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FROM BRAND EXPERIENCE TO BRAND EQUITY IN THE DIGITAL ERA: THE SEQUENTIAL ROLES OF CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT AND BRAND TRUST

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ABSTRACT

The digitalization of markets has transformed how consumers encounter, evaluate and form relationships with brands. Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE), traditionally explained through brand awareness, associations, perceived quality and loyalty, is now increasingly shaped by interactive, experiential and relational processes occurring across websites, mobile applications, e-commerce platforms, social media and online communities. Although brand experience, consumer brand engagement and brand trust have each received substantial attention in branding research, they are frequently examined as isolated antecedents or within partial relational pathways. This study develops an integrative conceptual framework explaining how these constructs can operate sequentially in the formation of CBBE. Drawing on customer-based brand equity theory, service-dominant logic, customer-engagement research and commitment-trust theory, the study synthesises seminal and contemporary literature on the relationships among brand experience, consumer brand engagement, brand trust and brand equity. The review identifies four central findings. First, brand experience provides an experiential foundation for equity formation. Second, engagement converts experiential responses into active cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment. Third, trust stabilises the consumer-brand relationship by reducing uncertainty and increasing confidence in future brand performance. Fourth, digitalization changes the pathways through which brand equity is generated rather than replacing the psychological foundations of traditional CBBE. The study proposes an integrated Brand Experience-Engagement-Trust-Equity framework, in which brand experience contributes to CBBE through a sequential process involving consumer brand engagement and brand trust. The framework advances digital-branding scholarship by integrating previously fragmented experiential, interactive and relational explanations of consumer-based brand value.

Keywords: consumer-based brand equity; brand experience; consumer brand engagement; brand trust; digital branding; customer experience; relationship marketing

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1. INTRODUCTION

Brand equity represents one of the most strategically important intangible assets available to firms because strong brands can enhance consumer preference, reduce perceived risk, increase loyalty and provide competitive differentiation. From the consumer perspective, the concept is grounded principally in the work of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993). Aaker conceptualises brand equity through dimensions such as awareness, associations, perceived quality and loyalty, whereas Keller defines customer-based brand equity as the differential response produced by consumers' knowledge of a brand. Yoo and Donthu (2001) subsequently operationalised these foundations into a multidimensional consumer-based brand-equity measure.

These foundational conceptualisations remain highly relevant, but the environment in which brand knowledge develops has changed substantially. Consumers now encounter brands through websites, mobile applications, social-media platforms, online reviews, e-commerce systems, digital advertising, influencers, brand communities and algorithmically personalised interactions alongside traditional physical channels. Customer journeys have consequently become fragmented, interactive and socially embedded, incorporating firm-controlled, partner-controlled and consumer-controlled touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Digitalisation has also altered the role of consumers. Rather than functioning predominantly as receivers of firm-generated communication, consumers now comment on, evaluate, share, recommend and create brand-related content. Engagement therefore extends beyond purchasing behaviour to include cognitive, emotional and behavioural participation in consumer-brand interactions (van Doorn et al., 2010; Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Lim and Rasul (2022) similarly show that social media has increased the strategic importance of consumer engagement within contemporary brand relationships.

These changes have generated renewed discussion concerning the meaning and measurement of brand equity. France et al. (2025) argue that conventional brand-equity metrics may not independently capture the complexity of digitally mediated markets and propose greater attention to digital brand awareness, share of search and brand sentiment. Yet digital equity cannot be reduced to technological or social-media indicators alone; the human and relational dimensions of branding remain essential. A systematic review of 258 studies on CBBE in digital brands likewise identifies engagement, electronic word-of-mouth, communication effects and online consumer behaviour as prominent research streams while concluding that the fundamental logic of brand equity remains comparable across digital and non-digital brands (Enes et al., 2024).

This creates an important theoretical question: if digital activity by itself does not constitute equity, through what mechanisms are digitally mediated brand encounters converted into durable consumer-based brand value? Three constructs appear central to this process: brand experience, consumer brand engagement and brand trust. Brand experience captures consumers' sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioural responses to brand-related stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009). Consumer brand engagement captures cognitive, affective and behavioural investment in brand interaction (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Brand trust captures confidence that a brand is dependable and

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capable of delivering promised value (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2005).

