

Brand Image and Customer Loyalty: Exploring the Power of Word of Mouth

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the moderating role of word of mouth (WOM) in the relationship between brand image and customer loyalty within the Vietnamese market context. While previous research has primarily explored WOM as a direct influencing factor, limited attention has been given to its moderating effect on this specific relationship. Employing a quantitative research design, the study collected data through a structured survey, distributing 950 questionnaires and obtaining 829 valid responses. The data were analyzed using PLS-SEM via SmartPLS 4.0 software. The findings indicate that WOM significantly moderates the relationship between brand image and customer loyalty, such that positive WOM reinforces consumer loyalty when brand perceptions are favorable, particularly when the message comes from influential sources such as celebrities or opinion leaders. Conversely, negative WOM can attenuate the effects of brand image and result in decreased loyalty. The study contributes to the existing literature by clarifying the contextual influence of WOM in a collectivist culture and offering practical implications for marketers in developing communication strategies that leverage WOM to enhance brand equity and customer retention. This research provides novel empirical evidence relevant to both theory development and managerial practice in emerging markets.

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1- Introduction

WOM is a great way for businesses to attract new customers because these customers will largely rely on what their current customers say about the company and its services or products. So, in today's dynamic and highly competitive business environment, retaining customers through loyalty building strategies has become a crucial priority for companies, particularly in sectors with high product substitutability such as the apparel industry. Among various determinants of customer loyalty, brand image plays a central role by shaping consumer perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions [1, 2]. A strong brand image helps organizations build a favorable market position and fosters sustainable loyalty, even when consumers are exposed to competing marketing efforts [3].

Another significant factor influencing customer loyalty is WOM a form of interpersonal communication that occurs between consumers and is widely perceived as more credible than traditional advertising [4, 5]. Prior studies have confirmed that positive WOM can effectively support the development of customer loyalty [6, 7], while also enhancing brand image [8]. Conversely, negative WOM may damage brand reputation and deter potential customers, especially in collectivist societies where peer opinions and social influence play a dominant role in shaping consumer behavior.

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In Vietnam, currently ranked among the top five apparel exporting countries globally, faces increasingly intense competition in the fashion and textile industry [9]. In this context, Vietnamese apparel companies must strategically invest in both acquiring new customers and, more importantly, retaining existing ones through brand differentiation and customer engagement. Research has shown that loyalty can help businesses maintain continuity and stable profits, even in situations where consumers are exposed to marketing stimuli from rival brands [10-13]. Thus, in high-competition contexts, customer retention has been identified as a more sustainable strategy compared to aggressive market expansion [14, 15].

While there is considerable literature on the direct effects of product related and promotional factors such as product quality, product innovation, advertising, and sales promotion on customer loyalty [16-19], there is limited empirical work exploring the mediating role of brand image in this relationship. Even more notably, few studies have examined the moderating role of WOM in the link between brand image and customer loyalty, particularly in emerging markets like Vietnam, where idol culture and collectivist consumer psychology may significantly amplify the impact of peer influence.

This study aims to address these gaps by developing and testing a comprehensive research model that (1) Examines the influence of product quality, product innovation, advertising, and sales promotion on brand image and customer loyalty; (2) Explores the mediating role of brand image; and (3) Investigates the moderating role of WOM on the relationship between brand image and loyalty. In doing so, the study responds to the need for deeper insight into the interactive effects of WOM in shaping consumer brand relationships, offering practical implications for branding strategies and customer retention policies in the Vietnamese apparel industry and similar collectivist markets.

2- Literature Review, Hypothesis Development and Research Model

2-1-Background Theories for Research

The foundation of relationship marketing is deeply rooted in the belief that “the customer is king,” a principle that has prompted firms to implement various strategies aimed at maintaining long-term customer engagement [20]. Relationship marketing theory highlights the critical role of effective communication, mutual trust, conflict management, and organizational commitment in nurturing sustainable relationships with customers [21]. By fostering strong relational ties, businesses can better understand and fulfill consumer needs, thereby enhancing customer retention and long-term profitability.

From a cognitive psychology perspective, the Associative Network Memory Theory (ANMT) offers a useful framework for understanding how brand information is stored and retrieved in the consumer mind. The ANMT posits that semantic memory is composed of interconnected nodes representing concepts and associations [22]. According to Kreuzbauer & Malter [23], when individuals process information from external or internal stimuli, it is encoded in abstract mental representations and allocated to specific nodes within a network like knowledge structure. According to Keller [24], further emphasized that the structure of brand knowledge including brand associations directly influences consumer perceptions and responses to branding stimuli. At the same time, according to Morrin [25], reinforced this view by arguing that information is organized hierarchically, where stronger associations enhance brand recall and recognition.

Building upon these theoretical foundations, this study considers advertising, product quality, product innovation, and sales promotion as key independent variables that directly influence brand image and customer loyalty. Brand image is conceptualized as the set of associations a consumer forms when thinking about a particular brand [26]. Prior research has shown that advertising via social media significantly contributes to the development of brand image [27], while product quality and innovation are central to shaping consumer perceptions and loyalty. Similarly, sales promotion is positively associated with brand evaluations and purchase intention. Brand image, in turn, serves as a mediating construct that amplifies the effects of these marketing variables on customer loyalty [28]. Additionally, WOM is posited to play a moderating role in the relationship between brand image and customer loyalty, potentially enhancing or undermining the strength of this connection based on the sentiment and influence of shared consumer experiences.

Brand Image

Brand image is defined as “perceptions of a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumers’ memory” [24]. These associations formed through various informational cues act as mental nodes linked to the brand’s meaning and play a crucial role in the development of brand equity. According to Rindell & Iglesias [26], brand image comprises the set of cognitive and emotional associations that arise in the consumer’s mind when recalling a specific brand. Drawing from the ANMT, brand image is a mental construct shaped by how consumers store and retrieve brand-related information over time [29]. A strong brand image can reinforce consumer confidence, shape favorable brand evaluations, and ultimately support long-term brand equity.

