

# Does Online-offline Brand Image Consistency Influence Brand Relationships? Empirical Research on Retail Brands

Yue Huang\*  
Lu Suo\*\*

## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to study, based on Schema Theory and customers' brand experience, the effect of online-offline brand image consistency in retail stores on consumer brand relationship variables such as brand trust, word-of-mouth (WOM), and willingness to co-create value. Using an online survey questionnaire and convenience sampling, data were collected from 421 Chinese consumers (18 years and older) who had made purchases from around 45 retail brands within the past year. Structural equation modeling was employed for data analysis. The findings confirm that online-offline brand image consistency positively influences brand experience. Furthermore, brand experience was found to positively affect retail brand relationships (brand trust, WOM, willingness to co-create value). Moreover, online-offline brand image consistency in retail stores was found to positively impact brand relationship variables. Finally, brand experience was found to play a role as an intermediary in the association between online-offline brand image consistency and retail brand relationships. These results provide valuable insights for the retail industry, suggesting the importance of incorporating online and offline brand image consistency into corporate branding strategies to attract and retain customers.

**Keywords:** Brand Experience; Brand Relationship; Brand Trust; Online-Offline Brand Image Consistency; WOM

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\* Ph. D, Faculty of Business and Technology, Stamford International University, Thailand.

\*\* Lecturer, Graduate School, Stamford International University, Thailand.

## Introduction

Brand consistency refers to a company's capability to maintain consistent communication and positioning aligned with its core values and identity elements. It involves ensuring that all brand touchpoints, including visual elements, messaging, and overall brand experience, remain cohesive and coherent across different channels and platforms (Lanseng & Olsen, 2012). By upholding brand consistency, a company can reinforce its identity, build trust with its audience, and establish a strong and recognizable brand presence in the market (Rowden, 2000). In today's consumer landscape, customers follow diverse consumption paths and may come across brands through various channels. They may, for instance, encounter a brand's products on social media, hear about it from friends, or see its advertisements in physical stores. In such scenarios, if a brand presents inconsistent brand images across different channels, customers may be confused and it may be difficult for them to remember or trust the brand.

Lack of brand consistency hinders customers' ability to quickly recognize the brand's products (Balogh & Hedin, 2011). Consequently, inconsistent brand image can ultimately lead to business failure. For instance, the Chinese laundry detergent brand Power 28 became a renowned player in the market by making its brand synonymous with domestic laundry detergent. It even surpassed major competitors like P&G. However, Power 28 made the flawed decision to venture into the pure water industry, which ultimately resulted in failure since customers associated the water sold by Power 28 with the scent of laundry detergent, highlighting the consequences of inconsistent brand image. Similarly, other Chinese brands like Changhong cell phone, Midea electrical appliances, Gomez real estate, Chundu pork processing, Grants air conditioners, Hongtashan flooring, Wahaha children's clothing, and Wang Laoji solid porridge had impressive launches, yet failed to sustain their success in the vast sea of brands. Maintaining brand consistency is crucial to business success as it helps establish a strong and enduring brand image in the minds of customers (Matthiesen & Phau, 2005). That strong brand acts as a powerful symbol that customers can easily recognize and connect with.

In 2021, China witnessed a notable increase in total retail sales of consumer goods, amounting to 44.1 trillion yuan, marking 12.5% growth compared to the previous year (Statista, 2023). Notably, online retail sales demonstrated steady growth despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on offline retailers. Projections indicate that China's online retail sales will approach 4 trillion US dollars by 2026 (Statista, 2022). The rapid rise of e-commerce presents a significant challenge to the retail industry, particularly with the explosive growth of live-streaming with goods and other online retail trends. As a result, offline retail brands are facing ever more daunting challenges. Consequently, finding ways to enhance the quality of retail brand relationships through online channels has become an urgent concern for retail companies to address.

The existing literature on retailers' online extensions primarily focuses on two main topics: firstly, online and offline store image; secondly, customer perception of online and offline service quality, along with research on the consistency of store image and service quality, etc.

(Badrinarayanan, Becerra, Kim, & Madhavaram, 2012; Badrinarayanan, Becerra, & Madhavaram, 2014; Wang, Beatty, & Mothersbaugh, 2009; Wu, Chang, & Hou, 2017). However, there is a research gap in the literature when it comes to directly examining the perceived consistency of multi-channel retailers' online and offline brand image directly. There are some references in the literature to online and offline brand image (Alzate, Arce-Urriza & Cebollada, 2022), the impact of interactivity between online and offline channels (Kuppelwieser, Klaus, Manthiou, & Hollebeek, 2022), online and offline retailing (Ratchford, Soysal, Zentner, & Gauri, 2022); however, little attention has been paid to the consistency of brand image with respect to both retail brands' physical stores and online virtual stores. To fill the gap in the literature, this research introduces the concept of online-offline brand image consistency and investigates its impact on retail brand relationships. More specifically, this study uses empirical analysis to examine whether online and offline brand image consistency in retail stores affects consumers' trust in the brand, word-of-mouth and consumers' willingness to co-create value. Additionally, this study incorporates brand experience into the model in order to explore whether it acts as a mediator between online-offline brand image consistency and retail brand relationships. The inclusion of brand experience in the model is justified for two reasons. Firstly, enhancing customer brand experience is crucial for retail brands, as a positive shopping experience is vital to supporting brands' future growth, particularly as they expand into e-commerce channels. Moreover, creating unique and valuable customer experiences is not only strategically important in the retail industry, but also a significant focus in current academic research, as highlighted by studies such as those of Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016), Vargo and Lusch (2008), and Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009). By way of example, Bleier, Harmeling, and Palmatier (2018) found that well-designed product pages are critical for improving the customer experience in online retailing.