Existing studies provide substantial evidence regarding individual relationships among these variables. Brand experience has been connected with engagement and brand equity (Hepola et al., 2017); engagement has been associated with CBBE (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Ndhlovu & Maree, 2024); engagement and experience have both been associated with trust in online-brand settings (Khan et al., 2020); and trust has been shown to mediate the relationship between consumer engagement and brand equity (Saikia & Bhattacharjee, 2024). The literature nevertheless remains fragmented at the process level, with prior research commonly examining individual relationships or partial mediation pathways rather than theoretically integrating experience, engagement and trust into a sequential explanation of CBBE formation.

Accordingly, the paper asks: RQ1: How can brand experience, consumer brand engagement and brand trust be theoretically integrated to explain the formation of consumer-based brand equity in the digital era? The paper contributes by integrating experiential, engagement and relationship-marketing research into a common CBBE framework; differentiating experience as an experiential foundation, engagement as an activation mechanism and trust as a relational stabilisation mechanism; and developing a sequential Brand Experience-Engagement-Trust-Equity framework explaining how digital consumer-brand interactions may become durable brand value.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Consumer-Based Brand Equity

CBBE represents the value consumers attach to a branded offering beyond its functional characteristics. Aaker (1991) conceptualises brand equity as a multidimensional asset comprising awareness, associations, perceived quality and loyalty. Keller (1993), from a consumer-psychology perspective, defines CBBE as the differential response to marketing activity arising from brand knowledge. Strong CBBE therefore depends not simply on recognition but on accessible, favourable and distinctive meanings in consumers' minds. Yoo et al. (2000) and Yoo and Donthu (2001) subsequently demonstrated that CBBE could be operationalised through consumer-level measures incorporating perceived quality, loyalty and brand awareness/associations.

Digitalisation expands the sources through which these perceptions are generated. Consumers increasingly learn about brands through search engines, digital reviews, influencer communication, online communities, user-generated content and algorithmic recommendations. Consequently, brand knowledge has become more socially distributed and less exclusively controlled by firms. France et al. (2025) argue that digital-era brand equity requires attention beyond conventional brand metrics, while Enes et al. (2024) show that engagement and online consumer behaviour have become central themes in digital CBBE research. Digital visibility may create awareness, but awareness does not automatically generate preference, loyalty or relational strength. The critical issue is how digital encounters become psychologically meaningful and relationally durable.

2.2 Brand Experience as the Experiential Foundation

Brakus et al. (2009) define brand experience as subjective internal and behavioural responses

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generated by brand-related stimuli and identify sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioural dimensions. The construct differs from satisfaction, attitude and involvement because it captures what consumers sense, feel, think and do during interactions with a brand.

Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013) demonstrate that online brand experience extends beyond technology acceptance and contributes to consumer-brand relationship development. Andreini et al. (2018) further position brand experience within relationship and service-dominant perspectives, arguing that experience should be understood as a broader relational process rather than a discrete encounter. The connection between brand experience and equity is also well established: Hepola et al. (2017) show that sensory brand experience affects brand equity directly and through consumer brand engagement, while Iglesias et al. (2019) find that sensory experience contributes to equity indirectly through satisfaction and affective commitment. Zollo et al. (2020) similarly demonstrate that emotional and rational experiences help explain how social-media marketing affects brand-equity dimensions.

Taken together, the literature suggests that brand experience constitutes the experiential entry point of brand-equity formation. Consumers must first encounter stimuli sufficiently meaningful to become encoded as brand-related sensations, emotions, thoughts or actions.

Proposition 1 (P1): Brand experience contributes positively to consumer-based brand equity.

2.3 Consumer Brand Engagement as an Activation Mechanism

Consumer engagement emerged partly from recognition that consumer-brand relationships extend beyond transactional purchasing. Van Doorn et al. (2010) conceptualise customer-engagement behaviour as behavioural manifestations extending beyond transactions, while Brodie et al. (2011) conceptualise engagement as a psychological state arising through interactive and co-creative experiences. Hollebeek et al. (2014) subsequently define consumer brand engagement through cognitive processing, affection and activation, capturing the extent to which consumers think about, feel connected to and actively interact with a brand.

Service-dominant logic provides an important theoretical foundation for this process. Vargo and Lusch (2004) argue that consumers should be understood as participants in value creation rather than passive recipients of firm-produced value. Digital environments intensify such participation by enabling consumers to share branded content, contribute ideas, participate in communities and publicly communicate brand experiences. Enes et al. (2024) accordingly identify engagement and online consumer behaviour among the central areas linking digital interaction with CBBE development.

