQ as a diagnostic tool for assessing the depth and caliber of the customer-brand relationship (Fournier, 1998). BRQ encapsulates the profound emotional bond between consumers and brands (Farhan, Omar, Jannat, & Nazri, 2020).

Building upon Fournier's foundational work, subsequent scholars have delved into BRQ, viewing it as a metric that gauges the strength and intensity of the bond between a specific consumer and a brand (Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007; Tho, Trang, & Olsen, 2016). Despite the dearth of Chinese studies on BRQ, He (2006) underscores the unique characteristics of Chinese consumers and brands that foster enduring connections within the Chinese market.

In the realm of BRQ measurement, scholars have adopted varied dimensions. Fournier (1998) delineated love and passion, self-connection, interdependence, personal commitment, intimacy, and brand partner quality as key dimensions. Subsequent researchers have tailored these dimensions to suit specific contexts; for instance, Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004) incorporated love and passion, intimacy, and interdependence. Lo, Im, Chen, and Qu (2017) emphasized trust, satisfaction, and commitment. He (2006) introduced dimensions such as trust, interdependence, commitment, authenticity, self-concept connection, and social value expression. Recent studies have focused on dimensions such as satisfaction and trust to assess BRQ (Adhikari & Panda, 2020). Farhan et al. (2020) selected satisfaction and trust as dimensions of BRQ.

Chang and Chieng (2006) found that brand image is an antecedent of BRQ. BRQ can be used to explain consumer purchase behavior, and one of the reasons for consumers' purchase decisions is good brand image, which is perceived as a positive relationship between the consumer and the brand, and this perceived positive relationship is also beneficial to the consumer. Therefore, this study also explores brand image (Zhang, 2021).

2.3 | Brand Image

In the eyes of consumers, a distinctive brand is the key to brand survival. In this context, there is a growing need for management scholars to develop marketing strategies in the area of brand image. Gardner and Levy (1999) suggest that brand image is a composite of thoughts, attitudes, and feelings about a brand. Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986) believe that brand image is not only a perceptual phenomenon that is only influenced by the communication activities of the company, but it is the understanding that consumers gain from all brand-related activities carried out by the company.

Park et al. (1986) and Singh, Yu, Ariza-Montes, and Han (2023) classify brand image into functional image, symbolic image, and experiential image. Most of the scholars believe that brand image is a comprehensive concept that represents the overall consumer perception of a brand. Many previous studies focus on the effect of brand image on brand trust (Alhaddad, 2015; Esch, Langner, Schmitt, & Geus, 2006; Tan, Ismail, & Rasiah, 2011), brand loyalty (Anwar, Gulzar, Sohail, & Akram, 2011; Chen & Tseng, 2010), and purchase intention (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Diallo, 2012).

Shaping a good brand image is a differentiation choice for enterprises to survive fierce market competition, and through the differentiation of brand image, enterprises can position their brands well. Therefore, the shaping and management of brand image is crucial to the development of enterprises.

Consumers' attitudinal perceptions of brands can also be included in the study of brand image (Blackston, 1992). There are both positive and negative attitudes toward brands, with brand hate being the most typical negative attitude. Brand image is objective, and brand attitude is subjective, and subjective and objective interact to form a brand relationship (Blackston, 1995). Therefore, negative brand attitude (brand hate) is added to the research model in this study.

2.4 | Brand Hate

Hate has its roots in psychology. Sternberg (2003) offers a triangular structured theory of hate, which states that hate is made up of three basic emotions: disgust, contempt, and anger. Sternberg (2003) also suggests that love and hate are interconnected, with love consisting of intimacy, passion, and commitment, and that hate evolves from these three elements.

Brand hate is a relatively new concept in marketing in recent years. Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux (2009) first conceptualized brand hate as a desire for revenge and avoidance. Most researchers define brand hate as a strong negative feeling customers have toward a brand (Bryson, Atwal, & Hultén, 2013; Fetscherin, 2019; Romani, Grappi, & Dalli, 2012; Zarantonello, Romani, Grappi, & Bagozzi, 2016) or a combination of multiple negative emotions (Fetscherin, 2019; Romani et al., 2012; Zarantonello et al., 2016), which include anger, disdain, disgust, fear, disappointment, shame, and dehumanization. There are also commonalities between the dimensions provided by scholars for brand hate.