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty refers to a consumer's consistent intention to repurchase a product or service in the future, often despite situational or marketing-induced alternatives. According to Jones & Sasser [30], customer loyalty can be measured across three dimensions: (1) Repurchase intention, (2) Primary behavior, such as frequency, timing, and volume of recent purchases, and (3) Secondary behavior, including WOM and public recommendations. Complementing this view, Bowen & Chen [31] proposed a threefold framework for assessing loyalty: behavioral loyalty (actual repeat purchasing), attitudinal loyalty (expressed preferences and satisfaction), and composite loyalty (an integration of behavioral and attitudinal metrics). The strength of customer loyalty is critical for sustaining market share, reducing customer acquisition costs, and increasing lifetime customer value.

Word of Mouth (WOM)

According to Arndt [32], word-of-mouth (WOM) is a direct interpersonal communication about a brand, product, or service, where the listener trusts the speaker's information due to its authenticity and non-commercial nature. This is the traditional form of word-of-mouth (offline WOM), occurring among family, friends, colleagues, or acquaintances, giving it high credibility and a strong influence on consumer purchasing decisions, though it remains difficult to control. Consequently, trust plays a crucial role in shaping consumers' attitudes toward products or services [33]. Trust is fundamental to the connection between the communicator and the receiver. In traditional WOM, conversations happen in real time at physical locations and are not recorded in any database, so the information disappears after the interaction [34].

Online word-of-mouth (WOM) involves one-to-many communication via the Internet, such as forums, review sites, and blogs, encompassing positive or negative feedback from potential, current, or former consumers about a product or company [35]. This form has a wider reach and can be partially monitored and managed on digital platforms; however, its credibility varies depending on whether the source is a trusted acquaintance or a stranger. Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) refers to informal, person-to-person communication about a brand, product, organization, or service shared on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Zalo [36]. This form of communication has a wider reach, is easier to manage, and allows for rapid responses. However, its public and viral nature makes negative information difficult to remove completely. Credibility is often lower due to susceptibility to fake reviews, sponsored influencers, and covert marketing campaigns. As a result, recipients may not fully trust the messages they receive [37], which undermines overall trustworthiness. Anonymous communicators typically have weaker ties to recipients, limiting their influence on consumer attitudes [38]. eWOM content is generally public and accessible to anyone, and since reviews are recorded, they can be viewed at any time [37]. This lack of privacy means information can be seen by anonymous individuals with no connection to one another [33].

This study defines word-of-mouth (WOM) as the sharing of experiences about apparel products by friends, family, and colleagues, as well as discussions on forums, review sites, and blogs, covering both offline and online channels. The focus is on social media WOM to fully leverage its effectiveness. According to Goyette et al. [4], WOM is informal communication between individuals about goods or services, conveyed through various means such as face-to-face conversations, phone calls, emails, or social media platforms.

2-2-Hypothesis Development

Advertising (AV)

Advertising is a central component of the marketing communication mix, possessing the capacity to inform, persuade, and reinforce consumer decision-making. Through these mechanisms, advertising contributes to shaping brand preference and fostering customer advocacy [39]. In the digital era, social media platforms such as Facebook serve as effective channels for delivering advertising content, thereby enhancing brand preference among target audiences [27]. Research indicates that consumers tend to respond positively to social media advertising from reputable brands and organizations [40]. Furthermore, Godey et al. [41] assert that social media advertising significantly influences both brand image and brand awareness. Early theoretical contributions, such as those of Barthes [42], emphasize the symbolic and cultural role of advertising in shaping consumer loyalty.

Hypothesis H1: Advertising has a positive effect on:

H1a: Brand Image

H1b: Customer Loyalty

Product Quality (PQ)

Product quality is evaluated based on a set of attributes and features that collectively determine the product's ability to satisfy consumer needs [43-45]. High product quality not only meets functional expectations but also contributes positively to brand perception. Rybaczecka et al. [46] highlight that consumers are more inclined to trust and engage

with brands known for delivering high-quality products. In parallel, Nawi et al. [47] argue that superior product quality enhances a company's public image. Product quality is also critical to building customer loyalty, as confirmed by Ariyanto et al. [48], who emphasize its role in fostering long-term consumer commitment.

Hypothesis H2: *Product quality has a positive effect on:*

H2a: *Brand Image*

H2b: *Customer Loyalty*

Product Innovation (PI)

Product innovation encompasses a broad set of activities including engineering design, research and development, production, and commercialization processes aimed at introducing new or improved products [49]. It is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of business growth and competitive advantage [50, 51]. Innovation and branding are interlinked in their contribution to organizational sustainability and value creation. Notably, product innovation enhances brand image by signaling progressiveness and responsiveness to market needs. As Sondoh Jr et al. [52] explain, product innovation also plays a critical role in shaping consumer satisfaction and loyalty by offering novel features and superior value propositions.

Hypothesis H3: *Product innovation has a positive effect on:*

H3a: *Brand Image*

H3b: *Customer Loyalty*

Sales Promotion (SP)

Sales promotion refers to short-term incentives designed to encourage the purchase or trial of a product or service. Typical tools include coupons, discounts, contests, and sweepstakes [53, 54]. Effective sales promotions enhance brand image when they are relevant, well-targeted, and reinforce brand values [55]. These strategies serve as visual and experiential representations of the brand's commitment to value creation. Moreover, Bowden [56] argues that sales promotion must be integrated with loyalty mechanisms to maintain consumer interest, especially in a globalized marketplace where consumers are exposed to numerous competitive offers.