Experience and engagement are nevertheless distinct. A consumer may experience an attractive website or advertisement without subsequently investing meaningful resources in the brand. Engagement requires additional cognitive, emotional or behavioural investment. Hepola et al. (2017) provide evidence that sensory experience contributes to engagement, which subsequently contributes to brand equity, while Ndhlovu and Maree (2024) find CBE to be central to brand outcomes across product and service contexts. Engagement can therefore be interpreted as an activation mechanism through which experiential responses develop into active consumer-brand relationships.

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P2: Favourable brand experience facilitates stronger consumer brand engagement.

P3: Consumer brand engagement contributes positively to consumer-based brand equity.

P4: Consumer brand engagement represents an important mechanism through which brand experience contributes to consumer-based brand equity.

2.4 Brand Trust as a Relational Stabilisation Mechanism

Relationship-marketing scholarship identifies trust as a central determinant of durable exchange relationships. Morgan and Hunt's (1994) commitment-trust theory proposes that successful relationship marketing depends fundamentally on trust and commitment. Within branding research, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) demonstrate that brand trust contributes to attitudinal and behavioural loyalty, while Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman (2005) establish a direct relationship between trust and brand equity.

Trust assumes particular significance in digital markets because consumers routinely make decisions without physical contact with products, organisations or service providers. Digital interfaces increase convenience but can also generate uncertainty relating to privacy, credibility, information accuracy, product quality and post-purchase performance. Under such conditions, experience provides evidence: repeated favourable encounters allow consumers to evaluate whether brand promises correspond with actual behaviour and therefore contribute to perceived reliability.

Khan et al. (2020), examining online services, report that both brand experience and consumer engagement positively influence brand trust. The engagement-trust relationship is especially important because cognitive engagement provides information about the brand, emotional engagement creates relational involvement and behavioural engagement generates repeated interaction episodes through which reliability can be evaluated. Saikia and Bhattacharjee (2024) further find that brand trust partially mediates the relationship between CBE and brand equity. Engagement alone may therefore not generate durable equity; trust stabilises engagement by converting repeated interaction into confidence regarding future performance.

P5: Favourable brand experience contributes positively to brand trust.

P6: Consumer brand engagement contributes positively to brand trust.

P7: Brand trust contributes positively to consumer-based brand equity.

P8: Brand trust represents a relational mechanism through which consumer brand engagement contributes to consumer-based brand equity.

2.5 Theoretical Integration

The proposed framework draws on three complementary theoretical traditions. Customer-based brand equity theory explains the ultimate outcome: brand equity exists when accumulated brand knowledge generates differential consumer responses (Keller, 1993). Service-dominant logic explains why consumers increasingly participate in rather than merely receive branding activity; engagement represents the investment of cognitive, emotional and behavioural resources into

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interaction and value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Brodie et al., 2011). Commitment-trust theory explains why interactions become sustainable relationships, as trust reduces uncertainty and increases willingness to maintain exchanges (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Together, these perspectives generate a process in which brand experience provides the experiential foundation, consumer brand engagement activates a deeper relationship, brand trust provides relational stability and CBBE represents the accumulated consumer-level outcome. The sequence does not deny direct relationships among the constructs; rather, it identifies a theoretically coherent dominant pathway through which initial brand encounters may be converted into durable equity.

P9: Brand experience contributes to consumer-based brand equity through a sequential process in which favourable experience stimulates consumer brand engagement, engagement strengthens brand trust, and trust consolidates consumer-based brand equity.

