From Clicks to Connections: How Social Media Activities Shape Brand Love Among Senior Tourists with Ewom as Moderator

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of the aged demographic globally has significantly influenced the tourism industry, particularly in China, where the challenges of an aging society have rendered senior tourists an increasingly vital market segment. However, despite their growing market potential, limited research has examined how social media activities influence senior tourists' emotional attachment to brands. This study aims to investigate the impact of social media activities on brand love among senior tourists, employing brand experience as a mediator and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) as a moderator, framed within the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model. A quantitative methodology was utilized with structured questionnaires, and the results were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings indicate that social media activities positively influence brand love, whereas brand experience exerts a significant positive impact on brand love. Brand experience serves as a mediator between social media activities and brand love. eWOM significantly strengthens the relationship between brand experience and brand love. This study enriches the current literature by broadening the S-O-R framework in senior tourism, highlighting the impact of social media and eWOM in cultivating emotional brand attachment. Practical implications suggest that tourism brands can enhance brand love among senior tourists by designing engaging social media activities, fostering authentic brand experiences, and encouraging positive eWOM.

1. Introduction

The global demographic landscape is experiencing a significant shift, marked by a remarkable rise in the aging population. According to alarming statistics from the United Nations, by 2050, the number of individuals aged 60 and older is expected to double, reaching 2.1 billion, up from 962 million in 2017 [1]. Elbaz *et al.,* [2] note that this trend has extensive implications across various sectors, including tourism, which is currently adapting to the growing number of elderly travelers. The China Tourism Academy has reported substantial profits in the domestic tourism market due to senior travelers, whose spending not only boosts industry revenues but also promotes off-season tourism, helping to stabilize demand throughout the year.

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The influence of social media as a communication and marketing tool has transformed tourism marketing. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WeChat have become integral to the travel decision-making process [3]. Social media serves as a valuable resource for senior tourists, providing inspiration, information, and validation to help them decide on their travel plans. Research by Ragab [4] indicates that many tourists seek travel information through social media, with user-generated content such as reviews and testimonials playing a significant role in shaping their perceptions and choices. Tourism brands can foster a devoted audience by producing compelling content, leveraging interactive platforms, and executing focused marketing strategies that promote sharing and brand advocacy [5]. Social media is particularly beneficial for senior travelers, who value recommendations from their peers and seek authentic, relatable information that can influence their travel decisions. By leveraging this data, tourism brands can effectively tailor their products and communication strategies to meet the preferences and needs of this demographic. This involves establishing a robust online presence and actively engaging with consumers on these platforms, thereby enhancing the attractiveness of tourism brands, fostering trust, building a sense of community and loyalty, and ultimately cultivating brand affection in a competitive market.

This study fills up the gap by focusing on the senior tourists' brand love and testing how social media activities impact on brand love through brand experience. This study contributes to the literature by providing valuable insights into how social media activities impact on senior tourists' brand love, as well as, extend the SOR Model. While previous studies have primarily focused on senior tourists' customer-brand relationship, fewer have examined their implications for brand love. Additionally, examining eWOM fit as a moderator highlights the external information in response to brand love. The study aims to examine the relationship between social media activities and brand love. Brand experience is the mediator and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) is the moderator. The questionnaire is utilized to collect data and smart-pls is performed to analyze the statistics. The research is structured into three sections: (1) theoretical hypothesis development, elucidating the essence and research models of brand love, social media activities, brand experience, and eWOM; (2) a methodology section detailing the empirical research approach, including the research hypothesis, sample characteristics, and results of statistical analyses; and (3) a discussion section culminating in conclusions.

