

INVESTIGATING THE LINKAGE BETWEEN TRUST, EMPATHY, COMMUNICATION, BRAND ASSOCIATIONS AND BRAND REPUTATION IN AFRICA: A BOTSWANA PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the interrelationship between trust, empathy, communication, brand associations and brand reputation of selected small and medium enterprise (SME) brands in a developing economy of Botswana. The population was defined as all retail customers of SME brands operating within the metropolitan city of Gaborone in Botswana. A stratified-convenience sampling approach was followed and a self-administered questionnaire was disseminated amongst 450 customers at the service points of SMEs. The Structural equation modelling (SEM) procedure was used to analyse the hypothesised relationships in this study. The findings conclude that trust, empathy and communication exerted a positive and significant influence on brand associations, whilst brand associations had a direct impact on brand reputation. In addition, brand commitment significantly mediated the influence of brand associations on brand reputation. It is therefore important for SMEs in the apparel industry of Botswana to cultivate the levels of trust, empathy, communication, brand associations and brand commitment to secure a genuine reputation with their customers.

Key words: Trust, empathy, communication, brand associations, brand reputation

1. INTRODUCTION

The apparel industry of Botswana has grown significantly over the years since its establishment in the 1980s, thereby attracting a multitude of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (MTI, 2017). This positive growth has led to increased competition for customer dominance and the need to achieve survival in the highly competitive apparel arena. In addition to this, customers have become more demanding in terms of the products they require to fulfil their expectations, emphasising the need for stronger relational drivers to stimulate brand associations and in turn achieve brand reputation. As a result, customers are prone to switch from one SME to the next, due to limited product choices and a lack of differentiation in the market place (MTI, 2017). In this highly competitive business environment, trust, empathy and communication have been identified as possible catalysts for enhancing brand associations in order to gain a higher level of brand reputation, thereby building competitive advantage and enhancing stronger bonds with customers (Majid, Zahra and Azade, 2016; Fatma, Rahman and Khan, 2015).

The goal of trust, empathy, and communication is to create long-term relationships with customers by emphasising the satisfactory value of a business' offerings in the market place (Molinillo, Japutra, Nguyen and Chen, 2017; Chen, 2010). This in turn increases re-purchase intentions and encourages positive referrals amongst consumers, which ultimately lead to increased profitability and sustain brand associations (Syed Alwi, Nguyen, Melewar, Loh and Liu, 2016). Conversely, customers who exhibit a higher level of brand associations have a greater probability of staying with their preferred brand since it satisfies their needs and provides superior value in comparison with competitors, thereby leading to increased brand reputation (Bojei and Alwie, 2010). Notably, Chen, Chen and Wu (2017) argue that the connection between brand associations and brand reputation can be reinforced by the inclusion of brand commitment through building and consolidating a collaborative relationship with customers and by sharing meaningful information to ensure that they are permanently locked in partnership with a brand. Although previous studies of Molinillo *et al.* (2017) and Syed Alwi *et al.* (2016) have empirically validated the relationship between trust, empathy, communication, brand associations, brand commitment and brand reputation in different

market contexts, the researchers could not identify any research that examined the connection between the selected constructs in the developing economy of Botswana. To address this research gap, the purpose of this study is to further knowledge by determining the connection between trust, empathy, communication, brand associations, brand commitment and brand reputation amongst SMEs operating in the apparel industry of Botswana.

The theoretical contribution of this study is based on developing an integrated model for understanding the impact of trust, empathy and communication on brand associations, the relationship between brand associations and brand reputation, as well as the mediating influence of brand commitment on the connection between brand associations and brand reputation, from a developing market context. From a managerial perspective, this study contributes to providing insights to SMEs in the apparel industry of Botswana on how they can successfully implement trust, empathy and communication in order to gain increased levels of brand associations, ultimately leading to enhanced brand reputation in the long run.