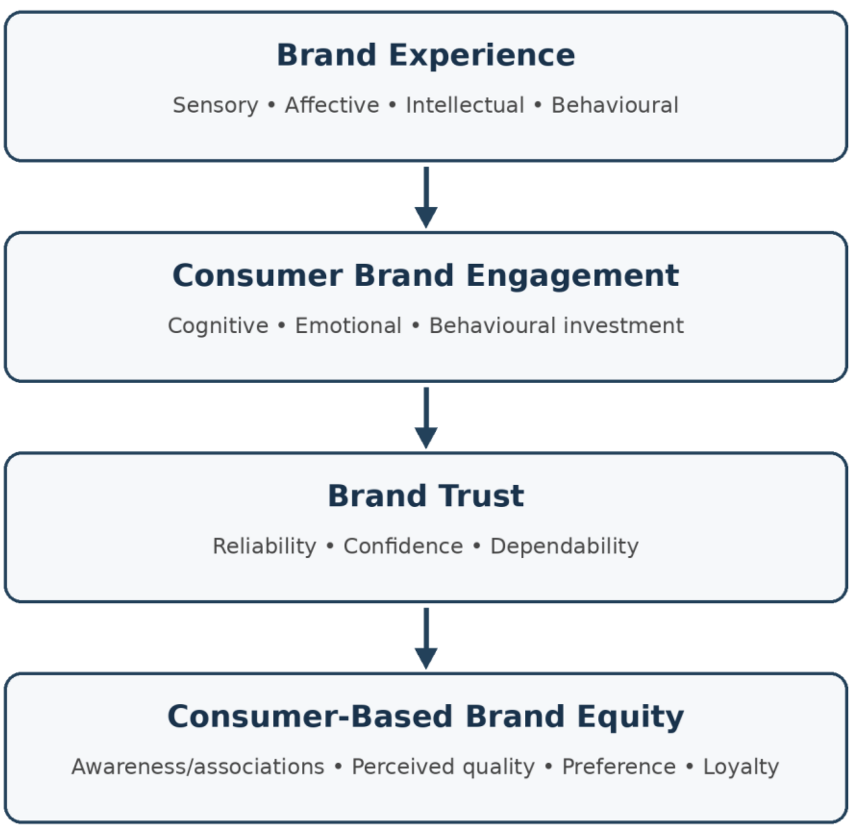

Figure 1. Brand Experience-Engagement-Trust-Equity conceptual framework.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts an integrative literature-review methodology. Integrative reviews are particularly appropriate where a research domain contains mature but fragmented conceptual streams and the objective is to synthesise those streams into a more comprehensive theoretical explanation. Snyder (2019) argues that literature reviews can constitute a research methodology in their own right when systematically designed to synthesise fragmented bodies of knowledge. The present review is therefore neither a bibliometric analysis nor a statistical meta-analysis; its principal objective is conceptual integration.

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3.2 Literature Identification and Selection

The review focused on four interconnected streams: consumer-based brand equity, brand experience, consumer brand engagement and brand trust. Search combinations incorporated terms such as 'consumer-based brand equity', 'customer-based brand equity', 'digital brand equity', 'brand experience', 'online brand experience', 'consumer brand engagement', 'customer engagement', 'brand trust', 'social-media branding' and 'digital branding'. Seminal publications were retained irrespective of year when they established foundational constructs or theories, including Aaker (1991), Keller (1993), Morgan and Hunt (1994), Vargo and Lusch (2004), Brakus et al. (2009), Brodie et al. (2011) and Hollebeek et al. (2014). Contemporary studies were prioritised when they addressed digital contexts or directly connected at least two focal constructs, with particular attention to literature published from 2018 onward.

Studies were prioritised when they developed or validated a focal construct, established a relevant theoretical mechanism, investigated relationships among experience, engagement, trust or equity, examined brand-equity formation in digital or omnichannel settings, or offered significant conceptual developments concerning digital brand equity.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The literature was analysed in three stages. First, the conceptual boundaries of CBBE, brand experience, engagement and trust were established through foundational literature. Second, empirical and conceptual evidence linking the constructs was compared, with particular attention to whether variables were treated as antecedents, mechanisms or outcomes. Third, convergent relationships were synthesised into a process-based conceptual model. Rather than aggregating statistical effect sizes, the analysis sought theoretical convergence, conceptual complementarity and unresolved causal relationships, consistent with the purpose of integrative review methodology (Snyder, 2019).

4. RESULTS / FINDINGS

4.1 Brand Experience Provides the Experiential Foundation

The first finding is that brand experience consistently precedes important downstream consumer outcomes. Brakus et al. (2009) establish sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioural dimensions, while later studies connect experience with engagement, commitment, trust and brand equity (Hepola et al., 2017; Iglesias et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2020; Zollo et al., 2020). The significance of experience is pronounced in digital environments, where consumers encounter brands through multiple visual, interactive and social touchpoints. Digital technologies increase the number of encounters, but their equity-producing value depends on whether they generate memorable and relevant responses. The literature therefore supports positioning brand experience as the experiential foundation of the framework.