Based on the above analysis, this study incorporates online-offline brand image consistency, brand experience, and retail brand relationship quality into the analytical framework in order to investigate the mediating mechanisms through which online-offline brand image consistency affects retail brand relationship quality. This study makes a number of innovative contributions. First, online-offline brand image consistency is a new concept that is introduced based on Schema Theory, and through the analysis of its mediating effect influence mechanism, it enriches the research related to the online-offline perceptual consistency of multichannel retailers. Second, this study expands the empirical analysis of brand experience influence factors. Third, this study enriches the theoretical perspective with respect to improving the quality of retail brand relationships.

In this paper, the initial section provides an overview of the literature, while the second section provides a description of the research methodology. Subsequently, the third section presents the research findings, while the fourth section examines those findings in detail and considers their implications for both academic literature and practical applications. Finally, the fifth section summarizes the study's conclusions, outlines its limitations, and suggests potential avenues for future research.

## Literature Review

### Online- Offline Brand Image Consistency

The construct of online-offline brand image consistency is rooted in Schema Theory, which explains how new information is processed by comparing it with existing cognitive structures called schemas, which are formed by memories of past experiences with objects or entities (Fiske & Linville, 1980). In the context of branding, a brand name can form a cognitive schema that contains a series of customer experiences and perceptions of the brand's qualities. According to Schema Theory, online-offline brand image consistency can influence customers' attitudes towards those channels when relevant brand associations are strongly present. Consistency between the offline physical stores and online brand images can impact customers' attitudinal responses, especially when there is a perceived similarity between the channels (Bezes, 2013). Consistency is key when it comes to building trust and credibility with the community; inconsistent branding, by contrast, can create confusion and mistrust among the audience (Depeçik, Everdingen, & Bruggen, 2014). Brand consistency refers to the practice of presenting a uniform image, message, and experience across all customer interactions, both online and offline (Grostøl & Kristensen, 2018). By presenting a consistent brand image, retailers and marketers make it easier for their customers to recognize and remember the brand. This can be expected to lead to increased brand awareness and loyalty, as well as more referrals and WOM marketing (Tome, 2023). Therefore, it is important for a company to raise the issue of consistency between brand image in traditional market places and that found in the virtual world (Keller, 2003).

The brand image of a multichannel retailer can have various dimensions. Some multichannel shoppers develop a brand image based on their overall experience across all channels, while others have distinct brand images and expectations for each channel. When a traditional in-store retail brand expands into the virtual realm of the Internet, it shares similarities and involves implications with extending a product brand to other products. As with brand extensions, most brick-and-mortar retailers use the same retail brand name for both offline and online channels; however, the offerings of a multichannel retailer may differ between its offline and online channels. Nevertheless, by leveraging the positive associations and reputation of the parent brand (Keller & Aaker, 1992), multichannel retailers can capitalize on the halo effect to establish a favorable online brand image and achieve positive evaluation of their online performance. This perspective is supported by the success of multichannel retailers compared to pure online players (Vishwanath & Mulvin, 2001).

With the increasing prevalence of multichannel shopping, the seamless integration of operations and consistency in multichannel brand strategy has become even more critical if multichannel retailers wish to fully benefit from the transfer of a strong offline brand image. Gabisch and Gwebu (2011) defined online-offline brand image consistency as the degree of compatibility or fit between consumers' perceived online and offline brand images. Research by Wang et al. (2009) confirmed the importance of consistency between online and offline environments in generating positive attitudes towards companies. Badrinarayanan et al. (2012)

developed a research model on purchase intention in online stores of multi-channel retailers, highlighting the significance of overall store image consistency. Wu et al. (2017) conducted studies on the impact of online-offline price consistency and product category consistency on retail brands, respectively, indicating the role of consistency in different dimensions.

### **Brand Experience**

Unlike constructs such as brand attitude or brand attachment, brand experience focuses on the range of emotions that arise when a customer interacts with a brand. More than forty years ago, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) highlighted that the role of experience is of great significance in shaping consumer behavior in the context of consumption. Brand experience, as defined by Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013), refers to an individual's intrinsic subjective response to a particular brand. According to Brakus et al. (2009), brand experience refers to the sensations, emotions, insights, and behavioral responses evoked by stimuli associated with a brand. These stimuli encompass various elements such as the brand's design and personality, packaging, environments, and communications. Alloza (2008) defines brand experience as the consumer's perception during every interaction with a brand, whether it be through advertising, initial personal contact, or the quality of personal treatment they receive; it encompasses the consumer's perception at each moment of contact with the brand.

Brand experience is a multidimensional construct, and there are several proposed dimensions in the literature. The four dimensions proposed by Brakus et al. (2009) and the five dimensions proposed by Schmitt (1999) are among the most widely used. This study follows Brakus et al.'s (2009) definition of brand experience as the sensory, emotional, insightful, and behavioral responses elicited by brand-related stimuli.

### **Brand Relationship**

In this study, we refer to Wang and Huang (2023) for their analysis of brand relationship quality, which they divided into 3 dimensions: brand trust, WOM, and willingness to co-create value.