Hypothesis H4: *Sales promotion has a positive effect on:*

H4a: *Brand Image*

H4b: *Customer Loyalty*

The Mediating Role of Brand Image (BI)

Brand image serves as a critical intermediary variable that strengthens the relationship between key marketing efforts and customer loyalty. Godey et al. [41] found that social media advertising significantly enhances brand image and awareness. Similarly, product quality [46-47] and product innovation [51] contribute to forming a positive and distinctive brand image in consumers' minds. Sales promotion, when executed strategically, can also enhance brand perceptions [55]. As emphasized by Zhang et al. [28], brand image is a strong predictor of customer loyalty. Therefore, brand image is posited as a mediating construct that links various antecedents to consumer loyalty outcomes.

Hypothesis H5: *Brand image mediates the relationship between marketing stimuli and customer loyalty:*

H5a: *Between Advertising and Customer Loyalty*

H5b: *Between Product Quality and Customer Loyalty*

H5c: *Between Product Innovation and Customer Loyalty*

H5d: *Between Sales Promotion and Customer Loyalty*

The Moderating Role of Word of Mouth (WOM): WOM is defined as informal, interpersonal communication about goods or services, conveyed through various channels such as in-person conversations, telephone, email, or social media platforms [4]. WOM can be both positive and negative in nature [5]. Among its forms, positive WOM is regarded as a particularly powerful marketing tool, often considered more credible than firm-generated communications [57, 58]. Gildin [8] emphasized that WOM significantly contributes to enhancing brand image, and that firms should actively encourage favorable WOM while minimizing negative sentiments. Positive WOM not only improves brand perception but also fosters customer loyalty [6, 7]. In collectivist cultures such as Vietnam, consumers often base their judgments on the opinions of influential members of their community. Therefore, negative WOM from opinion leaders can undermine brand image and erode customer loyalty.

Hypothesis H6: *Word of mouth moderates the relationship between brand image and customer loyalty.*

2-3- Research Model

From the proposed research hypotheses, we propose the research model for this study as Figure 1:

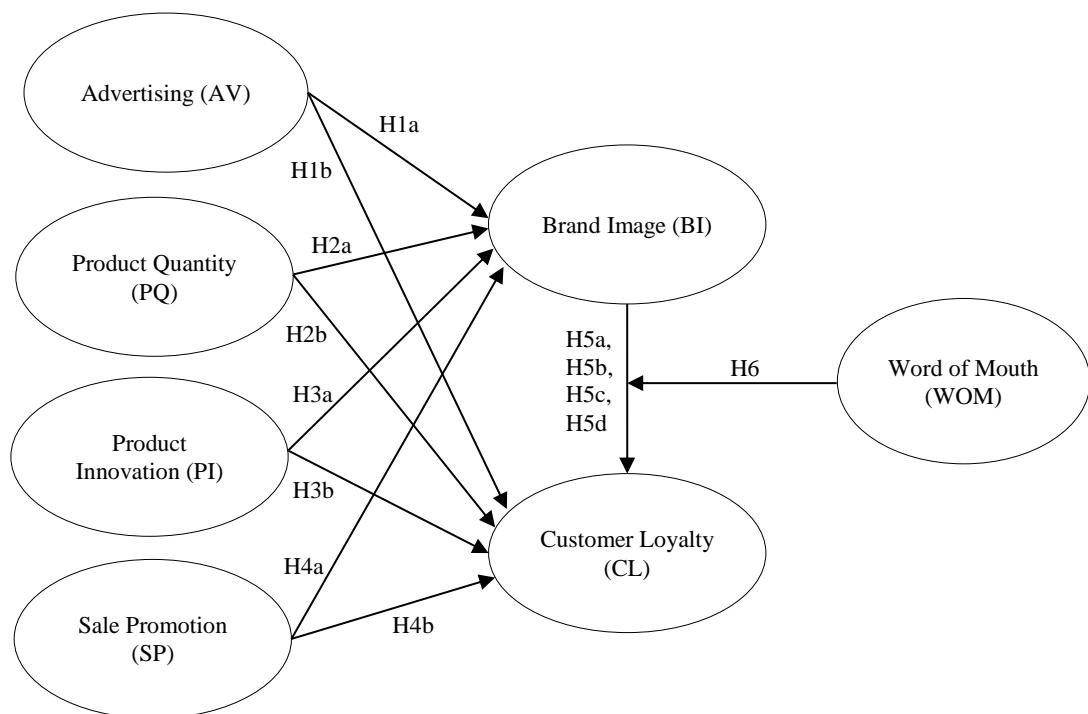


Figure 1. Research model

3- Methodology

3-1- Research Design

This study designed a research process consisting of two components, which are a theoretical analysis framework (based on qualitative research) and a practical analysis framework (based on quantitative research). Specifically, as Figure 2:

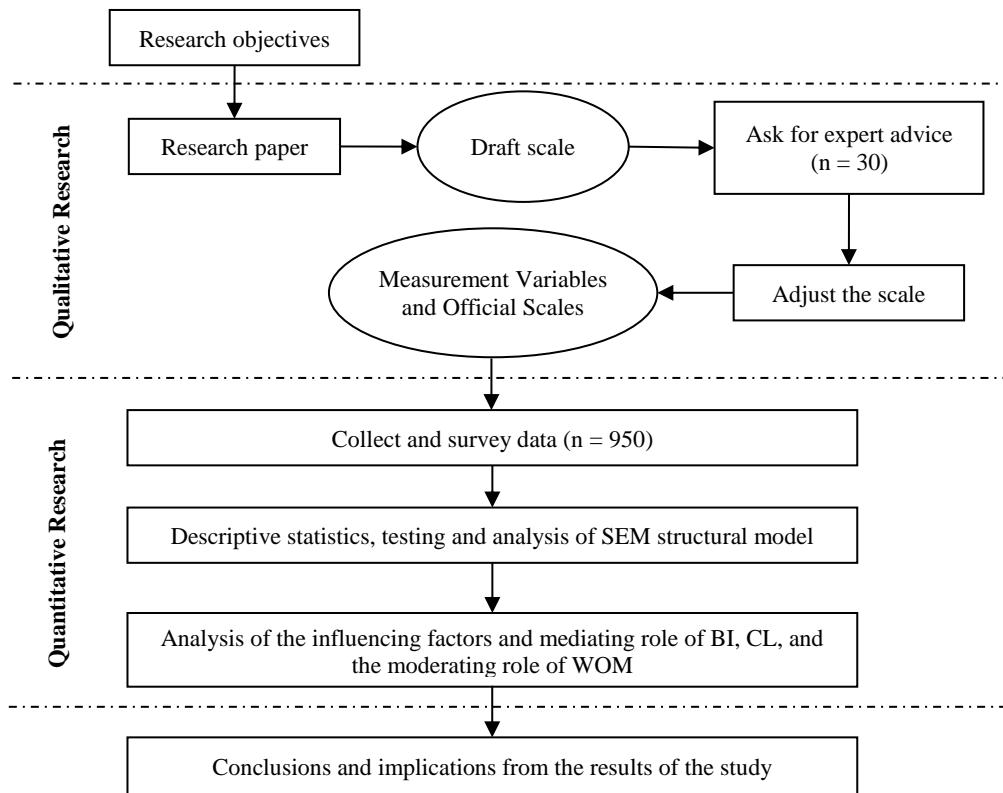


Figure 2. Research Design

3-2-Data Collection and Sample Characteristics

The objective of this study is to explore the factors influencing brand image and consumer loyalty, focusing specifically on advertising, product quality, product innovation and promotion. At the same time, to explore the mediating role of brand image in the relationship between advertising, product quality, product innovation, promotion and consumer loyalty, as well as the moderating role of word of mouth in the relationship between brand image and consumer loyalty. Therefore, the authors conducted a survey to collect data for the study. From the overview of previous studies, the authors designed a draft survey, then the authors conducted a pilot survey with experts in Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding areas with a sample size of 30 people, who were managers from departments of companies in the fashion and textile industry. The purpose of this survey was to evaluate the generality, comprehensibility and effectiveness of the wording of the draft questionnaire, as well as the appropriateness of the demographic factors collected from the respondents regarding Gender, Age, Occupation, Income, Professional level of the draft questionnaire before its official application. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were informed of the purpose of the study; the authors made every effort to keep the information of the participants giving this opinion confidential and did not share the information with third parties during the data collection and processing process. Based on their opinions, the authors revised and completed the questionnaire. Next, the authors conducted an official survey in the form of online random sampling and convenience through the google form tool, the link of the data collection form after being designed on google form will be sent to respondents via e-mail or social networking tools such as zalo, facebook for them to answer the survey, the sample size of this survey is 950 people, corresponding to 950 survey forms were issued and the results obtained are 829 valid forms, the response rate meeting the conditions for statistical analysis from the survey is 87.26%. According to Hair et al. [59], the ratio of the number of observations on an analysis variable is 5:1 or 10:1, the survey of this study has 39 questions using a 5-level Likert scale (corresponding to 39 observed variables belonging to different factors), these 39 questions are used for analysis in one EFA. Applying the 5:1 ratio, the minimum sample size required to conduct this study would be $39 \times 5 = 195$ questionnaires. However, to ensure the representativeness of the research sample, the authors proactively distributed 950 questionnaires and collected 829 valid questionnaires, this sample size exceeded the requirement considered sufficient to conduct PLS-SEM (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Survey Criteria	Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	397	47.9%
	Female	432	52.1%
	Total	829	100.0%
Age	25 years old and under	189	22.8%
	From 26 to 30	305	36.8%
	From 31 to 35	169	20.4%
	36 years and older	166	20%
Occupation	Total	829	100.0%
	Staff	359	43.3%
Income	Manager	470	56.7%
	Total	829	100.0%
Professional level	From 5 million to 15 million VND	187	22.5%
	From over 15 million to 30 million VND	314	37.9%
	Over 30 million VND	328	39.6%
Professional level	Total	829	100.0%
	College degree or below	107	12.9%
	Bachelor	595	71.8%
	Master	127	15.3%
	Total	829	100.0%

3-3-Measurement of Constructs

The measurement scales employed in this study were adapted from previously validated instruments in the literature. Advertising was measured using an eight-item scale developed by Buil et al. [60], while product quality was assessed with a four-item scale proposed by Flynn et al. [61]. Product innovation was evaluated using a five-item scale from

Alegre-Vidal et al. [62], and sales promotion was measured using a six-item scale by Sharma & Avasthi [63]. The brand image scale consisted of six items adopted from Weiss et al. [64]. Finally, consumer loyalty was measured using a five-item scale developed by Caruana [65].

In this study, all items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This scaling approach allowed for the capture of nuanced respondent attitudes and perceptions toward each construct, thereby facilitating deeper insights. By using multi-item measures based on prior research, the study ensured both the content validity and reliability of the constructs under investigation.

3-4- Measurement Model and Structural Model

The study employed PLS-SEM using the SmartPLS 4.0 software to analyze the data. The analysis followed a two-stage approach. In the first stage, the measurement model was assessed to determine construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. This step ensures that the indicators adequately reflect their respective latent constructs [66].