2 Literature review and Hypothesis development
2.1 Theoretical underpinning——S-O-R Model

The study is theoretically based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm, focusing on its relevance to brand love among senior tourists and their social media activities. The S-O-R model, as outlined in environmental psychology literature, posits that external stimuli evoke cognitive and affective processes within individuals, resulting in a personal reaction [6]. In the area of tourism marketing, stimulus may encompass promotional messages or digital media content. Senior tourists, who are increasingly navigating the online space with confidence, are influenced by promotional stimuli that encompass tailored advertisements derived from market segmentation, detailed information regarding travel destinations, and interactive digital features such as polls and online contests. The organism stage (internal processes within the individual) pertains to how seniors intellectually and affectively interpret these inputs [7]. Senior consumers demonstrate diverse technological proficiency and media literacy, leading to distinct cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to advertisements in contrast to younger demographics. The reaction component of the S-O-R model include behavioral behaviors such as content sharing, commenting, or making bookings via social media [8]. By comprehending the interactions of older adults with certain digital content or

interactive components, marketers may refine their strategy, enhance engagement, and ultimately cultivate brand love.

2.2 Hypothesis development
2.2.1 Social media activities and Brand love

The growing reliance on social media platforms for information and social connection has transformed the consumer-brand relationship, particularly among senior users. According to the research by Sikandar and Ahmed [9], social media has changed the relations between consumers and the brand, and consequently, the brand image, loyalty, and affection described as brand love. For example, in the senior tourist market who will interact with social media platforms for research, sharing and identification with brands. Furthermore, senior tourists exhibit a higher propensity to establish an emotional connection with brands through direct communication facilitated by social media, since they are particularly receptive to human attention [10]. If a senior tourist comments or inquires about a travel destination on a brand's social media account and the company answers promptly and positively, the senior tourist is likely to evaluate the brand highly in terms of accessibility and customer service.

The following hypothesis has been derived based on this extensive literature review:

H1: Social media activities has a positive influence on Brand love.

2.2.2 Brand experience and brand love

Brand experience frequently evokes emotions, possibly leading to deep affection, commonly referred to as "brand love." Senior tourists particularly appreciate businesses that offer services customized to their specific needs and preferences, such as accessible accommodations, vacation planning assistance, or health and wellness support [11]. The relationship between brand experience and brand love is not unequivocal. Numerous factors can influence whether a positive encounter results in enduring attachment. Moreover, experiences congruent with an individual's self-concept may foster deeper emotional ties [12]. Although the relationship between experience and emotional responses is extensively documented, there has been insufficient research investigating how the unique values and identities of seniors affect this process.

The following hypothesis has been derived based on this extensive literature review:

H2: Brand experience has a positive influence on Brand Love

2.2.3 Mediating role of brand experience

Contemporary study has shifted its focus to the digital realm, examining the discourse on brand experience in relation to brand love, where experiences are increasingly taking place. The research conducted by Ferreira *et al.,* [13] emphasized the significance of social media's impact on the development of brand experiences. Senior tourists, increasingly adept at utilizing digital platforms, typically rely on them for travel inspiration, storytelling, and engagement with tourism firms. This type of interaction would enhance brand experiences through accessible information, inclusivity, and direct engagement with the company. Engagement activities such as like, commenting, and sharing enhance the interactions between seniors and the brand, hence augmenting the experiential value [14]. Beyond the improvement of experience, these activities cultivate brand love by reinforcing emotional connection and trust. Consequently, social media serves as a conduit linking brand engagement to brand love via the intermediary of brand experience [15].

H3: Brand experience mediates the relationship between social media activities and brand love.

2.2.4 The moderating role of EWOM

Increased engagement and loyalty are the results of positive brand experiences. Acting as a moderator, eWOM has the potential to either enhance or reduce the relationship between brand experience and brand love, depending on the tone and content of the communication [16]. Research by Liu and Yan [17] point out that the credibility of online reviews, as well as their relevance, would only rise if a review were obtained from a fellow senior tourist, with those being the most influential among the strongest reviewers. This is because senior tourists tend to be more knowledgeable about such matters. Furthermore, the study by Iqbal *et al.,* [18] were in agreement that interest-sharing peers should be given more weight when it comes to consumer opinion. This indicates that tone and volume are factors that come into play when eWOM acts as a moderator of the connection between brand experience and brand love.

H4: Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) positively moderate the relationship between brand experience and brand love among senior tourists.