Trust is essential in building and maintaining customer relationships, and it is especially relevant in the context of online-offline brand image consistency and the retail brand relationships. Hence, we chose trust as one of the dimensions to measure brand relationship. He (2006) developed and validated a measurement model for consumer brand relationship quality based upon Chinese indigenous social psychology; in particular, the study emphasized the pivotal role of trust in shaping the quality of brand relationships and its significance in establishing and maintaining a strong bond between consumers and brands. In addition, previous research by Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2001) and Roberts, Varki, and Brodie (2003) also highlighted the importance of trust as a critical dimension in studying brand relationships, especially in the context of multichannel retailing (Badrinarayanan et al., 2014).

Moreover, word-of-mouth (WOM), and willingness to co-create value were also selected as two other dimensions of retail brand relationship in the study. WOM and willingness to co-create value are considered critical in understanding retail brand relationships, as they emphasize the involvement of external stakeholders in co-creating value for the brand.

WOM is one of the oldest ways of conveying information (Dellarocas, 2003). Katz and Lazarsfeld (1966) described WOM as the exchanging of marketing information between consumers in such a way that it plays a fundamental role in shaping their behavior and in changing attitudes toward products and services.

Furthermore, Vargo and Lusch (2004), Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016), and He, Huang, and Wu (2018) have argued that value co-creation activities in the retail context involve not only company managers and employees, but also external stakeholders, such as consumers. In addition, Ramirez and Garcia-Penalvo (2018) explained that co-creation is a form of open innovation that integrates knowledge, information and related skills in different institutional environments, and promotes multi-agent participation, which is an important basis for enterprises to obtain sustainable competitive advantages.

These three constructs are important in capturing the dynamic and interactive nature of retail brand relationships, and thus are included in the model for this study.

### **Online - Offline Brand Image Consistency and Brand Experience**

According to research on expectation confirmation by Olson, Roese, and Zanna (1996), individuals tend to experience positive emotions when their anticipated outcomes align with the actual results. In the context of online shopping, when shoppers have expectations of encountering website images that resemble their offline experiences, and these expectations are fulfilled due to high consistency between the online and offline brand images, it leads to positive emotional responses. As a result, shoppers are more likely to pay closer attention, feel a sense of control, and experience positive emotions, ultimately contributing to a positive impact on website traffic. Consistency between online and offline brand images enhances the alignment of expectations and outcomes, fostering a more satisfying and engaging online shopping experience for customers (Landers, Beatty, Wang, & Mothersbaugh, 2015). Badrinarayanan et al. (2014) categorized customers' attitudes towards online stores into practical and hedonic dimensions, differentiating offline and online store images across seven areas such as transaction convenience, service, and price orientation. The authors found that consistency between customers' perceptions of offline and online store experiences influenced their attitudes and purchase intentions through the mediating role of trust. Drawing on Schema Theory, which suggests that new information can trigger changes in a customer's cognitive schema and subsequently impact brand attitudes (Wu et al., 2017), it can be postulated that when online and offline environments are consistent, it often enhances the overall customer experience, reinforces brand image, and increases customer loyalty. Based on this, it can be hypothesized that customers' brand experience will be positively influenced when they perceive consistency between the online and offline brand image. Therefore:

**H1:** Online-offline brand image consistency positively impact brand experience.

### **Brand Experience and Brand Relationship**

Chang and Chieng (2006) discovered that individual experiences, as well as other relevant experiences, have an impact on consumer-brand relationships. Klabi (2020) highlighted

that self-image congruence enhances the quality of brand perception, and brand experience plays a reinforcing role. In other words, self-image congruence and brand experience can serve as effective marketing tools for cultivating long-term consumer-brand relationships. Kumar and Kaushik (2018) argued that brand experience has distinct effects on two-way communication and emotional exchange in consumer-brand relationships. Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010) stated that brand experience can positively affect trust, satisfaction and commitment. Azize, Cemal and Hakan (2012) found that brand experience is positively related to brand trust. The importance of e-WOM has grown as an increasing number of people turned to online shopping during the Covid-19 period. In a study conducted by Almohaimmed (2020) focusing on Arabic restaurants, the relationship between brand experience and e-WOM was examined. The findings revealed that three dimensions of brand experience, namely emotional, sensory, and behavioral, have a significant influence on e-WOM. Iqbal, Malik, Yousaf and Yaqub (2020) confirmed that a brand's reputation and brand experience are positively related with brand love and e-WOM in the Smartphone industry. Li, Bu, and Cao (2019) examined the influence of customer involvement in value co-creation on brand relationships, and found that brand experience positively impacts brand relationships. Moreover, according to value co-creation theory, value co-creation stems from the continuous process of creating consumer experiences between consumers and brands (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). It can be inferred that when the brand experience is enhanced, customers are more inclined to establish a robust and meaningful relationship with the brand, which in turn fosters trust, WOM, and willingness to co-create value for the brand. Hence:

**H2:** Brand experience positively influences brand relationships, including (2a) brand trust, (2b) WOM, and (2c) willingness to co-create value.