In the second stage, the structural model was evaluated to examine the hypothesized relationships among the latent variables. This included estimating path coefficients, coefficients of determination (R^2), and predictive relevance. Furthermore, to assess the mediating role of brand image in the relationships between advertising, product quality, product innovation, sales promotion, and consumer loyalty, the Variance Accounted For (VAF) method was applied. According to Hair et al. [59], a VAF value of less than 20% indicates no mediation, a value between 20% and 80% indicates partial mediation, and a value above 80% indicates full mediation.

4- Results

4-1- Scale Reliability Evaluation

The reliability results for all constructs are summarized in Table 2. The composite reliability (CR) values for the study variables ranged from 0.876 to 0.936, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, thereby indicating satisfactory internal consistency for all constructs. Similarly, the Cronbach's Alpha (CA) coefficients for the variables ranged from 0.812 to 0.922, also surpassing the minimum acceptable level of 0.70. These findings confirm the high reliability of the measurement scales used in this study [59].

Table 2. Results of scale reliability assessment

Scale	CA	CR
Independent Variables		
1. Advertising (AV)	0.922	0.936
2. Product Quality (PQ)	0.812	0.876
3. Product Innovation (PI)	0.868	0.904
4. Sales Promotion (SP)	0.896	0.921
Dependent Variables		
5. Brand Image (BI)	0.894	0.919
6. Customer Loyalty (CL)	0.842	0.888
Regulatory Variable		
7. Word of Mouth (WOM)	0.851	0.894

4-2- Evaluation of Scale Convergence Values

As presented in Table 3, the results of the convergent validity assessment indicate that all factor loadings exceed the recommended threshold of 0.733, demonstrating strong item reliability [66]. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs are 0.614 or higher, which surpasses the minimum acceptable level of 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity [59]. These results suggest that the measurement scales exhibit satisfactory convergence, with each construct explaining a substantial portion of the variance in its corresponding indicators.

Table 3. Convergence value assessment results

Scale		Observation variables	Load factor	AVE
Independent Variables				
Advertising (AV)	Advertising is persuasive	AV1	0.755	
	Advertising is interesting	AV2	0.806	
	Visual effects of the adverts are appealing	AV3	0.810	
	TV adverts are appealing	AV4	0.853	
	Billboard adverts are appealing	AV5	0.809	0.646
	Radio adverts are appealing	AV6	0.800	
	Newspaper adverts are appealing	AV7	0.804	
	Online or internet adverts are appealing	AV8	0.788	
Product Quality (PQ)	New product designs are thoroughly reviewed before the product is produced and sold	PQ1	0.808	
	Customer requirements are thoroughly analyzed in the new product design process	PQ2	0.814	
	Reducing the cost of new products is a more important priority than new product quality	PQ3	0.798	0.639
	On-time delivery concerns are more important than quality in the new product development process	PQ4	0.778	
Product Innovation (PI)	Newness and uniqueness of our products/services	PI1	0.843	
	Customer orientation of our new products/services	PI2	0.809	
	Frequency of introduction of new products/services	PI3	0.840	0.654
	Contribution of our products/services in expanding market size (number of end customers)	PI4	0.759	
	Value for customers in our products/services	PI5	0.791	
Sales Promotion (SP)	Does the apparel that a famous person advertises encourage you to buy them?	SP1	0.771	
	Do TV advertisements and Commercials help you to purchase new brands?	SP2	0.825	
	Do you consider visual merchandising as a factor in your clothing purchase decisions?	SP3	0.827	
	Is your buying behavior influenced by the arrangement and layout of the store?	SP4	0.733	0.660
	Has the 'buy one get one free' promotion influenced you to purchase additional units of the same product?	SP5	0.836	
	Are you more likely to choose a product when it is displayed in an orderly or organized manner?	SP6	0.874	
Dependent Variables				
Brand Image (BI)	This brand has a high quality	BI1	0.761	
	This brand demonstrates superior attributes compared to its competitors.	BI2	0.796	
	The brand possesses a distinct personality that sets it apart from its competitors.	BI3	0.822	
	This brand consistently meets customer expectations and avoids dissatisfaction.	BI4	0.827	0.655
	This brand is recognized as one of the leading performers within its industry sector.	BI5	0.869	
	The brand maintains a consistent and secure position within the market.	BI6	0.774	
Customer Loyalty (CL)	I speak favorably about my bank when communicating with others.	CL1	0.734	
	I tend to recommend my bank to individuals who ask for my financial advice.	CL2	0.755	
	I actively encourage my friends and family members to utilize the services of my bank	CL3	0.764	0.614
	I regard my bank as my primary provider for banking services.	CL4	0.862	
	I intend to increase my engagement with my bank over the next few years.	CL5	0.796	
Regulatory Variable				
Word of Mouth (WOM)	I share my information about this brand with people	WOM1	0.850	
	I seek out the advice of people before I choose this brand	WOM2	0.809	
	The probability of accepting advice from other people is high	WOM3	0.754	0.628
	The probability of choosing this brand before receiving recommendations is low	WOM4	0.756	
	The probability of choosing this brand after receiving recommendations is high	WOM5	0.788	

4-3-Discriminant Validity Assessment

The discriminant validity of the measurement model was assessed using two approaches: the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT).

(i) Via Fornell-Larcker Coefficient Criteria:

As shown in Table 4, the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (\sqrt{AVE}) for all constructs (represented by bold diagonal values) are 0.784 or higher, and each is greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlations in the same column (non-bold values). This finding confirms that all constructs satisfy the Fornell–Larcker criterion, demonstrating satisfactory discriminant validity [67].