The anonymity of virtual brand communities allows consumers to express their thoughts and opinions more openly and freely; unpleasant feelings are more likely to proliferate in virtual brand communities. As a result, it is critical to emphasize the role of brand hate, which is produced by negative emotions, in shaping consumer-brand relationships. The mediating role of brand hate has been studied in previous research by Hegner, Fetscherin, and Van Delzen (2017); Hogg and Banister (2001) and Zhang (2017), but there is little research on the mediating role of brand hate between brand image and BRQ, which is investigated in this study.

It is clear from previous literature that brand image is one of the antecedents that affects BRQ (Chang & Chieng, 2006), and a bad brand image can trigger brand hate (Bryson et al., 2013; Bustaman & Dasuki, 2012; Hegner et al., 2017). Brand image is considered a key dimension of brand equity (Keller, 1993) and an antecedent of brand equity (Iglesias, Markovic, Singh, & Sierra, 2019) and is closely related to BRQ. A good brand image will generate positive emotions toward a brand. For cellular telecommunication companies, brand hate is a considerable problem that seriously affects BRQ. Brand hate is partially driven by negative online reviews. It can have an impact through public online complaints and on online boycotts (Attiq, Hasni, & Zhang, 2022).

Brand hate as a mediator in this model can explain why positive emotions have a negative effect on consumer brand relationships when they

are not met. Therefore, brand hate is used as a mediating variable in this model to study its role in the consumer–brand relationship, extending and enriching the consumer–brand relationship model (Attiq et al., 2022).

3 | THEORETICAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

3.1 | Theoretical Model Development

After analyzing the literature, it is clear that BRQ is a relatively rich concept that includes many different and complex feelings and attitudes of consumers toward brands. Therefore, in order to extend the BRQ theory, we comprehensively consider the important factors that affect the strength of BRQ. According to the literature, brand image has a certain relationship with BRQ (Doğanlı, 2022; Lee, Han, Choi, & Kim, 2011), so brand image is linked to BRQ in the theoretical model in this study.

Brand image is consumers' objective perception of a brand, subjective perception is consumers' affective attitudes, and the interaction of objective and subjective factors can ultimately affect BRQ (Blackston, 1995). There are both positive and negative affective factors. Most of the previous studies on BRQ's influencing factors have selected positive affective factors; this study selects negative affective attitudes to expand the theory of BRQ. Brand hate, as the most typical negative emotion, will be used as a mediating variable in this model to investigate its role in consumer brand relationships and extend the theory of BRQ. Figure 1 shows the research model for this study.