### **Online - Offline Brand Image Consistency and Brand Relationship**

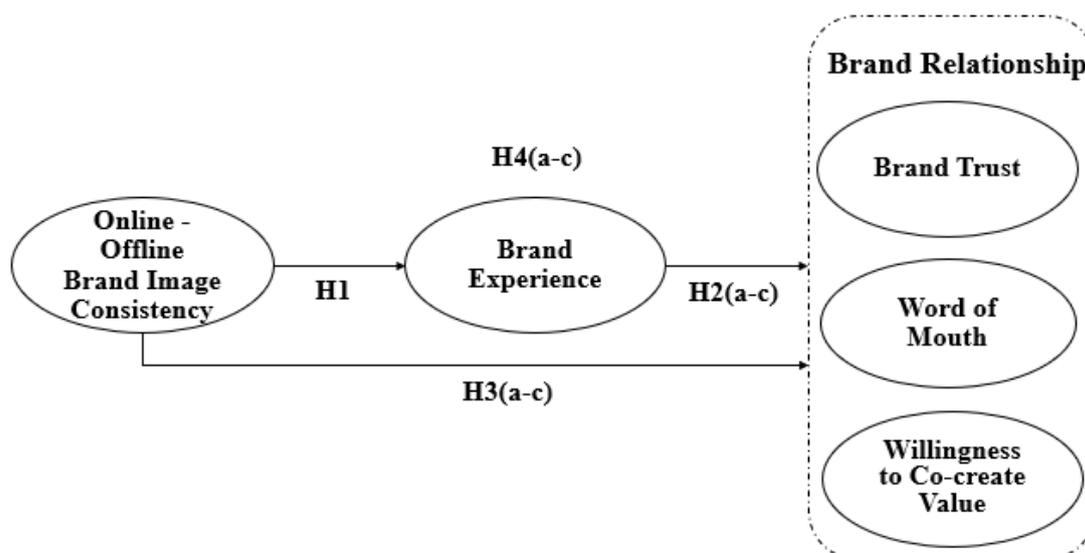
The theory of cognitive consistency explains that consistent beliefs about an object are desirable and linked to a more positive overall evaluation of those objects (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). According to attitude theory, inconsistency can lead to ambivalence, which, in turn, may result in less favorable and less stable attitudes, as supported by Eagly and Chaiken (1993). Many consumers use different channels interchangeably during their purchasing process, by, for example, searching for products or services online but then making purchases in physical stores. This switching behavior impacts consumer loyalty to a particular channel or store, and consumers may switch not only the channel but also the seller (Chiu, Hsieh, Roan, & Tseng, 2011). When a retail store's brand image is not consistent between online and offline stores, it increases the risk and uncertainty with respect to consumer perception of the brand, leading to reduced brand trust. Additionally, Newman, Stem and Sprott (2004) noted that people generally prefer consistency and avoid inconsistencies in the perceptions, actions, people, and events in their lives. Consistency in the online-offline brand image of a retail store helps consumers remember the brand as it conveys a message that aligns with the brand image and values. Burmann, Schaeffe and Maloney (2008) pointed out that customer behavior is influenced and determined by brand image. Consistency in online-offline brand image in retail stores can evoke positive emotions and create favorable brand associations, resulting in consumers' warm and enjoyable feelings, thereby enhancing their brand relationships. Hence:

**H3:** Online-offline brand image consistency positively influences brand relationship, including (3a) brand trust, (3b) WOM, and (3c) willingness to co-create value.

### The Mediating Role of Brand Experience

The stimulus-organism-response (SOR) model proposes that an individual's behavioral response is influenced by an external stimulus that affects that person's internal state. The external stimulus can include marketing factors like store or brand image, environmental atmosphere, promotions, or consumer situations. In this study, online-offline brand image consistency is considered to be the external stimulus (S); the customer's brand experience is the organismic factor (O), and the customer's response (R) includes brand trust, word of mouth, and willingness to co-create value. Schema Theory suggests that the introduction of new information through a brand's extension to online or offline platforms can change the customer's cognitive schema and impact his or her brand attitude or brand equity. Landers, Beatty Wang, and Mothersbaugh (2015) found that a customer's mind stream experience is negatively affected by inconsistency in online-offline retail brand image, which in turn affects the customer's attitudes towards websites and his or her purchase behavior. Additionally, Jiang and Zhao (2013) mentioned that store image influences purchase behavior through consumers' virtual experience based on the S-O-R model. Gong, Ye, Wu, and Liu (2019) applied the S-O-R model to reveal that ambience cues in live scenes impact impulse consumption intention through the mediating role of mind-flow experience. Hence:

**H4:** Online-offline brand image consistency influences the retail brand relationships including (4a) brand trust, (4b) WOM, and (4c) willingness to co-create value through the mediating role of brand experience.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

## Research Methodology

### Participants

The study comprised a total of 45 general retail brands, categorized into 20 specialty store brands (e.g., Uniqlo, Liangpin Shop, Three Squirrels, Li Ning, Watson's, etc.), 15 supermarket brands (e.g., China Resources Vanguard, Wal-Mart, etc.), 5 department store brands (e.g., Wanda, Yintai, etc.), and 5 home appliance retailer brands (e.g., Suning, Gree, Midea, etc.), representing diverse types of retailers. The participants were Chinese consumers who were 18 years old or older who had made purchases from these 45 retail brands within the previous 12 months.

The representativeness of the retailer brands examined in this study can be attributed to the diversity of retailer types. Moreover, these 45 brands analyzed in this study had a strong presence in both online and offline channels, ensuring comprehensive and easily accessible services for customers. Furthermore, these top 45 retail brands mentioned had gained recognition as leaders in their respective industries and were widely regarded as representatives of their fields. This acknowledgment is supported by the outcomes of the online voting conducted in China for the Retail Big Business Brand Awards in December 2022.

Convenience sampling was used to collect data through an online questionnaire survey conducted from March to April 2023. In this research, the distribution and collection of questionnaires was facilitated through an online professional data research platform called Questionnaire Star. Participants who met the screening criteria and completed the questionnaires were provided with WeChat cash bonuses as rewards.