Table 4. Fornell–Larcker criterion

Variables	AV	PQ	PI	SP	BI	CL	WOM
AV	0.804						
PQ	0.404	0.800					
PI	0.301	0.246	0.809				
SP	0.353	0.389	0.341	0.812			
BI	0.533	0.527	0.471	0.525	0.809		
CL	0.556	0.452	0.378	0.496	0.621	0.784	
WOM	0.316	0.328	0.376	0.333	0.431	0.320	0.792

(ii) Via Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio:

To further confirm discriminant validity, the HTMT ratios were examined. The results in Table 5 indicate that all HTMT values fall within the range of 0.285 to 0.713, which are well below the recommended threshold of 0.90 [68]. These results further support that the constructs are empirically distinct from one another. Taken together, the results from both Fornell–Larcker and HTMT assessments demonstrate that the measurement model possesses adequate discriminant validity, in addition to the previously established reliability and convergent validity. Accordingly, the collected data are deemed suitable for testing the proposed research hypotheses.

Table 5. Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio

Variables	AV	PQ	PI	SP	BI	CL	WH	WOM × BI
AV								
PQ	0.464							
PI	0.330	0.285						
SP	0.384	0.456	0.380					
BI	0.582	0.616	0.525	0.583				
CL	0.629	0.545	0.432	0.567	0.713			
WH	0.352	0.392	0.435	0.381	0.493	0.376		
WOM × BI	0.356	0.392	0.454	0.400	0.571	0.216	0.455	

Note: The interaction construct (WOM × BI) is a product-indicator variable used for moderation analysis. Discriminant validity measures such as HTMT are not applicable to interaction terms.

4-4- Structural Model Evaluation and Hypothesis Testing

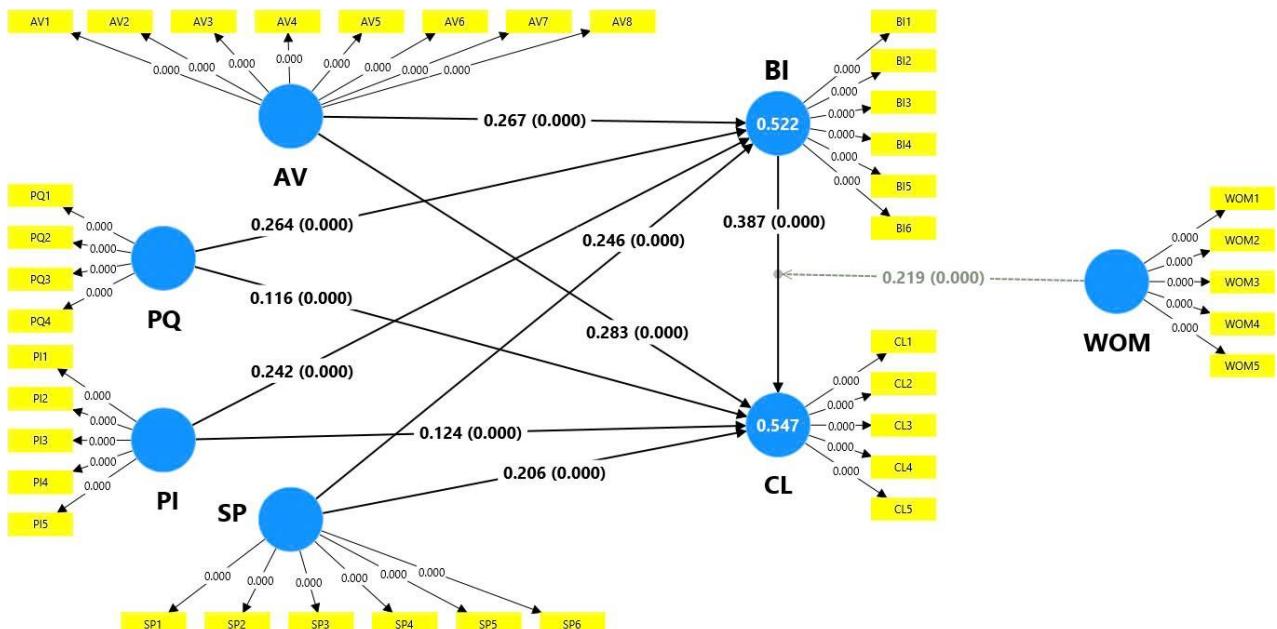
The results show that there is a significant relationship between advertising and brand image ($\beta = 0.267$, $p < 0.05$), between advertising and consumer loyalty ($\beta = 0.283$, $p < 0.05$). There is a significant positive relationship between product quality and brand image ($\beta = 0.264$, $p < 0.05$), between product quality and consumer loyalty ($\beta = 0.116$, $p < 0.05$). There is a significant positive relationship between product innovation and brand image ($\beta = 0.242$, $p < 0.05$), between product innovation and consumer loyalty ($\beta = 0.124$, $p < 0.05$). There is a significant positive association between sales promotion and brand image ($\beta = 0.246$, $p < 0.05$), between sales promotion and consumer loyalty ($\beta = 0.206$, $p < 0.05$) (Table 6 and Figure 3).

This suggests that higher levels of advertising, product quality, product innovation, and sales promotion lead to increased brand image and consumer loyalty. Highlighting the importance of brand image in advertising, product quality, product innovation, and sales promotion. The specific indirect effects indicate that brand image plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between advertising, product quality, product innovation, sales promotion, and consumer loyalty: between advertising and consumer loyalty ($\beta = 0.103$, $p < 0.05$); between product quality and consumer loyalty ($\beta = 0.102$, $p < 0.05$); between product innovation and consumer loyalty ($\beta = 0.094$, $p < 0.05$); and between sales promotion and consumer loyalty ($\beta = 0.095$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that brand image is the primary mechanism through which advertising, product quality, product innovation, and promotion affect consumer loyalty. With this research result, it can help businesses understand more deeply the factors that promote brand image and consumer loyalty, so that they can have appropriate marketing strategies to enhance brand image and consumer loyalty. The highlight of the study results is that word of mouth plays a moderating role in the relationship between brand image and consumer loyalty. This highlight research result can help businesses better understand the moderating role of word of mouth in the relationship between brand image and consumer loyalty.