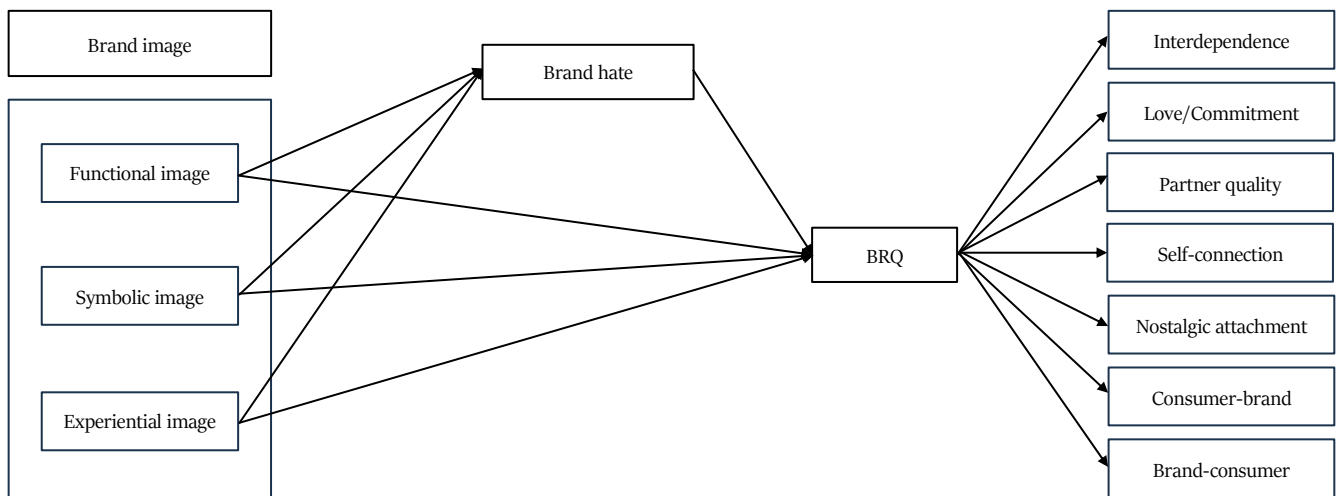


Figure 1: Research model.

3.2 | Hypothesis Development

3.2.1 | The Relationship between Brand Image and BRQ

A heightened brand image engenders a deeper sense of consumer–brand attachment (Doğanlı, 2022). Consumers tend to forge brand self-associations when confronted with a brand boasting a distinctive and compelling image. The cultivation of a favorable brand image emerges as a linchpin for augmenting consumer satisfaction within virtual brand communities, with satisfaction constituting a pivotal facet of BRQ (Song, Wang, & Han, 2019). Notably, brand image encompasses functional, symbolic, and experiential dimensions, as expounded by Park et al. (1986). Empirical investigations have consistently underscored the positive influence of brand image on the quality of consumer–brand relationships, thereby laying the foundation for the following hypotheses:

H1a: There is a significant relationship between functional image and BRQ.

H1b: There is a significant relationship between symbolic image and BRQ.

H1c: There is a significant relationship between experiential image and BRQ.

3.2.2 | The Relationship between Brand Image and Brand Hate

Symbolic incompatibility stands out as a significant driver of brand hate. Central to this concept is the notion of symbolic consistency incongruity, reflecting a discordance in brand image portrayal (Balıkcıoğlu & Kiyak, 2019). When consumers discern a misalignment between their self-image and the projected brand image, a sense of detachment from the brand ensues, often culminating in negative sentiments or behaviors (Zarantonello, Romani, Grappi, & Fetscherin, 2018). Noteworthy research has underscored that adverse consumer encounters also play a pivotal role in fomenting brand hate. Consequently, the following hypotheses are presented:

H2a: Positive functional image significantly reduces brand hate.

H2b: Positive symbolic image significantly reduces brand hate.

H2c: Positive experiential image significantly reduces brand hate.

3.2.3 | The Mediating Effect of Brand Hate on the Relationship between Brand Image and BRQ

A favorable brand image exerts a positive influence on BRQ, while a tarnished image, exemplified by symbolic incongruity, can instigate brand hate (Hegner et al., 2017). The emergence of brand hate precipitates a cascade of adverse behaviors that undermine positive consumer engagement (Attiq et al., 2022; Jain & Sharma, 2019), encompassing actions such as brand avoidance (Bryson et al., 2013; Romani et al., 2012), hostility toward the brand (Fournier, 1998), reduction in brand loyalty (Hegner et al., 2017), and brand defection.

There are many studies on brand hate as a mediator in previous literature (Attiq et al., 2022; Md Kashedul Wahab, 2019; Pinto & Brandão, 2021; Rodrigues, Brandão, & Rodrigues, 2021; Trudeau H & Shobeiri, 2016). Brand hate as a mediator influences the quality of the consumer-brand relationship. Brand image is one of the main causes of brand hate (Abd Ghani & Tuhin, 2021; Abd Ghani & Tuhin, 2016; Bryson et al., 2013; Che Nawi et al., 2021; Hegner et al., 2017; Mbelangani & ÜNAL, 2020; Zarantonello et al., 2016). It is therefore necessary to explore the mediating role of brand hate between brand image and BRQ within the context of this study.

H3a: Reducing brand hate mediates the relationship between functional brand image and BRQ.

H3b: Reducing brand hate mediates the relationship between symbolic brand image and BRQ.

H3c: Reducing brand hate mediates the relationship between experiential brand image and BRQ.

