

# Consumers' assessment of the brand equity of garment brands

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## ABSTRACT – REZUMAT

### Consumers' assessment of the brand equity of garment brands

*The assessment of brand equity and its sources is a trend among researchers and garment brand companies nowadays. The purpose of the current study is to explore the impact of two independent variables, including “words of mouth” (WOM) and “brand personality”, on the dependent variable “brand equity”, along with the assessment of mediating effects of “relationship quality”. Previous literature on the subject suggests that multiple sources including “words of mouth” and “brand personality” influence “brand equity”, but no attempts have been made for the assessment of “relationship quality” as a mediator among sources of brand equity in the context of garment brands. The present study aims at filling that gap through the presentation of a statistical model. Respondents in the sample included the regular customers of the garment brands. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyze the collected data. The results indicated that the “WOM” and “brand personality” had a significantly positive influence on “brand equity”. “Relationship quality” was found to have a strong mediating effect. The theory of brand equity and the social exchange theory was used to develop a representative model. Results of the study strengthen the premises of the theory of brand equity and the social exchange theory. The researchers recommended the exploration of the influence of other possible mediating variables in future researches. Recommendations were also made for the administrators of the garment brand companies for the consideration of “relationship quality” along with the sources of “brand equity”, including “words of mouth” and “brand personality” for improved decision making and competitive advantage.*

**Keywords:** brand equity, word of mouth, brand personality, brand relationship quality, garment brand companies, social exchange theory

### Evaluarea de către consumatori a valorii brandului pentru mărcile de îmbrăcăminte

*Evaluarea valorii brandului și a surselor sale este o tendință în rândul cercetătorilor și al companiilor de branduri de îmbrăcăminte din zilele noastre. Scopul studiului actual este de a explora impactul a două variabile independente, inclusiv „publicitatea din gură în gură” (WOM) și „personalitatea brandului”, asupra variabilei dependente „valoarea brandului”, împreună cu evaluarea efectelor mediatore ale „calității relației”. Literatura anterioară pe acest subiect sugerează că surse multiple, inclusiv „publicitatea din gură în gură” și „personalitatea brandului” influențează „valoarea brandului”, dar nu s-au făcut încercări de evaluare a „calității relației” ca mediator între sursele de valoare a brandului în contextul brandurilor de îmbrăcăminte. Prezentul studiu își propune să umple acest gol prin prezentarea unui model statistic. Respondenții din eșantion au inclus clienții obișnuiți ai brandurilor de îmbrăcăminte. Modelarea ecuațiilor structurale cu cele mai mici pătrate parțiale (PLS-SEM) a fost utilizată pentru a analiza datele colectate. Rezultatele au indicat că „WOM” și „personalitatea brandului” au avut o influență semnificativ pozitivă asupra „valorii brandului”. S-a constatat că „calitatea relației” are un puternic efect de mediere. Teoria valorii brandului și teoria schimbului social au fost utilizate pentru a dezvolta un model reprezentativ. Rezultatele studiului întăresc premisele teoriei valorii brandului și ale teoriei schimbului social. Cercetătorii au recomandat explorarea influenței altor posibile variabile mediatore în cercetările viitoare. De asemenea, au fost făcute recomandări pentru administratorii companiilor de branduri de îmbrăcăminte pentru luarea în considerare a „calității relației” împreună cu sursele de „valoare a brandului”, inclusiv „publicitatea din gură în gură” și „personalitatea brandului” pentru îmbunătățirea luării deciziilor și a avantajului competitiv.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** valoarea brandului, publicitatea din gură în gură, personalitatea brandului, calitatea relațiilor de brand, companiile de branduri de îmbrăcăminte, teoria schimbului social

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## INTRODUCTION

In this competitive business age, every business organization and firm, including well-known ones, depends on branding for their survival as having a good reputation and a brand name enhances a firm's profit [1]. A “brand” can be explained as a unique name or a symbol (such as trademark, logo) to identify the

customer's goods or services or a group of sellers from others who are providing similar goods and services [2]. A brand is highly successful when it distinguishes itself from its competitors through better customer service. In addition, a brand with a good reputation makes it easier for consumers to choose a reliable product or service due to a high level of trust

and good quality. For companies, a brand with high brand strength will ensure consumer preference, purchase intention, excessive customer loyalty, more considerable margin gains, market share, less vulnerability to competitive attacks, consumer price insensitivity, additional brand lengthening opportunities, more cooperation from trade, resilience to product-harm crisis and other intermediaries [3]. These factors add value to a brand, and that added value ensures “brand equity”.