4.2 Engagement Converts Experience into Active Relationship Investment

The second finding concerns the transition from experience to active involvement. Consumer engagement represents more than exposure or experience: Hollebeek et al. (2014) conceptualise it

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through cognitive processing, affection and activation, while Brodie et al. (2011) emphasise interactive and co-creative processes. Experience describes what happens within the consumer during an encounter; engagement captures what the consumer subsequently invests in the relationship. Research connecting experience with engagement and brand equity supports this distinction (Hepola et al., 2017). Engagement therefore acts as an activation mechanism, transforming favourable experiences into deeper consumer participation and relational involvement.

4.3 Trust Provides Relational Stability

The third finding is that trust helps distinguish temporary interaction from durable brand relationships. Consumers may interact frequently with brands because of entertainment, novelty or promotional incentives without regarding those brands as reliable. Trust is therefore theoretically distinct from engagement. Relationship-marketing research establishes that trust reduces uncertainty and facilitates stable relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), while branding studies connect trust with loyalty and brand equity (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2005). Saikia and Bhattacharjee (2024) specifically show that trust partially mediates the engagement-equity relationship. Trust can consequently be interpreted as a relational stabilisation mechanism: engagement produces interaction, whereas trust determines whether those interactions create confidence in the brand.

4.4 Digitalization Changes the Pathways, Not the Psychological Foundations, of Equity

The fourth finding is that digitalisation has changed where, when and through whom consumers experience brands without eliminating the psychological foundations of CBBE. Enes et al. (2024) show that online consumer behaviour, engagement and communication have become central themes in digital CBBE research, while France et al. (2025) argue for digital brand-equity metrics that retain the human side of brand value. Digital indicators therefore measure activity around a brand, whereas CBBE captures what that activity ultimately means to consumers. Followers, likes, comments, search volume and sentiment can provide useful signals, but none automatically constitutes strong consumer-based equity.

4.5 Integrated Finding: The Experience-Engagement-Trust-Equity Process

Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests a sequential mechanism in which digitally and physically mediated touchpoints generate brand experience; favourable experience can stimulate consumer brand engagement; engagement provides repeated cognitive, emotional and behavioural interaction through which trust can develop; and trust helps consolidate consumer-based brand equity. The conceptual contribution lies not in claiming that the constructs have never previously been connected, but in integrating established partial relationships into a unified process explanation of CBBE formation.

Table 1. Key literature and the remaining conceptual gap.

Study	Principal relationship	Contribution	Remaining limitation
Brakus et al.	Brand experience ->	Established	Engagement and trust not

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(2009)	brand outcomes	multidimensional brand experience	integrated
Hollebeek et al. (2014)	Engagement -> brand outcomes	Established multidimensional CBE	Experience-trust pathway absent
Hepola et al. (2017)	Experience -> engagement -> equity	Demonstrated engagement mediation	Trust absent
Iglesias et al. (2019)	Experience -> relational mechanisms -> equity	Demonstrated indirect experience-equity pathway	Engagement not central
Khan et al. (2020)	Experience/engagement -> trust -> loyalty	Connected three focal constructs	CBBE not terminal outcome
Zollo et al. (2020)	Social-media marketing -> experience -> equity	Established experience as digital-equity mechanism	Engagement and trust not serially integrated
Saikia & Bhattacharjee (2024)	Engagement -> trust -> equity	Demonstrated trust mediation	Brand experience absent
France et al. (2025)	Digital brand equity	Extends equity thinking to digital metrics	Does not explain complete relational conversion process
Present study	Experience -> engagement -> trust -> CBBE	Integrates experiential, interactive and relational mechanisms	Requires future empirical validation

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical Interpretation

The principal implication of the review is that CBBE should increasingly be conceptualised as the cumulative outcome of a dynamic consumer-brand relationship process rather than simply a direct consequence of brand communications. Experience begins the process because consumers encounter brand-related stimuli; however, favourable experience may remain temporary unless consumers allocate additional cognitive, emotional or behavioural resources to the brand. Engagement represents this deeper investment, while trust provides a mechanism through which repeated interactions become perceived reliability. CBBE consequently represents the accumulated consumer-level value generated when these processes reinforce favourable brand knowledge, associations, quality perceptions and loyalty. This interpretation extends rather than replaces traditional brand-equity theory: Keller's (1993) emphasis on brand knowledge remains fundamental, but the pathways through which such knowledge and relational meaning are produced have become more interactive and digitally distributed.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The first contribution is the integration of experiential and relational branding theories. Existing literature often treats experience, engagement and trust as separate predictors of brand outcomes;

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the present framework differentiates their functional roles. Brand experience provides the experiential foundation, consumer brand engagement provides the activation mechanism, brand trust provides the relational stabilisation mechanism and CBBE represents the accumulated outcome. This differentiation offers greater explanatory precision than a model in which all three constructs simply point independently toward equity.