2.3 Conceptual framework

Figure 1 below illustrates the conceptual model that portrays the relationship between social media activities, brand experience, ewom and brand love.
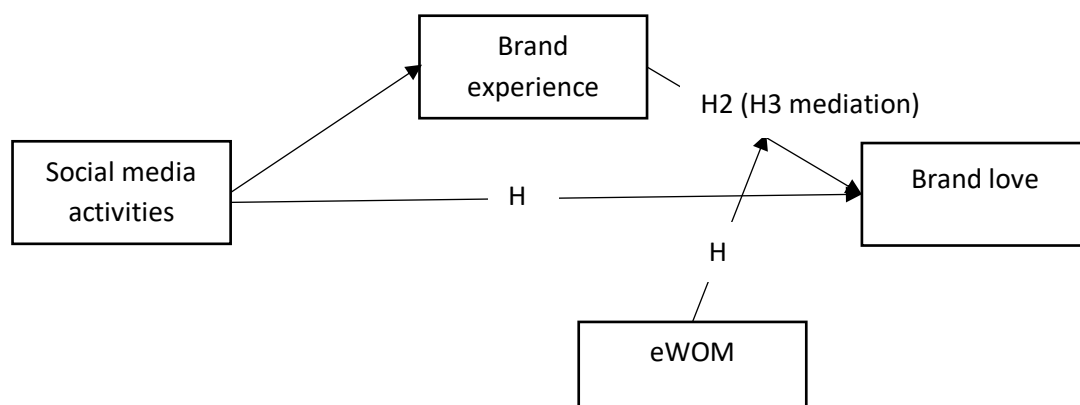
Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

3 Methodology

The quantitative method will be used to analysis the research by pls-sem. The research employs structured questionnaires as the main method of data collection, primarily concentrating on quantitative analysis to investigate the effect of social media on senior tourists' brand love. The questionnaires are particularly beneficial to the researcher due to their fast way of collecting a very large volume of data from a wide and large audience [19]. The data collection process using structured questionnaires involves several meticulous steps to ensure the collection of valid and reliable data:

The questionnaire has two sections. Section A comprises the personal information of the respondents, whereas Section B evaluates assesses the research variables taken from literature using a five-point Likert scale. The five-point Likert scale assigns the following values: 1 for "strongly disagree", 2 for "disagree", 3 for "neutral", 4 for "agree", 5 for "strongly agree".

4. Result

4.1 Respondent Profile

Based on descriptive statistics, 47.4% of participants were male, and 43.6% were female. The age distribution revealed that 31.25% of the respondents were aged between 65 and 65 years, 39.32% were between 66 and 70 years, and 24.48% were aged between 71 and 75 years. A smaller portion, 4.95%, was older than 75 years. In terms of educational attainment, the largest group consisted of individuals with a secondary school education or lower (34.11%), followed by those with a high school diploma or equivalent (40.36%). Regarding employment status, 1.04% were employed full-time, 36.2% were employed part-time, 16.67% were unemployed, and 46.09% were retired. Furthermore, 43.49% of participants reported an annual income ranging from ¥25,000 to ¥59,999, while a minority, 9.9%, earned over ¥100,000 annually.

4.2 Validity and Reliability of the Measurement Model

Construct Reliability and Validity is shown below in Table 1. Utilizing the loadings, we computed the composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) for the four key constructs. The results revealed that all constructs exhibited Cronbach's alpha and CR values above 0.7, while AVE values surpassed the 0.5 threshold, confirming strong structural validity. These findings indicate high internal consistency within the measurement model, reinforcing the reliability and accuracy of our study [20].

Table 1
Construct Reliability and Validity

Variables	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Brand experience	BE1	0.862	0.898	0.918	0.585
	BE2	0.791			
	BE3	0.756			
	BE4	0.736			
	BE5	0.721			
	BE6	0.776			
	BE7	0.679			
	BE8	0.787			
Brand love	BL1	0.808	0.925	0.937	0.597
	BL2	0.767			
	BL3	0.791			
	BL4	0.804			
	BL5	0.804			
	BL6	0.724			
	BL7	0.752			
	BL8	0.763			
	BL9	0.776			
	BL10	0.732			
EWOM	EWOM1	0.834	0.924	0.938	0.655
	EWOM2	0.825			
	EWOM3	0.826			
	EWOM4	0.812			
	EWOM5	0.738			
	EWOM6	0.787			
	EWOM7	0.83			
	EWOM8	0.817			
Social media activities	SMA1	0.736	0.913	0.928	0.562
	SMA2	0.774			