Brand equity refers to a brand’s value determined by consumers’ experience with and perception of the brand [4]. The achievements and performances of brands in the market are evaluated through brand performance and brand equity. Brand equity strongly affects business operations and development and, therefore, is classified by researchers as a nucleus concept in branding [5]. The brand with high brand equity enjoys better consumer association and well-established acquaintance in the market [4]. Marketing researchers have attempted to conceptualize measures of brand equity that drive a brand’s market performance. Some scholars [6, 7] concluded that companies are moved toward scrutinising brand equity for two purposes. The first purpose is the estimation of a more defined value of the brand for financial reporting. The second purpose is the formulation of a strategy to upgrade marketing efforts for increased profits.

Furthermore, Jamil et al. [8] claimed that assessing the brand from the customer’s point of view is necessary for market performance nowadays. These findings demonstrate that brand equity is based on consumers’ perceptions. Therefore, according to Jamil et al. [8], the source of brand equity rolls up from customers’ perception, which is why considered critical to review brand equity at the customer’s level.

Products achieve high brand equity when consumers positively respond to any marketing efforts by the brands. The marketing effort refers to any marketing activity that has a potential effect in establishing and crafting substantial brand equity in consumer’s minds [9]. The branding literature states that the marketing efforts are predictors or sources of brand equity, and they are considered crucial as they may increase or decrease brand equity. Davcik [3] noticed that business drivers also serve as essential sources of brand equity. In short, both marketing efforts and business drivers play significant roles in influencing the formation of brand equity.

Garments brands are considered to be active business entities all around the globe. Investigators [10, 11] recommend garment companies to focus on brand management practices as a strategy because they can ensure benefits in the highly competitive market. Moreover, the examiners have stated that the branding takes part in small and medium business development, particularly making an allowance for SME market activity [5]. It is well-known that firms have restricted resources and budgets whereas, brand management is expensive. However, Jamil et al. [13] acknowledged that these constraints could be

overcome if a firm understands the importance of branding.

Literature on brand equity suggests that multiple sources of brand equity, including words of mouth and brand personality, influence brand equity, but no attempts have been made to assess mediating properties of relationship quality in the context of garment brands in Pakistan. Therefore, this study will investigate the effects of “words of mouth” and “brand personality” on “brand equity” along with the assessment of “relationship quality” as a mediator.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The brand equity

The accomplishment of brands in the market can be evaluated through brands’ performance in branding their products and services as branding is a good predictor of business performance [14]. Therefore, brand equity is among the numerous indicators for the assessment of brand performance. Since this concept came into being, many researchers have been defined brand equity in different ways. It started to gain the attention of researchers in the late 1980s [15].

To understand brand equity, one should use consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) for better understanding. For the success of brand management, consumers should deeply understand the concept of brand equity. CBBE is used to gain an insight into consumers’ knowledge, familiarity, experience and associations with the brand [16]. The CBBE model is the most appropriate model that can be implemented to understand multiple factors, including the inability of several brands to perform well and troubles faced by stronger brands. When its assessment is used in strategy management, it is found to impact a company’s financial performance strongly. Resultantly, brand equity has become the subject of many studies in the literature. Brand equity from consumers’ perception is also known as customer-based brand equity, which can be calculated through a direct or indirect approach [16].

Researchers have used different approaches to develop brand equity sources or constructs, making this field somewhat ambiguous. Previous studies on the constructs or predictors of brand equity have been mainly observant on tangible factors of the marketing mix, which includes advertising efforts, price, store image, distribution intensity, advertising expenditure and price promotions, marketing communication, marketing mix, brand personality and sales promotion power, celebrity endorsement and event sponsorship [16].

### Word of mouth and brand equity

A literature review suggests that the functions of WOM, either the traditional WOM or e-WOM, have been investigated plenty of times, focusing on the marketing field. The literature demonstrates that WOM impacts purchase intention, brand equity, brand equity dilution and membership growth [17, 18]. A WOM has a considerable effect in influencing consumers’

perceptions. It also plays its role in the formation of an approving consumer's attitude and behavioural intention. It was narrated by Sekaran and Bougie [16], where they declared that the influence of WOM on brand equity has not yet been widely studied. Researchers noted that brand personality is a central promotional tool in differentiating a brand from its competitors [19, 20]. It was illustrated in an empirical study by Muhammad et al. [21] that brand personality has a principal relationship with an element of brand communication which is positive WOM. That explanation led the researchers to assume that brand personality and WOM are correlated and have to be investigated more to have a comprehensive understanding of its strength. But despite a lot of investigations on the subject, literature regarding the role of WOM in the formation of brand equity still lacks generalizable evidence.