4 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 | Research Construct

Various instruments were implemented in this study. The items assessing BRQ were drawn from the comprehensive scale pioneered by Hudson, Huang, Roth, and Madden (2016), delineating BRQ into seven dimensions: Interdependence (3 items), Love/Commitment (7 items), Partner Quality (5 items), Self-Connection (6 items), Nostalgic Attachment (3 items), Intimacy (consumer-brand) (3 items), and Intimacy (brand-consumer) (3 items). The measurement scale for brand image was adapted from Singh et al. (2023) and supplemented by insights from Park et al. (1986) and other seminal works on brand image with similar dimensions (Arklina, Grinberga, Singh, & Livina, 2020; Kim & Kim, 2011). Singh et al. (2023) advocated for the categorization of brand image into three dimensions: Functional image (4 items), symbolic image (3 items), and experiential image (3 items). The scale measuring the mediating variable, brand hate, was sourced from Zarantonello et al. (2016), with seven items dedicated to active hate (anger and contempt) and passive hate (fear and disappointment) as the dimensions of brand hatred, reflecting prevalent negative emotions in consumer-brand dynamics (Fetscherin, 2019; Hegner et al., 2017).

4.2 | Data Collection

This study employs a quantitative research design utilizing a survey to delve into the intricate dynamics within the virtual brand community of the Chinese cell phone industry. A cross-sectional research framework was selected for this survey, targeting Chinese consumers who are Xiaomi cell phone users actively engaged in the Xiaomi smartphone virtual brand community. The survey implementation leveraged a probability sampling technique, with a total distribution of 340 questionnaires and the return of 306 valid responses.

The selection of the sample size for the study was based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970), who proposed the sample calculation formula ($n = \frac{NZ^2}{E^2NZ^2}$). The Krejcie and Morgan (1970) method is based on two essential variables: the desired level of confidence (which is often set at 95%) and the projected population size. The population of this study comprises Chinese users of Xiaomi's cell phones who participate in the virtual brand community, with a population of approximately 100,000 people in the selected geographic area. While the precise number in this group is difficult to determine due to its dynamic nature, it is commonly accepted as significant considering the popularity of cell phone usage and virtual communities in China. The sample number needed was calculated to be 304, and the number of valid surveys collected was 306, which meets the requirement.

This model was built based on the theory of the consumer-brand relationship or brand relationship quality (BRQ), emphasizing that the consumer-brand relationship does not operate in a vacuum, and finalizing the model for this study. In consumer-brand relationships, Fournier (1998) further developed the relationship theory in consumer research by comparing consumer-brand relationships to interpersonal relationships and developing the concept of BRQ. This offers a useful framework for comprehending the different types of connections that customers have with brands. Consumers also share emotions with brands in different forms, and an essential component of the consumer-brand connection is brand emotions.

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Demographic Profiles of the Participants

A predominant segment of Xiaomi cell phone users reported a usage duration of 1–2 years, constituting 40.2% of the sample. Gender distribution exhibited a near equilibrium, with men representing 48.04% and women 51.96% of the respondents. Within the pool of 306 valid questionnaires, the highest proportion of daily engagement time within the virtual brand community fell within the range of 0–1 hour, encompassing 23.53% of the total respondents. A significant portion of the participants (70%) reported incomes below RMB 8,000.

5.2 | Measurement Model

In this investigation, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to analyze both the measurement and construct models. The two pivotal reliability metrics, CA and CR, operate within the range of 0 to 1, where higher values signify enhanced reliability. As depicted in Table 1, all constructs exhibit alpha coefficients above 0.7 and composite reliability values above 0.9, indicating the robust reliability of all items. Additionally, the AVE values, ranging from 0.678 to 0.779, align with established standards (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017).

Table 1: Measurement model and reliability results.