Two criteria were established for screening the questionnaires. Firstly, questionnaires with extremely short completion times (e.g., less than 200 seconds) were excluded based on the completion time statistics. Secondly, in the initial part of the study, participants were required to provide the specific name of a retailer brand. Before completing the second part, which involved the evaluation of the brand experience, participants were prompted to restate the name of the retailer brand to ensure careful and accurate responses. If the retailer brand name provided by a participant was not consistent, the questionnaire was deemed invalid. Out of the 443 questionnaires collected, a total of 421 valid questionnaires were retained after applying the elimination criteria.

Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic information of the participants in the research. A majority of the respondents were female, constituting 62.47% of the total sample, while males accounted for 37.53%. This gender distribution seems consistent with the idea that women are more likely to engage in shopping activities compared to men, and thus may be more willing to participate in a study related to retail brands. Respondents were mainly aged 18-30 years old (56.29%) and had a bachelor's degree (46.08%). More than half of the respondents (50.02%) worked in the private sector with a monthly income of 5,001-10,000 RMB (54.39%).

**Table 1: Demographic Profile**

Variable		Frequency	% (n=421)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	158	37.53%
	Female	263	62.47%
<b>Age</b>	18-30	237	56.29%
	31-40	145	34.44%
	41-50	24	5.7%
<b>Your Education</b>	Above 51	15	3.56%
	High school or below	51	12.11%
	Diploma	79	18.76%
	Bachelor's Degree	194	46.08%
	Master's Degree	87	20.67%
<b>Monthly income (Chinese Yuan)</b>	Doctoral Degree	10	2.38%
	≤3,000	30	7.13%
	3,001-5,000	142	33.73%
	5,001-10,000	229	54.39%
<b>Occupation</b>	≥10,001	20	4.75%
	Student	77	18.29%
	Government employee	86	20.43%
	Private employee	219	50.02%
	Own business	31	7.36%
	Others	8	1.90%

### Measurements

The variables measured in the questionnaire were adopted from prior literature. The data were collected using a 7-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) for all items. Table 2 provides an overview of how measurements from different researchers were adapted for this study.

**Table 2: Source of Measurement Item in Questionnaire**

Variable	Indicators	Measurement Items	Source
<b>Online - Offline Brand Image Consistency</b>	<b>OBIC1</b>	The retailer's online brand image is consistent with its offline brick-and-mortar brand image.	Carlson & O'Cass (2011)
	<b>OBIC2</b>	The retailer's online brand image fits with my image of the offline retailer.	
	<b>OBIC3</b>	The retailer's online brand image matches that of its offline retailer.	

**Table 2: Source of Measurement Item in Questionnaire (Cont.)**

Variable	Indicators	Measurement Items	Source
<b>Brand Experience</b>	<b>BE1</b>	This brand makes a strong impression on my visual sense or other senses.	Brakus et al. (2009)
	<b>BE2</b>	I find this brand interesting in a sensory way.	
	<b>BE3</b>	This brand induces feelings and sentiments.	
	<b>BE4</b>	This brand is an emotional brand.	
	<b>BE5</b>	I engage in physical actions and behaviors when I use this brand.	
	<b>BE6</b>	This brand results in physical experiences.	
	<b>BE7</b>	I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter this brand.	
	<b>BE8</b>	This brand stimulates my curiosity and problem solving.	
	<b>BE9</b>	This brand does not appeal to my senses. <sup>a</sup>	
	<b>BE10</b>	I do not feel strong emotions for this brand. <sup>a</sup>	
	<b>BE11</b>	This brand is not action oriented. <sup>a</sup>	
	<b>BE12</b>	This brand does not make me think. <sup>a</sup>	
<b>Brand Trust</b>	<b>BT1</b>	I trust this brand.	Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001)
	<b>BT2</b>	I rely on this brand.	
	<b>BT3</b>	This is an honest brand.	
	<b>BT4</b>	This brand is safe.	
<b>WOM</b>	<b>WOM1</b>	Mentioned to others that I buy product from this brand.	Kuppelwieser et al. (2022)
	<b>WOM2</b>	Made sure that others know that I buy products from this brand.	
	<b>WOM3</b>	Spoke positively about employee(s) of this brand to others.	
	<b>WOM4</b>	Recommended this brand to family members.	
	<b>WOM5</b>	Spoke positively of this brand to others.	
	<b>WOM6</b>	Recommended this brand to acquaintances.	
	<b>WOM7</b>	Recommended this brand to close personal friends.	
<b>Willingness To Co-Create Value</b>	<b>WTCV1</b>	I often express my personal needs to the company that owns this brand.	Nysveen & Pedersen, (2014)
	<b>WTCV2</b>	I often make suggestions about how this brand can improve its services.	
	<b>WTCV3</b>	I participate in decisions about how this brand offers its services.	
	<b>WTCV4</b>	I often find solutions to my problems together with this brand.	
	<b>WTCV5</b>	I am actively involved when this brand develops new solutions for me.	
	<b>WTCV6</b>	This brand encourages customers to create solutions together.	

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup> Items are negatively phrased and reverse coded.

## Procedures

To test the proposed conceptual framework, the data collected in this study were analyzed using SPSS 25 software for descriptive statistics and inference, and AMOS 23 software for structural equation modeling (SEM).