### **Brand personality and brand equity**

There has been frequent production of literature about brand personality and brand equity. Dunnan et al. [22] stated that brand personality is the mainstay dimension of brand image that needs to be considered an essential factor during efforts to build a strong market presence in the market. Numerous researchers consider brand personality one among the leading sources of brand equity. Brand personality inspires brand loyalty, brand preferences and brand attachment. Brand attachments and brand preferences make their ways to brand equity. Meanwhile, brand trust and brand loyalty are the sections of brand equity [1].

Brand personality has been proven to join in a meaningful role in ensuring brand loyalty, forming a positive attitude towards the brand, and boosting brand equity [15]. Earlier findings revealed that brand personality enables consumers to different product types into product categories, enhancing customer needs and loyalty to brands and managing similarities. Accordingly, brand personality and equity are two interlinked branding constructs that must be comprehended when designing a brand management plan. On the other hand, only a few researchers appeared to have inspected the effect of brand personality on brand equity [23].

The studies on brand personality in Asia, especially in Pakistan, are limited [24]. Moreover, the literature indicates that it is only to conduct empirical studies to examine the impact of quality on brand management in garment brands. This is why Valette-Florence et al. [24] proposed that further investigation is required to re-confirm the influence of ethics on brand management. In addition, the investigators Seimienea and Kamarauskaiteb [25] urged the need for other studies to look into the impact of personality traits on racial equality.

### **Relationship quality as mediator**

A mediating variable serves as a bridge to the relationship between independent and outcome variables. It is a matter of skill when it comes to defining

the relationship between variables and the mediator [26]. The use of the mediating variable in any study enriches its research design and findings [27]. To enhance the current research findings, relationship quality would be analyzed as a mediator among dependent and independent variables. Relationship quality is an important concept that was introduced by Gammoh et al. [7] and consolidated by Dwyer and Oh [28] and noted further by numerous investigators over 29 years [29, 30]. The idea of relationship quality came to light from an extended issue of relationship marketing. Mohsin et al. [31] asserted that relationship quality is the term used to measure customer perception of how well the relationship meets the terms of consumer's hope, predictions, goals, and requirements. In Pakistan, random research has looked into the effects of relationship quality as a mediating variable [32]. Safeer et al. [6] conducted their studies in Pakistan and described that relationship quality intervenes among product innovation, service quality and brand equity.

Moreover, Seimienea and Kamarauskaiteb [25] has also discussed the intervening role of relationship quality among innovativeness, market orientation, learning orientation, and firm performance.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### **Data collection and sampling technique**

The investigation examined consumers' perception of brand strength. Self-administered questionnaires were administered among customers of garment brand companies in the shopping malls and famous markets of Islamabad, Pakistan. Researchers received formal approval from the administration of shopping malls. Before distributing the questionnaires, the purpose of the research was conveyed to the respondents. Informed consent was obtained from all the respondents. The researchers followed all the research ethics during the data collection phase. The data collection phase continued for over five weeks (25 April 2019 to 29 May 2019). One hundred thirty-eight questionnaires were distributed among the respondents. One hundred seventeen were given back. Fifteen of the remaining questionnaires were left out as they were not fully answered. After the conduction of outliers' assessment, only 101 questionnaires were selected for final analysis. Two software were used for data analysis. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22 was used for the analysis of descriptive statistics. Secondly, Partial Least Square Path Modeling (PLS), a component-based Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) system, was drawn.

### **Research measures**

Brand equity was adopted from a previous study [15, 33] and calculated with six items. WOM was adopted from Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold [17] and was computed with six items. Additionally, brand personality was adopted from Hanaysha [34], which also



comprised of six items. Finally, the relationship quality was adopted from Safer et al. [6] with five things.

## RESULTS

### Measurement model assessment

Reliability and validity have been used to calculate the measurement model [34]. The combination of factor loading and composite reliability are the main elements to determine the model's reliability under discussion [35]. Figure 1 clearly explains that all the factor loadings and composite reliability are above the thrash hold value, which is 0.70, and it proves that all the model items are reliable. The average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability assesses the measurement model [23]. Figure 1 shows that AVE and CR for all the items are above the thrash hold value as 0.5 and 0.7, respectively, proving the convergent validity (table 1).