Table 6. Hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Relationship	Path coefficients	p values	Results
<i>Direct effects</i>				
H1a	AV → BI	0.267	0.000	Accepted
H1b	AV → CL	0.283	0.000	Accepted
H2a	PQ → BI	0.264	0.000	Accepted
H2b	PQ → CL	0.116	0.000	Accepted
H3a	PI → BI	0.242	0.000	Accepted
H3b	PI → CL	0.124	0.000	Accepted
H4a	SP → BI	0.246	0.000	Accepted
H4b	SP → CL	0.206	0.000	Accepted
<i>Indirect effects/mediating hypothesis result</i>				
H5a	AV → BI → CL	0.103	0.000	Accepted
H5b	PQ → BI → CL	0.102	0.000	Accepted
H5c	PI → BI → CL	0.094	0.000	Accepted
H5d	SP → BI → CL	0.095	0.000	Accepted
<i>Indirect effects/moderating hypothesis result</i>				
H6	WOM × BI → CL	0.219	0.000	Accepted

The results of PLS Algorithm (Figure 3):

**Figure 3. Structural model test results**

4-5- Mediation Analysis

The results of the study show that brand image as a mediator in the relationship between advertising and consumer loyalty, with an indirect effect of 0.103. The overall effect between advertising and consumer loyalty was 0.387 and the VAF value was 26.73%, indicating partial mediation [66]. This suggests that brand image plays an important role in explaining the impact of advertising on consumer loyalty.

The results of the study show that brand image as a mediator in the relationship between product quality and consumer loyalty, with an indirect effect of 0.102. The overall effect between product quality and consumer loyalty was 0.218 and the VAF value was 46.83%, indicating partial mediation [66]. This suggests that brand image plays an important role in explaining the impact of product quality on consumer loyalty.

The results of the study show that brand image as a mediator in the relationship between product innovation and consumer loyalty, with an indirect effect of 0.094. The overall effect between product innovation and consumer loyalty

was 0.217 and the VAF value was 43.05%, indicating partial mediation [59, 66]. This suggests that brand image plays an important role in explaining the impact of product innovation on consumer loyalty.

The results of the study show that brand image as a mediator in the relationship between sales promotion and consumer loyalty, with an indirect effect of 0.095. The overall effect between sales promotion and consumer loyalty was 0.301 and the VAF value was 31.59%, indicating partial mediation [66]. This suggests that brand image plays an important role in explaining the impact of sales promotion on consumer loyalty.

5- Discussion and Implications

5-1- Discussions

The results of the study highlight the significant effect of advertising, product quality, product innovation, and sales promotion on brand image and consumer loyalty; the mediating role of brand image in the relationships between advertising, product quality, product innovation, and sales promotions and customer loyalty is significant; the moderating role of word of mouth in the relationship between brand image and customer loyalty.

The first, the results show that there is a significant relationship between advertising and brand image, between advertising and consumer loyalty, the strongest impact level. This result aligns with previous studies [27, 41, 42]. Practical experience shows that concise, clear, and repetitive advertising helps customers recognize the brand and absorb its values, personality, and strengths, thereby reinforcing its image. These messages also increase awareness, evoke positive emotions, and foster loyalty. Loyal customers often become brand ambassadors, and many brands effectively combine advertising with outstanding customer experiences to build a loyal customer community. The results show that there is a significant relationship between product quality and brand image, between product quality and consumer loyalty. This result aligns with previous studies [46-48]. Practical experience shows that when a product delivers high quality and meets or exceeds customer expectations, it strengthens and positively shapes the brand image in consumers' minds. Apparel businesses must continuously improve and maintain product quality to retain loyal customers, while providing consistent, positive experiences that foster long-term engagement. The study indicated a positive relationship between product innovation and brand image, between product innovation and consumer loyalty. This result aligns with previous studies [51, 52]. Practical experience shows that a brand's continuous introduction of new products featuring enhanced functions, designs, or technologies reflects creativity, dynamism, and commitment to growth. This fosters a positive impression, boosts brand value, and supports ongoing customer purchases. The results show that there is a significant relationship between sales promotion and brand image, between sales promotion and consumer loyalty. This result aligns with previous studies [55, 56]. Practical experience shows that advertising, promotions, events, and social media help businesses create multiple customer touchpoints, enhancing brand recognition and recall while strengthening loyalty. These findings align with both theoretical frameworks and real-world practices within Vietnam's apparel industry. This result shows that customers in the apparel sector are interested in the company's advertising programs, product quality, product innovation, and sales promotions in the context of Vietnam.

The second, the mediating role of brand image in the relationships between advertising, product quality, product innovation, and sales promotions and customer loyalty is significant. A key contribution of this study lies in integrating mediating relationships, rather than examining them individually as in previous research [28, 41, 46, 51, 55]. Practical experience shows that advertising, product quality, innovation, and diverse, effective sales promotions not only communicate value and satisfy consumer needs but also enhance brand awareness and positive emotions, thereby strengthening brand image and fostering lasting customer loyalty.

The third, the moderating role of word of mouth in the relationship between brand image and consumer loyalty is very important. This is also the new point of this study. Previous studies also suggest that word of mouth had a significant relationship with brand image and consumer loyalty [6-8]. Vietnam's collectivist culture leads people to rely more on advice from close acquaintances and trusted relationships than on strangers or mass advertising. As a result, word-of-mouth becomes a powerful and enduring communication tool within Vietnamese society. Moreover, positive or negative feedback from potential, current, or former consumers about products or companies is widely disseminated online [35], significantly influencing businesses in Vietnam's apparel industry. Therefore, to maintain competitiveness and meet the changing needs of customers, Vietnamese enterprises must incorporate advertising, product quality, product innovation, and sales promotion into their business strategies. In addition, special attention is also paid to the word-of-mouth factor to enhance brand image and consumer loyalty.