## Results

### Measurement and Structural Model Analysis

Reliability and validity were analyzed to test the measurement model in this study, and the goodness-of-fit index was calculated to test the structural model. Table 3 presents the results of the reliability and convergent validity analyses. The alpha and composite reliability (CR) values for all variables were higher than 0.7, indicating good reliability of the measurement scales according to the guidelines proposed by Nunnally (1978). Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct was greater than 0.5, indicating that a substantial proportion of the variance in each observed variable is explained by its corresponding latent constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Moreover, the factor loadin for each variable was above 0.7, indicating that each measurement item had a strong association with its respective latent constructs.

To test discriminant validity, different measurement models, such as three-, four-, and five-factor models, were constructed based on the expected relationships between variables, and the goodness of fit was compared using AMOS23. As shown in Tables 4 and 5, the five-factor model, which included online-offline brand image consistency, brand experience, brand trust, word-of-mouth, and willingness to co-creation value, demonstrated better goodness of fit than the other factor models. This indicates that the five-factor measurement model has relatively better discriminant validity, as it is able to clearly distinguish between the latent constructs and their associated measurement items. These findings suggest that the measurement scales used in the study are reliable and valid, and provide support for the subsequent analyses and interpretation of the results.

**Table 3: Results of Validity and Reliability Analysis**

Factors	Indicators	Factor Loadings	AVE (>0.5)	CR (>0.7)	Cronbach's Alpha
<b>Online - Offline Brand Image Consistency</b>	<b>OBIC1</b>	0.717	0.571	0.841	0.842
	<b>OBIC2</b>	0.822			
	<b>OBIC3</b>	0.786			
<b>Brand Experience</b>	<b>BE1</b>	0.774	0.622	0.937	0.937
	<b>BE2</b>	0.793			
	<b>BE3</b>	0.804			
	<b>BE4</b>	0.796			
	<b>BE5</b>	0.772			
	<b>BE6</b>	0.749			
	<b>BE7</b>	0.795			
	<b>BE8</b>	0.821			

**Table 3: Results of Validity and Reliability Analysis (Cont.)**

Factors	Indicators	Factor Loadings	AVE (>0.5)	CR (>0.7)	Cronbach's Alpha
Brand Trust (BT)	BE9	0.793	0.627	0.871	0.871
	BE10	0.731			
	BT1	0.774			
	BT2	0.793			
	BT3	0.804			
	BT4	0.796			
WOM	WOM1	0.794	0.594	0.880	0.881
	WOM2	0.795			
	WOM4	0.739			
	WOM6	0.781			
	WOM7	0.743			
Willingness To Co-Create Value	WTCV1	0.712	0.507	0.837	0.852
	WTCV2	0.701			
	WTCV3	0.709			
	WTCV4	0.726			
	WTCV5	0.712			

**Table 4: Discriminant Validity**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) OBIC	<b>.756</b>				
(2) BE	.210	<b>.789</b>			
(3) BT	.142	.169	<b>.792</b>		
(4) WOM	.226	.236	.171	<b>.771</b>	
(5) WTCV	.069	.044	.032	.096	<b>.712</b>

Note: OBIC= Online-Offline Brand Image Consistency, BE= Brand Experience, BT= Brand Trust, WOM= Word of Mouth, WTCV= Willingness to Co-Create Value

**Table 5: Fit Indices of Structural Models**

Fit indices	$\chi^2$ /df	GFI	AGFI	CFI	TLI	NFI	RMSEA
<b>Recommended</b>	<3	>0.9	>0.8	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	<0.05
<b>Five-factor model</b>	1.94	0.948	0.934	0.931	0.934	0.933	0.049
<b>Four-factor model<sup>a</sup></b>	2.36	0.914	0.901	0.906	0.908	0.908	0.061
<b>Three-factor model<sup>b</sup></b>	2.98	0.895	0.854	0.886	0.889	0.889	0.072

Note: <sup>a</sup> Merge brand trust and word-of-mouth into one potential factor.

<sup>b</sup> Merge brand trust, word of mouth and willingness to co-create value into one potential factor.

**Direct Effects Testing**

In this study, the significance of the path coefficients was tested using AMOS23 software. The hypotheses, as depicted in Figure 2, were examined, and the results are presented in Table 6. Regarding H1, the findings reveal that online-offline brand image consistency significantly positively impacts brand experience ( $\beta=0.675$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), thus supporting H1. When brand trust is considered as the dependent variable, both online-offline brand image consistency ( $\beta=0.411$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and brand experience ( $\beta=0.394$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) positively affect brand trust. Similarly, when

WOM is the dependent variable, both online-offline brand image consistency ( $\beta=0.582$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and brand experience ( $\beta=0.524$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) significantly impact WOM. Additionally, when willingness to co-create value is the dependent variable, both online-offline brand image consistency ( $\beta=0.486$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and brand experience ( $\beta=0.417$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) significantly positive influence willingness to co-create value. Hence, the findings support both H2 (H2a, H2b, H2c) and H3 (H3a, H3b, H3c). In summary, three hypotheses, H1, H2 and H3, are confirmed.