The second contribution concerns engagement. Engagement is positioned not merely as another desirable branding outcome but as the process through which consumers transform favourable experiences into active brand relationships. The third concerns trust: frequent interaction does not necessarily equal strong equity because consumers may follow, comment on or repeatedly use a brand without regarding it as dependable. Trust determines whether interaction acquires relational durability. Finally, the framework contributes to digital-brand-equity scholarship by arguing that digital transformation multiplies touchpoints and introduces new behavioural indicators without making established psychological processes irrelevant (France et al., 2025).

5.3 Managerial Implications

The framework suggests that digital branding should not be reduced to maximising visibility or platform engagement metrics. Impressions, follower counts and interaction volumes are strategically useful only when they contribute to meaningful brand experiences and stronger consumer relationships. Managers should therefore design touchpoints around experience quality, including website usability, visual identity, content quality, application functionality, customer-service responsiveness and consistency between digital and physical encounters (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). They should also prioritise meaningful engagement over superficial activity by stimulating cognitive involvement, emotional relevance and participatory behaviour (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Finally, engagement must be converted into trust-building evidence through consistent fulfilment, transparent communication, responsible data practices and alignment between online promises and actual performance. Strong digital brand equity therefore emerges not from interaction alone but from managing the sequence of experience, engagement, trust and equity.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, it adopts an integrative rather than systematic meta-analytic design; the framework synthesises theoretical and empirical convergence but does not estimate pooled effect sizes. Second, the focal literature covers heterogeneous contexts, including social media, online services, consumer products and omnichannel environments, so the strength or sequencing of relationships may vary across industries. Third, the causal ordering between engagement and trust remains theoretically contestable. Some studies position trust as an antecedent of engagement, whereas others indicate that engagement can generate trust. The present framework adopts an engagement-to-trust sequence because it seeks to explain how repeated interaction develops into relational confidence, but future longitudinal research should test reciprocal effects. Fourth, digital contexts differ in technological intensity, consumer involvement and perceived risk, and trust may therefore play a stronger role in sectors such as financial services or e-commerce than in low-risk consumer products. Future research should examine the proposed

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framework across sectors, cultures and digital environments and consider moderators such as perceived authenticity, personalisation, privacy concerns, brand-community identification, AI-enabled interaction and perceived platform credibility.

7. CONCLUSION

Digitalisation has altered how consumers encounter brands but has not eliminated the fundamental psychological and relational processes underlying consumer-based brand equity. This study integrates brand experience, consumer brand engagement and brand trust into a unified explanation of CBBE formation. Brand experience creates the initial sensory, emotional, cognitive and behavioural foundation; consumer engagement transforms favourable experience into active psychological and behavioural investment; and brand trust stabilises these interactions by providing confidence in future brand performance. Together, these mechanisms contribute to enduring CBBE.

The resulting Brand Experience-Engagement-Trust-Equity framework advances branding research by explaining not merely whether these constructs influence equity but how they may operate as successive stages in the development of brand value. The central theoretical argument is therefore that consumers first experience brands, then engage with them, learn whether they can trust them and ultimately assign stronger value to brands that successfully sustain this process. In the digital era, sustainable CBBE is unlikely to arise from visibility alone; it emerges when brands create experiences worth engaging with, interactions capable of establishing trust and relationships strong enough to generate durable consumer preference and value.

DECLARATIONS

Funding

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no known financial or non-financial conflict of interest relevant to this research.

Data Availability

No primary dataset was generated or analysed because the study is based on an integrative synthesis of published literature.

Ethics Approval

Ethical approval was not required because the research did not involve human participants, personal information or primary data collection.

Consent to Participate

Not applicable.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Author Contributions

Sendy Toppo: Conceptualisation, literature review, theoretical framework development, writing - original draft, and writing - review and editing.

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Supplementary Material

No supplementary material is required for the present conceptual study.