5-2- Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications for businesses in the Vietnamese, especially those that want to enhance their brand image and consumer loyalty. First, the results show the importance of implementing advertising initiatives, product quality, product innovation, and sales promotion into marketing strategies. To maintain competitiveness and meet changing customer needs, Vietnamese enterprises must incorporate advertising, product

quality, product innovation and sales promotion into their business strategies, which can improve brand image and build consumer loyalty [41, 42, 46-48, 51, 52, 55, 56]. The second, recognizing brand image as a mediator, businesses should focus on building their corporate brand image by incorporating advertising, product quality, product innovation, and sales promotion into their business strategies [41, 42, 46-48, 51, 52, 55, 56]. This also shows the role and importance of brand image in building and developing a company's marketing strategy. Therefore, businesses should integrate advertising strategy, product quality, product innovation and sales promotion: this will allow businesses to differentiate, improve competitiveness and meet changing customer needs, contributing to increasing brand image and consumer loyalty. The third, recognizing word of mouth as a moderator, businesses in Vietnam should focus on promoting the positive nature of word of mouth. Because word of mouth is known to be the oldest means of changing opinions about a variety of goods and services offered in the market [4]. Word of mouth opinions can be positive or negative [4, 5]. Among them, positive word of mouth has been recognized as an effective advertising tool compared to information provided by businesses [57]; consumers tend to trust more information shared by other consumers [58].

Gildin [8] found that word of mouth effectively improves brand image. Positive word of mouth can create a product's brand image, so organizations promote positive word of mouth and prevent negative word of mouth, which can harm the company or brand image. Because, when customers speak positively about a company and its services/products, they are likely to be loyal to that organization. Indeed, Ferguson & Paulin [6], and Osmontbekov & Czaplewski [7] suggested that positive word of mouth can actually be a powerful marketing tool in creating customer loyalty. In a country like Vietnam, where the culture encourages collectivism and people tend to work together. Therefore, customers are likely to develop a collective conscience, shared beliefs and feelings. As a result, customers will listen to and trust the views of those they perceive as their opinion leaders. When such influential customers speak negatively about services/products, others will stay away from those services/products. This negatively impacts the brand image and the company will lose customers. Therefore, organizations have an interest in promoting positive word of mouth and preventing negative word of mouth, which can harm the company's brand image and consumer loyalty. This shows the importance of word of mouth in the relationship between brand image and consumer loyalty.

6- Conclusions

The research results contribute several key highlights as follows:

WOM moderates the relationship between brand image and customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.05$). Research demonstrates a significant moderating effect of WOM on this relationship, marking a novel contribution of the study. When effectively executed, WOM strategies spread positive information among social media users through genuine consumer sharing, which is perceived as more authentic than traditional advertising. Positive recommendations and reviews from friends, family, or community members help customers form favorable impressions, boosting brand awareness and strengthening brand image, ultimately enhancing customer loyalty. This study confirms that WOM enhances brand image effectiveness. Positive WOM builds product brand image; therefore, organizations should encourage it while mitigating negative WOM, which can damage company reputation. Customers who speak positively about a company and its offerings are more likely to remain loyal. This study's findings also reveal that WOM moderates the brand image-customer loyalty relationship, aligning with theoretical and practical contexts within Vietnam's apparel sector. At the same time, Vietnam's collectivist culture fosters a tightly connected social environment where word-of-mouth goes beyond simple information exchange to encompass sharing, understanding, and community consensus. Consumers are more inclined to share information with peers or close family members. Given that collectivism is positively associated with social cohesion and bonding, the impact of social bonds on information sharing is especially strong in collectivist societies. In individualistic cultures, people are more likely to share sincere and emotional evaluations, including negative feedback, motivated by personal reasons such as self-expression or financial gain. Meanwhile, collectivist cultures emphasize community values, resulting in the public sharing of positive feedback while negative opinions are often withheld to prevent conflict or loss of face. So, consumers in these societies generally align with existing reviews, prioritizing harmony, respect for hierarchy, and group dignity. Information is frequently shared for the collective benefit, such as supporting a brand or community.

Consequently, in Vietnam's collectivist culture, people are more likely to trust and heed advice from close acquaintances rather than strangers or mass advertising. Direct communication within familiar groups enhances the credibility and persuasiveness of information, making word-of-mouth a potent and enduring communication tool in Vietnamese society. Which shows that, eWOM has become a vital factor in shaping consumer purchase intentions, prompting companies to invest in enhancing its effectiveness. Specifically, within Vietnam's collectivist culture and the rising influence of digital media and social networks, this study recommends several strategies to boost positive WOM: (1) Prioritize product quality and exceptional customer experiences; (2) Encourage customers to share experiences on social platforms; (3) Utilize influencer marketing; (4) Foster loyal customer communities with regular engagement; (5) Maintain transparency and authenticity in all WOM efforts; (6) Combine WOM with excellent customer service; (7) Create innovative, highly interactive viral marketing campaigns; (8) Employ multi-channel digital and online media suited to the apparel sector.

7- Declarations

7-1- Author Contributions

Conceptualization, N.T.T. and L.H.T.N.; methodology, N.T.T. and L.H.T.N.; investigation, L.H.T.N.; resources, N.T.T.; data curation, N.T.T.; writing—original draft preparation, N.T.T. and L.H.T.N.; writing—review and editing, N.T.T. and L.H.T.N.; visualization, L.H.T.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

7-2- Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

7-3- Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

7-4- Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

7-5- Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

7-6- Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the authors.

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