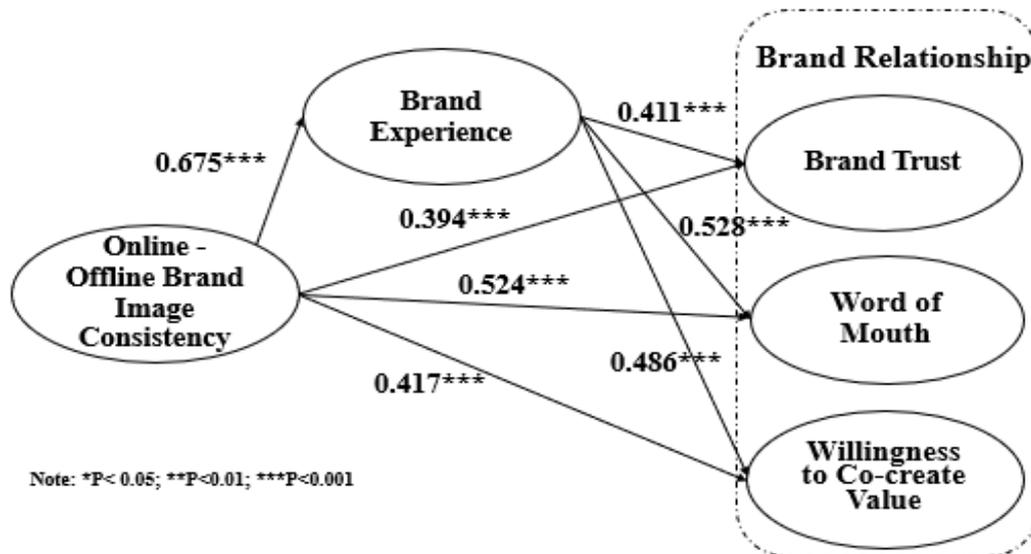


Figure 2: Results of Analysis of Structural Modeling with Hypotheses

Table 6: Result of Hypothesis Test

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	Results
H1	OBIC→BE	0.675***	Supported
H2a	BE→BT	0.411***	Supported
H2b	BE→WOM	0.528***	Supported
H2c	BE→WTCV	0.486***	Supported
H3a	OBIC→BT	0.394***	Supported
H3b	OBIC→WOM	0.524***	Supported
H3c	OBIC→WTCV	0.417***	Supported

Note: OBIC= Online - Offline Brand Image Consistency, BE= Brand Experience, BT= Brand Trust, WOM= Word of Mouth, WTCV= Willingness to Co-Create Value. \*P< 0.05; \*\*P<0.01; \*\*\*P<0.001.

Mediation Effect Analysis

The mediating effects analysis in this study was conducted using the Bootstrap method, with a 95% confidence interval (CI) in the statistical model, and a sample size of 5000. The results of the mediating effect testing (Table 7) reveal a number of key findings.

First, when the dependent variable is brand trust, the direct effect of online-offline brand image consistency on brand trust is 0.399 with a 95% CI of [0.189, 0.361], which does not include 0. When brand experience is introduced as a mediating variable, the mediating effect is 0.275 with a 95% CI of [0.102, 0.271], and when combined with the direct effect, this indicates that

brand experience plays a partially mediating role in the relationship between online-offline brand image consistency and brand trust. Therefore, H4a is fully supported.

Similarly, when the dependent variable is WOM, the direct effect of online-offline brand image consistency on word of mouth is 0.523 with a 95% CI of [0.118, 0.235], which does not include 0. When brand experience is introduced as a mediating variable, the mediating effect is 0.356 with a confidence interval of [0.196, 0.320], indicating that brand experience plays a partially mediating role in the relationship between online-offline brand image consistency and WOM. Therefore, H4b is supported.

Finally, when the dependent variable is willingness to co-create value, the direct effect of online-offline brand image consistency on willingness to co-create value is 0.416 with a 95% CI of [0.076, 0.283], not including 0. When brand experience is introduced as a mediating variable, the mediating effect is 0.325 with a 95% CI of [0.192, 0.329], indicating that brand experience plays a partially mediating role in the relationship between online-offline brand image consistency and willingness to co-create value. Therefore, H4c is supported.

**Table 7: Mediation Effect of Brand Experience**

Path	Direct Effect			Indirect Effect		
	Point Estimate	95% CI		Point Estimate	95% CI	
		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper
H4a: OBIC→BE→BT	0.399	0.189	0.361	0.275	0.102	0.271
H4b: OBIC→BE→WOM	0.523	0.118	0.235	0.356	0.196	0.320
H4c: OBIC→BE→WTCV	0.416	0.076	0.283	0.325	0.192	0.329

**Note:** OBIC= Online - Offline Brand Image Consistency, BE= Brand Experience, BT= Brand Trust, WOM= Word of Mouth, WTCV= Willingness to Co-Creat Value

## Discussion

The purpose of this research is to investigate, based on Schema Theory and from the perspective of the customers' brand experience, the effect of retail stores online-offline brand image consistency on consumer brand relationships with respect to such things as brand trust, WOM, and willingness to co-create value. We obtained the results, enumerated below, through empirical research.

First, the findings of this research indicate that online-offline brand image consistency has a significant positive impact on brand experience, which aligns with previous studies by Badrinarayanan et al. (2014) and Wu et al. (2017). Furthermore, brand experience was found to positively influence retail brand relationships, including brand trust, WOM, and willingness to co-create value, which is consistent with the research of Kumar and Kaushik (2020) and Li et al. (2019). Additionally, the results show that online-offline brand image consistency in retail stores positively affects brand relationships (e.g., brand trust, WOM, willingness to co-creation value), which is in line with the study by Burmann et al. (2008).

Importantly, the findings also support the idea that brand experience mediates the relationship between online-offline brand image consistency and retail brand relationships, which

is line with the research of Gong et al. (2019) and Jiang and Zhao (2013), who studied the mediating effect of experience on consumer purchase behavior in terms of store image.