SMA3	0.766	
SMA4	0.778	
SMA5	0.8	
SMA6	0.724	
SMA7	0.723	
SMA8	0.699	
SMA9	0.715	

To assess discriminant validity, we applied the Fornell–Larcker criterion, where the square root of each construct's AVE exceeded its correlations with other constructs [20]. This result confirms that the measurement scales effectively differentiate between constructs. Additionally, we employed the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, as suggested by Henseler *et al.,* [21], due to its heightened sensitivity in detecting discriminant validity issues in PLS-SEM models. As shown in Table 2, all HTMT values remained below the 0.85 benchmark, further verifying discriminant validity [21]. Collectively, these Fornell–Larcker and HTMT assessments reinforce the robustness of our measurement model, demonstrating that the constructs are distinct and appropriately defined for examining variable inter-relationships.

Table 2
Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

Variable	BE	BL	EWOM	SMA	EWOM x BE
BE					
BL	0.602				
EWOM	0.567	0.588			
SMA	0.446	0.521	0.476		
EWOM x BE	0.308	0.059	0.156	0.075	

4.2 Direct Effects Analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to analyze both direct and indirect effects among study variables. To evaluate hypothesis validity and assess path coefficient significance, Smart-PLS bootstrapping was applied alongside a one-tailed test with a 5% significance level. The hypothesis significance was determined using "P values" and "T-statistics," derived through a 5,000-resample bootstrapping approach [22].

The results, as presented in Table 3, indicate that social media activities have a significant positive effect on brand love ($\beta = 0.217$, $t = 4.206$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Moreover, the research revealed that brand experience has positive impact on brand love ($\beta = 0.379$, $t = 6.135$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2.

Table3
Analysis of direct effects

Hypothesis	Relationship	Original sample (O)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	Decision
H1	SMA -> BL	0.217	4.206	0	Supported
H2	BE -> BL	0.379	6.135	0	Supported

4.3 Mediation Effect Analysis

To examine the mediating roles of brand experience (BE) in the relationship between social media activities (SMA) and brand love (BL), mediation analyses were conducted following the guidelines outlined by Hayes [23]. The mediation analysis demonstrates that both brand experience (BE) serves as significant mediator in the relationship between SMA and BL. Specifically, the effect of SMA on BL via BE is significant ($\beta = 0.154$, $t = 4.996$, $p < 0.001$). These findings emphasize the pivotal roles of brand experience as mediator in shaping consumer brand relationships within the senior tourism context.

Table 4
Indirect and interaction effect results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Original sample (O)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values	Decision
H3	SMA -> BE -> BL	0.154	4.996	0	Supported
H4	EWOM -> BE -> BL	0.224	4.197	0	Supported

4.4 Analysis of the Moderating Effect of EWOM

The assessment of EWOM moderating influence within the connection between brand experience and brand love revealed notable insights. Applying the PLS-SEM method and incorporating the interaction term into the foundational framework, researchers examined its effect on Brand love [24].

In table 4, the moderation analysis reveals that electronic word of mouth (eWOM) significantly moderates the BE-BL and BI-BL relationships. Specifically, eWOM positively moderates the BE-BL relationship ($\beta = 0.224$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that when EWOM levels are high, the effect of BE on BL is strengthened.

To further clarify the moderating effects, simple slope analysis was conducted, providing deeper insights into the relationship dynamics. Figure2 illustrates the moderating effect of EWOM on the relationship between BE and BL. The results of the simple slope analysis reveal that eWOM significantly moderates the relationship between brand experience and brand love. A high eWOM strengthens almost distinctly the positive effect exerted by BE on BL, opposite to the scenario of a low level of eWOM. This means if senior tourists engage in eWOM, the stronger would be the