Construct	Factor loading (range)	CA	CR	AVE
Interdependence	0.855-0.879	0.834	0.9	0.75
Love/Commitment	0.806-0.858	0.932	0.945	0.71
Partner quality	0.866-0.883	0.923	0.942	0.764
Self-connection	0.807-0.853	0.911	0.931	0.692
Nostalgic attachment	0.864-0.886	0.847	0.908	0.766
Intimacy (Consumer-brand)	0.835-0.881	0.827	0.896	0.743
Intimacy (Brand-consumer)	0.876-0.894	0.858	0.914	0.779
Functional brand image	0.818-0.854	0.859	0.904	0.703
Symbolic brand image	0.853-0.888	0.84	0.903	0.757
Experiential brand image	0.869-0.899	0.857	0.912	0.776
Active brand hate	0.798-0.847	0.921	0.937	0.678
Passive brand hate	0.809-0.859	0.928	0.942	0.7

Note: Cronbach's Alpha (CA), Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

HTMT (heterotrait-monotrait ratio) values were utilized in this study to check discriminant validity, and the exact HTMT values are listed in Table 2, where it is clear that all of the values are less than the critical value of 0.9, thus meeting the criterion for discriminant validity.

Table 2: Discriminant validity of the structure (HTMT criteria).

	ABH	EI	FI	ID	IBC	ICB	LC	NA	PQ	PBH	SC
EI	0.397										
FI	0.323	0.533									
ID	0.288	0.334	0.337								
IBC	0.376	0.472	0.425	0.54							
ICB	0.374	0.462	0.404	0.461	0.613						
LC	0.364	0.353	0.359	0.551	0.652	0.521					
NA	0.364	0.385	0.269	0.541	0.526	0.541	0.588				
PQ	0.325	0.416	0.328	0.591	0.597	0.594	0.575	0.489			
PBH	0.607	0.347	0.347	0.381	0.394	0.389	0.386	0.35	0.344		
SC	0.306	0.423	0.387	0.562	0.574	0.63	0.543	0.505	0.694	0.377	
SI	0.328	0.513	0.459	0.273	0.312	0.4	0.329	0.346	0.301	0.397	0.324

Note: BA: Brand attachment, FI: Functional image, SI: Symbolic image, EI: Experiential image, ABH: Active brand hate, PBH: Passive brand hate, ID: Interdependence, ICB: Intimacy (Consumer-brand), IBC: Intimacy (Brand-consumer), NA: Nostalgic attachment, PQ: Partner quality, SC: Self connection, LC: Love/Commitment.

5.3 | Structural Model Analysis

After assessing the measurement model, the structural model needs to be assessed, and in performing the structural model assessment we mainly perform path analysis of the hypotheses. The specific results of the analysis are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Results of hypothesis testing.

H	Path	B	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/ST DEV)	P-value	Significance
H1a	Functional image -> Brand relationship quality	0.172	0.054	3.167	0.002	Yes
H1b	Symbolic image -> Brand relationship quality	0.086	0.053	1.626	0.104	No
H1c	Experiential image -> Brand relationship quality	0.231	0.057	4.049	0	Yes
H2a	Functional image -> Brand hate	-0.157	0.055	2.86	0.004	Yes
H2b	Symbolic image -> Brand hate	-0.211	0.057	3.696	0	Yes
H2c	Experiential image -> Brand hate	-0.213	0.059	3.598	0	Yes

From Table 3, it can be seen that among the six hypotheses, only H2b is not significant, that is, the relationship between symbolic image and BRQ is not significant in the relationship in the validation of this study. The other hypotheses hold.

In addition to conducting direct path analyses, tests for mediating effects were also conducted. In this study, 5,000 samples were analyzed using the bootstrap method to calculate the effect size of each mediating effect in the model, and the results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Analysis of mediation effects.

H	Path	β	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P-value	Significance
H3a	Functional image -> Brand hate -> Brand relationship quality	0.047	0.019	2.536	0.011	Yes
H3b	Symbolic image -> Brand hate -> Brand relationship quality	0.064	0.021	2.979	0.003	Yes
H3c	Experiential image -> Brand hate -> Brand relationship quality	0.064	0.022	2.909	0.004	Yes

The above table shows that the mediating role of brand hate in functional image, symbolic image, experiential image and BRQ are all significant, with β -values of 0.047, 0.064, 0.064, and P-values of 0.011, 0.003, 0.004, respectively. The validation of H1 and H2 revealed that the mediating role of brand hate in the relationship between symbolic image and BRQ is a fully mediating role, and the role between functional image, experiential image and BRQ is a partial mediating role.