### Structural model assessment

After assessing the measurement model, the structural model valuation was obtained with the assis-

Table 1

DISCRIMINATE VALIDITY OF THE VARIABLES				
Variables	BE	BP	RQ	WOM
BE	<b>0.787</b>			
BP	0.714	<b>0.767</b>		
RQ	0.824	0.744	<b>0.760</b>	
WOM	0.548	0.613	0.608	<b>0.816</b>

tance of Smart PLS 3.0. Finally, though, consequent tests in the structural model assessment were carried out.

### Hypothesis testing

Referring to Hair et al. [36] recommendation, if the value of VAF is less than 20%, it can be concluded as the absence of mediation. In contrast, the higher outcome of VAF value of over 80% indicates complete mediation. Therefore, the value of VAF between 20% and 80% can be characterized as partial mediation. For this study, the value of VAF is indicated in table 2 and table 3.

In conclusion, the findings confirmed that relationship quality plays a fully mediating role between WOM and brand equity. Besides, relationship quality partially mediates the relationship between brand personality and brand equity.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, mouth's word was measured through Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold [17] scale. As mouth's word effects more at the information-gathering stage, the questions in this investigation are more on information search. The evaluation shows that positive words of mouth have a considerable and positive effect on brand equity. The results of this study supported the theory of brand equity, whereas [2, 5] declared that WOM included in the components of brand communication could enhance brand equity and power.

The researchers concluded that the brand personality affects brand equity positively and considerably ( $\beta = 0.211$ ,  $t\text{-value} = 9.061$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The outcomes are coherent with early studies that inspected how brand personality affects brand equity's creation [25, 15].

In this research, brand personality defines human characteristics that are appropriate for brands [34]. This research used [34] brand personality