connection between their positive brand experiences and brand love, thus reflecting the messenger function of eWOM in fostering emotional brand attachments.
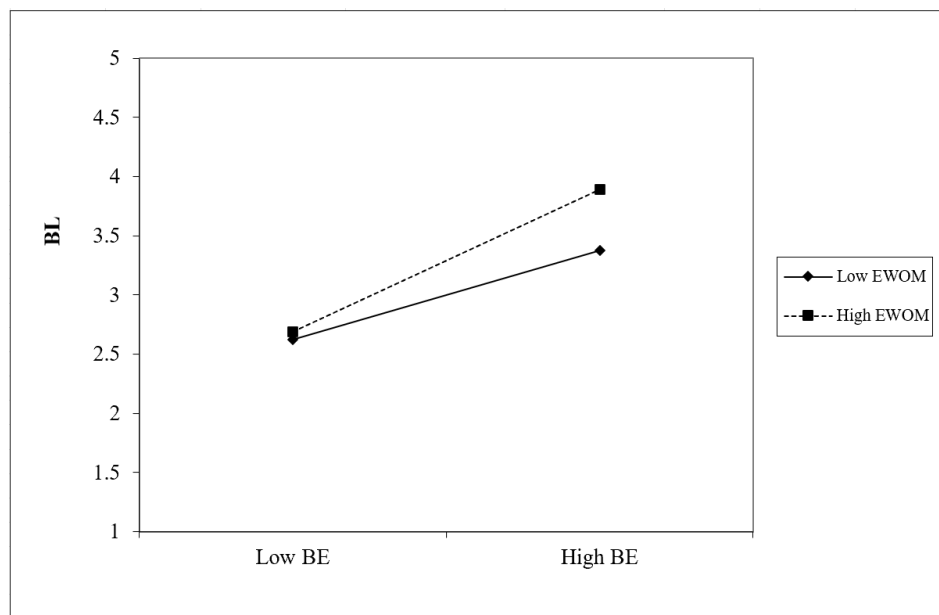

Fig. 2. The moderation effect of EWOM in the relationship between BE and BL

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigates the complex relationships between social media activities, brand experience, eWOM and brand love. The results offer valuable insights on how social media impact on senior tourists' brand love. The results confirm the hypothesis in this research, showing that social media activities significantly influence brand love. These findings are consistent with S-O-R model, extending eWOM as a moderator.

The results confirm that social media activities significantly influence brand love both directly and indirectly. Specifically, brand experience was found to be the significant mediator in this relationship. According to the research by Kim *et al.,* [25], a senior tourist with a positive image of a cruise line due to its high level of service and safety standards is more likely to have brand love. These findings are aligned with previous studies suggesting that social media enhances consumer perception and experience, which in turn foster emotional attachment and loyalty [26]. Senior tourists, in particular, appear to derive emotional value from interactive, community-driven online engagements.

6. Implication

This research has significance in two aspects for both academic contributions and practical applications. In terms of academic implications, this study is important for researches as it contributes to the tourism literature by assessing brand love for a specifically inclusive group of tourists, seniors, in a swiftly aging society, in which literature has almost completely neglected. Moreover, by including eWOM as an important moderating variable, this study builds on the SOR model and furthers demonstrates eWOM can enhance brand love in senior tourists. From a practical standpoint, the developments resulting from this research provide tourism marketers with significant outputs. The

research identifies social media as playing an important role in travel choices by senior tourists, highlighting the need for tourism marketers to increase digital marketing to targeted specifically to this age group. The findings will also assist policymakers and destination managers in their policy and infrastructure development to also encourage tourism for senior markets.

7. Limitation and Future research

The study has significant limitations. First, due to the cross-sectional design, we could not determine a causal direction between the variables. Future research could use an anticipatory, longitudinal, or experimental design to observe changes in brand preferences over time. Second, the data came from senior tourists in Jiangsu Province, China, therefore it cannot be applied to other regions or age groups. External validity might improve with a larger sample from different cultures and regions. Third, we employed eWOM as a mediator without distinguishing between its specific dimensions (impact, credibility, and quantity). These eWOM aspects should be studied to better understand how they affect senior consumers' brand perceptions. Ultimately, qualitative research such as interviews may elucidate senior visitors' emotional reactions to social media marketing activities.

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