Overall, these results highlight the significance of online-offline brand image consistency for retail companies in developing strong brand relationships and gaining a competitive advantage in the market. By focusing on maintaining consistency in brand image across online and offline channels and enhancing consumers' brand experience, retailers can enhance brand trust, WOM, and willingness of their customers to co-create value.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

The theoretical contributions can be identified in several aspects.

Firstly, the introduction of online-offline brand image consistency as a construct based on Schema Theory enriches the understanding of the perceived consistency between online and offline channels. This study combines online and offline sales channels as a holistic construct, and, by analyzing brand experience, provides insights into how online-offline brand image consistency can impact retail brand relationships such as brand trust, word-of-mouth, and willingness to co-create value.

Secondly, this study expands the empirical analysis of factors influencing brand experience. While previous studies have focused on macro and company-related factors, this research sheds light on the role of online-offline brand image consistency in shaping customer brand experience. This provides a new perspective on how retail brands can enhance the quality of customer experience by maintaining consistency in brand image across online and offline channels.

Thirdly, this study enriches the theoretical perspective with respect to improving the retail brand relationships. By examining brand trust, word-of-mouth, and willingness to co-create value as outcomes of retail brand relationships, this research contributes to the understanding of relational brand equity. Brand trust plays a critical role in consumers' evaluation of brand extensions across different online and offline channels, and it is crucial for building strong brand relationships, especially in the current COVID-19-influenced market.

Overall, the current research enhances theoretical understanding of the role of online-offline brand image consistency, brand experience, and retail brand relationships, and acts as a reference for future researchers who wish to explore the relevant topic in greater detail.

### **Practical Implications**

The practical insights from this study can guide retail brand companies in improving their brand strategies and enhancing customer brand experience. First, by incorporating online-offline brand image consistency into brand strategy, companies should be able to successfully maintain a coherent and unified brand perception among customers. This can be achieved by aligning visual elements, messaging, and overall brand identity across different channels. A consistent brand image can help build brand trust and positively impact customer relationships.

Second, by balance balancing online and offline brand strategies, pure online retail e-commerce companies such as Three Squirrels have started laying out brand experience stores offline in recent years. While online channels are gaining prominence, retailers should not neglect the importance of offline brand image. Offline shopping experiences still hold value for customers, and companies should exercise careful management of both their online and offline channels in order to establish a cohesive and consistent customer experience. As Chinese retailers are increasingly focusing on strengthening their online presence, it is crucial for them to recognize the importance of maintaining their offline brand image, and to avoid relying solely on an online brand strategy. Companies should strike a balance between their online and offline brand strategies to effectively attract customers across different channels.

Third, focusing on the creation of a positive customer brand experience should be a priority for retail brands. Companies should invest in understanding customer expectations and preferences in both online and offline environments and strive to provide a consistent and delightful experience across channels. A favorable brand experience yields higher levels of brand trust, positive word-of-mouth, and a willingness among customers to co-create value.

Fourth, it is important to recognize differences between online and offline environments. Companies should recognize that online and offline environments have uniquely different characteristics and customer expectations. Understanding these differences and tailoring services accordingly can help improve the compatibility of the two channels and create a better customer experience. Companies should be agile and adapt their strategies based on the dynamics of online and offline retail markets.

In conclusion, this study provides practical insights for retail brands wishing to incorporate online-offline brand image consistency, enhance brand experience, and build strong customer relationships. The findings of this research can help retail brands to enhance their brand relationships, improve their brand equity, and gain a competitive advantage in the ever-evolving retail landscape.

## **Conclusion**

### **Brief Summary**

This research studied the effect of online-offline brand image consistency in retail stores on consumer brand relationship variables such as brand trust, word-of-mouth, and willingness to co-create value, based on Schema Theory and customers' brand experience. The results confirm the structural model. All hypotheses are supported. The results highlight the significance of online-offline brand image consistency for retail companies in developing strong brand relationships and gaining a competitive advantage in the market. The results further show that maintaining consistency in brand image perception is crucial when extending retailer brands online, particularly for traditional retailers like large supermarket chains. As these retailers expand their online presence, it is important for them to ensure that their online brand image aligns with their established offline brand image. Failure to maintain consistency between the

two can have a negative impact on the overall brand image, including the offline perception of the brand. By maintaining this consistency, companies can create a positive customer brand experience and enhance the quality of the retail brand relationship.

### Limitation and Directions of Future Research

The study has some limitations. Firstly, the study is limited to the Chinese population in the specific study site. Future research could consider expanding the survey to include participants from different countries with diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds. This would allow for a comparison of how online-offline brand image consistency impacts customer perceptions and behaviors across different markets, providing more insight into the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the current study only utilized quantitative research methods and closed-ended questions. Incorporating qualitative research methods could offer more detailed data and insights into consumers' perceptions and behaviors related to online-offline brand image consistency. Thirdly, while online-offline brand image consistency is an important factor, there are other factors that can influence the success of a brand relationship from a corporate perspective, such as operations, management capabilities, corporate capital, etc. Future research could explore the interplay between online-offline brand image consistency and these other relevant factors to gain a more holistic understanding of how different factors contribute to overall brand success. Finally, the current study likely provides a snapshot of consumer perceptions and behaviors at a particular point in time. Conducting longitudinal studies in the future over an extended period could provide insights into how perceptions and behaviors related to online-offline brand image consistency change over time, allowing for a more dynamic understanding of the topic.

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