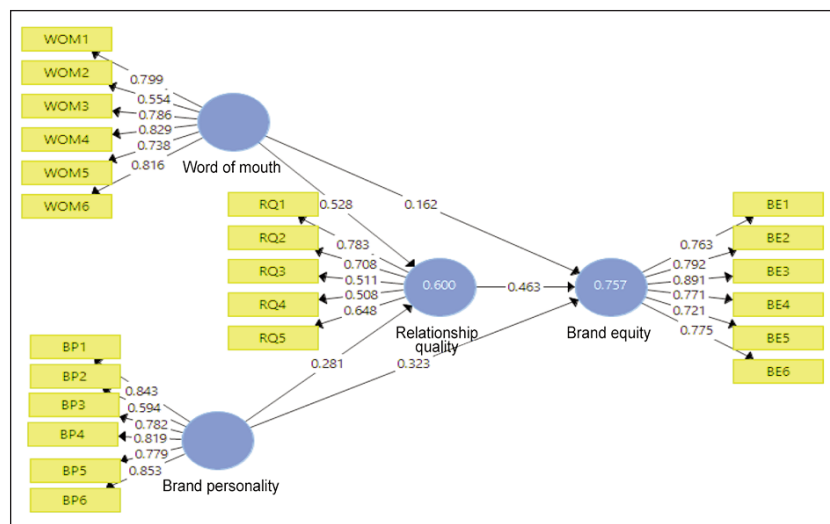


Fig. 1. Measurement assessment model

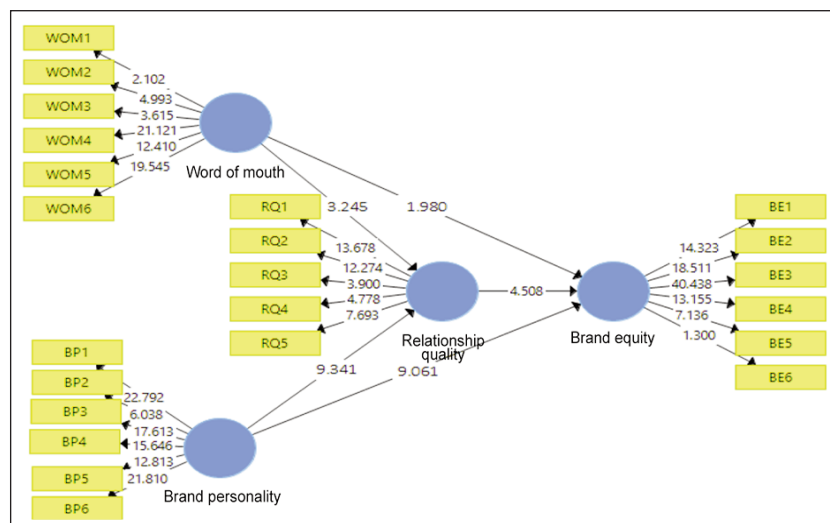


Fig. 2. Results of the structural model

Table 2

HYPOTHESIS SUMMARY						
No.	Hypotheses	Path coefficient	S.D.	T-value	P-Value	Decision
H1	WOM → BE	0.010	0.052	1.980	0.024	Accepted
H2	BP → BE	0.211	0.055	9.061	0.000	Accepted
H3	WOM → RQ → BE	0.148	0.046	3.245	0.001	Accepted
H4	BP → RQ quality → BE	0.451	0.048	9.341	0.000	Accepted

Table 3

MEDIATING VALUE				
Relationship	Indirect effect	Total effect	VAF (%)	Effect of mediation
WOM → BE	0.093	0.103	90.29	Full mediation
BP → BE	0.283	0.494	57.29	Partial mediation

measurement to consider consumers' brand personality. Evaluations have shown that consumers' brand personality positively affects brand equity. Therefore, the results of this study supported the theory of brand equity, whereas Aaker [2] declared characteristics are an essential part capable of enhancing brand equity and power. Furthermore, this research also highlighted that brand equity and brand personality have a positive relationship in garment companies. Earlier studies supported the positive association of brand equity and brand personality regarding Global brands only (e.g., Nike, Sony, Pepsi, and Coca-Cola). Based on this outcome, Firms are recommended to develop a personality appropriate to encourage people to use their product. In other contexts, owners of garment brands can set the brand's personality to accommodate the self-expressions of clients by using the brand equity's sources such as advertisement as it is supposed to develop a brand personality.

For WOM, this research revealed the quality of relationship arbitrates the relationship between brand equity and a mouth's word. Furthermore, this research concluded that terms of mouth and relationship quality have a positive relationship. Early studies supported these findings [18] in which a positive relationship was found between the mouth's word and relationship quality. Therefore, WOM has been proved as a significant construct ( $R^2 = 0.647$ ).

## IMPLICATIONS

This research is meant to be beneficial in several ways. Firstly, this contributes to the marketing knowledge, predominantly to the theory of brand equity building. The findings presented empirical evidence of the multidimensionality of valid code from the customer's template. The research context came from developing [2] model through the incorporation of Hair et al. [36] point of view. This research also supported Aaker [2] and File and Prince [30] conceptualization of brand equity. In Aaker's model [2], brand equity includes four brand equity assets (which were

referred to as brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality and brand loyalty). Many previous studies, including [7, 22], reported the multidimensionality of brand equity consumers based on the work of Aaker [2].

However, preceding studies that purposely focused on sources of brand equity on the creation of brand equity in garment brands may still be limited. Hence, the research adds up the views on the impact of predictors of brand equity on the creation of brand equity in garment companies by using data

from actual consumers to explore the dimensionality of brand equity consumer-based construct empirically. Moreover, the research also helps the body of knowledge by strengthening the Brand Equity Process Model (BEPM) and the fundamental theory of Brand Equity.

Another contribution of this study is identifying relationship quality as an effective marketing strategy in brand-building efforts. The positioning of relationship quality as a mediator in the relationship between WOM and brand personality and brand equity also contributes to the theory of brand equity and social exchange theory. However, the mediator effect was neither presented previous work [2, 30, 34, 38].

Additionally, trust, commitment, and other variables such as satisfaction were applied in Pakistan's garment brand sector.

## LIMITATION AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper adopts a cross-sectional design that does not permit causal inferences to be generated from the population. Hence, a longitudinal design is recommended in the following research to measure the theoretical constructs at several points to verify the studies. On the other hand, this research work was conducted in the context of garment brand companies. Therefore, in future, Research on different sectors is recommended.

This article's research model was capable of explaining 64.4% of the total variance in relationship quality and 69.8% of the total variance in brand equity. In short, it can be said that the remaining 35.6% and 30.2% of the variance for the relationship quality and brand equity respectively left behind to be comprehended by other factors. This is why upcoming findings may enlarge the study on brand equity by judging other elements vital to improving brand equity such as product innovation, brand identity, brand experience, brand salience and brand community.

At last, the additional focus should be given to researching and exploring the brand equity at

cross-national validation. That's why the influence of marketing strategies (namely WOM and brand personality) on brand equity may vary depending on the cultural exercises of a definite country. Hence, precise findings should be carried out to examine the

marketing strategies that would positively impact different countries.

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