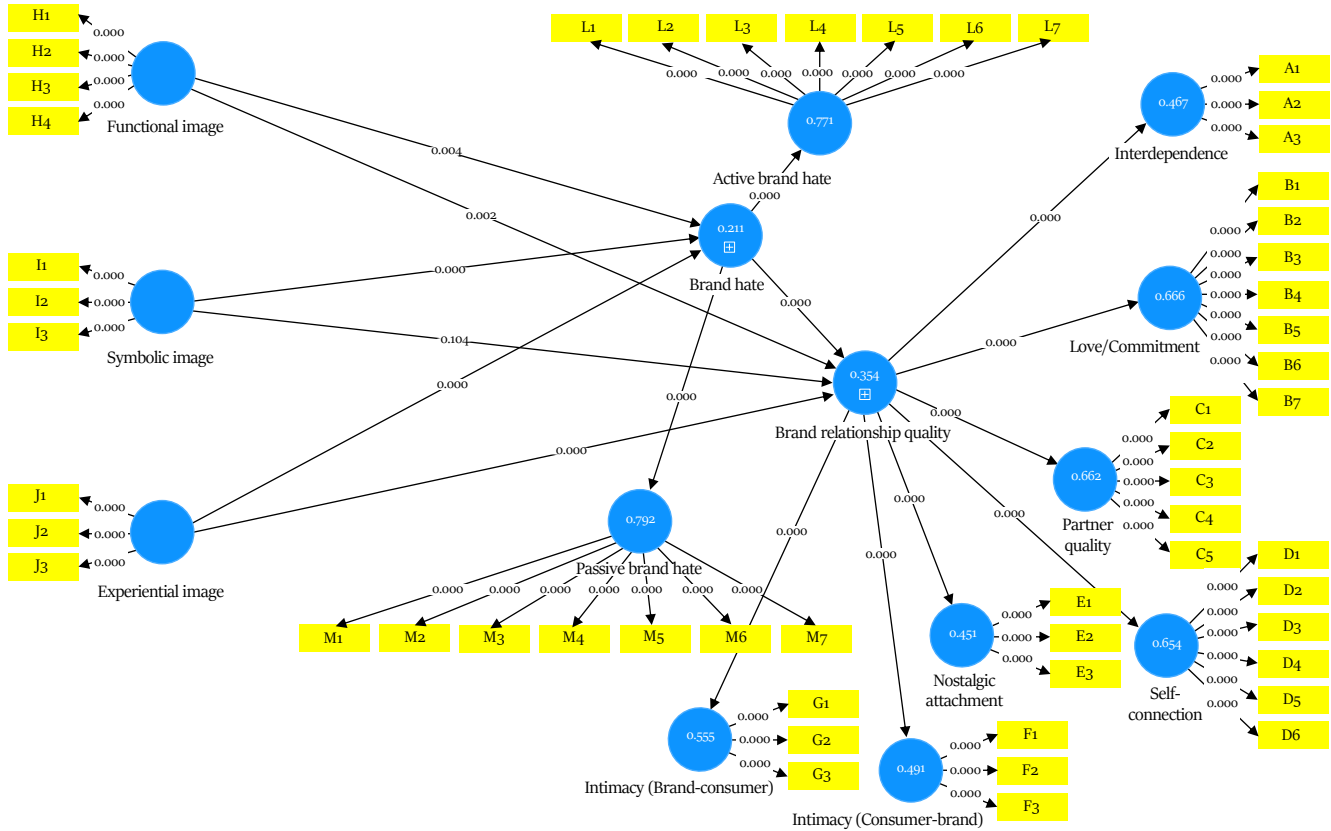


Figure 2: Structural model.

Figure 2 shows the structural model between the variables, mainly showing the *p*-values of the outer model and inner models, and the R-squared values of the endogenous variables.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 | Discussion

The findings of this study unveil a significant linkage between brand image and BRQ. Notably, within the triad of brand image dimensions, the association between functional brand image and BRQ emerges as statistically significant ($\beta = 0.172, p = 0.002$), alongside a pronounced significance observed in the relationship between experiential image and BRQ ($\beta = 0.231, p = 0.000$). However, the connection between symbolic image and BRQ did not attain statistical significance ($\beta = 0.086, p = 0.104$). A positive brand image confers competitive advantages, stimulating heightened consumer engagement within the virtual brand community and fostering intimacy (Simonson, Huber, & Payne, 1988). A favorable functional image can engender positive emotional connections with a brand, thereby influencing BRQ positively (Keller, 1993). Conversely, experiential image revolves around consumers' pleasurable experiences, amplifying their intimacy and reliance on the brand, consequently bolstering BRQ.

Moreover, this research underscores that a positive brand image serves as a deterrent to brand hate. When a brand aligns positively with consumer values, individuals are more inclined toward favorable brand perceptions and less prone to harbor hostile sentiments toward the brand (Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

6.2 | Theoretical Implications

This study further extends the theory of BRQ proposed by Fournier (1998). The definition of BRQ proposed by Hudson et al. (2016) based on Fournier (1998) was adopted and expanded to take into account the characteristics of virtual brand communities. BRQ can be improved from a brand image perspective, thus explaining the consumer-brand relationship. Consumers' brand emotions are also an important aspect of the consumer-brand connection, which is characterized by a mix of love and hate. While previous studies have discussed more about the impact of positive emotions on consumers' brand relationships, this study explores the role that negative emotions play in consumers' brand relationships, which further extends the BRQ theory.

In previous research on brand relationship quality, increased brand experience (Chang & Chieng, 2006; Choi, Ok, & Hyun, 2017; Jung & Soo, 2012; Sun, 2015; Wu, 2015; Xie, Poon, & Zhang, 2017), brand personality (Cao, 2020; Choi et al., 2017), relational bonds (Huang, Fang, Huang, Chang, & Fang, 2014), value creation (Khan & Khattak, 2017), consumer brand engagement (Khan & Khattak, 2017; Wang, 2018) and other variables connected with the strength of the consumer-brand relationship are considered to be closely related to the quality of brand relationship. In contrast, in this study, brand image is used as a novel independent variable to extend the theory of brand relationship quality. This study contributes to the literature on brand hate by identifying the relationship between the variables, especially in China as a developing country, which has a large consumer base and different ethnic cultures, and where it is easy for young people to express their thoughts and needs in today's virtual brand communities.

6.3 | Managerial Implications

From a practical standpoint, this study helps with the marketing management of virtual brand communities. It can help corporate managers to develop strategies to enhance BRQ. It is clear from this study that strategies to enhance functional and experiential images can directly affect the BRQ of a corporate brand, but it is not true that symbolic images do not have a significant effect on BRQ, but rather that enhancing a positive symbolic image reduces brand hate and thus enhances BRQ. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to changes in consumers' emotions when developing a symbolic image strategy. Paying attention to the causes and effects of brand hatred sentiments and what kind of brand image can reduce brand hate is a new finding of this study, through which it helps marketers to develop strategies to deal with brand hate.

6.4 | Conclusions and Limitations

For companies seeking to enhance BRQ through virtual brand communities, a pivotal focus on brand image factors and the intricate role of brand hate as an intermediary becomes imperative. This study targets users of Xiaomi's cell phones, chosen strategically due to the distinct positioning and pricing strategies across cell phone brands, thereby catering to diverse consumer segments. As the dynamics within virtual brand communities may vary for other product categories, the transferability of these findings warrants further validation. Cultural nuances underpin divergent consumer behaviors, underscoring the need to explore how brand image influences brand hate and BRQ across varied cultural contexts—a research avenue ripe for future investigation. Such cultural disparities necessitate nuanced examinations to unravel the differential impacts of brand image on brand hate and BRQ, thereby presenting opportunities for future research.

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Institutional Review Board Statement:

The Ethical Committee of the University of Kelantan Malaysia Research Ethics Committee, Malaysia has granted approval for this study (Ref. No. UMK.REC/110624).

Transparency:

The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests:

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions:

All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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