This paper uncovers the theory grounding the study and provides a discussion of the key constructs underlying the study. Thereafter, the research model, the research problem, the research objectives and the research methodology are provided. Finally, the findings are outlined, from which the managerial implications, the limitations and future research opportunities are derived.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theories grounding the study

The study draws on the principles of the theory of brand equity and the Relationship Marketing theory with respect to the constructs investigated and the proposed relationships between the constructs. According to Keller (2016), brand equity can add value to a product or service by enabling brands to interact with customers, examine their needs and develop offerings that exceed their expectations. Ahn, Park and Hyun (2018) concur that brand associations and brand reputation are key factors emanating from the brand equity theory and are often used to understand consumer behaviour. The authors add that, customers receive great value from brands that emphasise positive associations and a genuine reputation in their mindset, which in turn leads to increased competitive advantage and a stronger market share. Wang, Capon, Wang and Guo (2017) support this argument by stating that the cultivation of brand associations and brand reputation through a brand equity orientation enhances the quality and depth of customer relationships, thereby influencing the degree of trust, empathy and communication. Therefore, brand equity provides support for the interrelationship between trust, empathy, communication, brand associations and brand reputation by promoting superior outcomes and predicting customers' intention to remain with a particular brand (Wang *et al.*, 2017).

In terms of the Relationship Marketing theory, the seminal work of Morgan and Hunt (1994) states that the goal of pursuing Relationship Marketing is to create stronger customer relationships that enhance brand equity outcomes such as sales growth, market share, profits and customer retention. The Relationship Marketing theory departs from a transaction orientation by emphasising a holistic process and effective strategy for how businesses can cultivate trust, empathy and communication in an effort to maintain client relationships and improve the levels of brand associations and brand reputation (Rambocas, Kirpalani and Simms, 2018; Rootman, Tait and Sharp, 2011). This argument is reinforced by Al Abdulrazak and Gbadamosi (2017) and Huang (2015), who contend that Relationship Marketing facilitates the linkage between trust, empathy, communication, brand associations and brand reputation by emphasising the tangible benefits of retaining loyal customers, adopting a social perspective of relationship, and offering solutions to customers' problems. Rootman *et al.* (2011) concur and state that the Relationship Marketing theory provides deeper knowledge

about how customers perceive the influence of trust, empathy and communication with respect to stimulating brand associations, which in turn promotes brand reputation.

2.2 Trust

According to Van Tonder (2016), trust refers to the customer's perception of the integrity, honesty and reliability of the organisation's promises, resulting in positive outcomes. Trust plays a central role in customer relationships and is essential for the development of enduring relationships because it contributes to constructive dialogue and co-operative problem-solving among SMEs in order to reduce uncertainty and complexity in the future (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Ponder, Holloway and Hansen (2016) support this statement, suggesting that, when customers deem the SME to be trustworthy, there is a greater likelihood that they will share the information with others to ensure the continued development of the relationship. As a result, the customer develops a higher level of trust in the organisation and the relational bond intensifies, thereby making it difficult for the customer to leave the relationship (Ponder *et al.*, 2016).

Trust makes a significant contribution to stimulating the brand associations of SME brands (Fatma *et al.*, 2015). This observation is consistent with Loureiro (2013), who revealed that trust has a relative influence on the brand associations of service banks in Portugal. Similarly, trust has a significant influence on brand associations within the banking industry of the emerging economy of Vietnam (Phan and Ghantous, 2013). These empirical findings indicate that trust has a significant impact on brand associations. On the basis of the preceding evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: There is a significant positive relationship between trust and brand associations

2.3 Empathy

According to Prior (2016), empathy can be defined as the ability of an organisation's employees to relate to customers in a meaningful way. In the view of the apparel industry, it is of great importance for SMEs to be able to recognise and satisfy each customer's needs individually and to provide a service unique to each customer's situation, thereby contributing to empathic concerns (Ebersohn and Theron, 2014). This notion is supported by Hau and Ngo (2012) who argue that empathy emphasises the emotional bond between an SME and customers by being sensitive to their needs and concerns, leading to the increased longevity of the relationship. Consequently, an organisation which exhibits a higher level of empathy can better understand the needs of customers, since it is able to see things from the customer's point of view (Itani and Inyang, 2015).

Previous study of Lee (2016) concurs that the development of empathetic concerns towards consumers can lead to favourable brand associations with SMEs. The empirical work of Tuan (2014) established that empathy contributed to the prediction of brand associations in the health and fitness sector in Vietnam. Majid *et al.* (2016) agree with this view, indicating that there is a significant relationship between empathy and brand associations amongst consumers in the food industry of the emerging economy of Iran. These findings indicate that the cultivation of empathy can lead to stronger associations with SME brands in the memories of consumers. On the basis of the foregoing discussion, the following hypothesis is offered:

H₂: There is a significant positive relationship between empathy and brand associations

2.4 Communication

Communication involves keeping in touch with customers on a regular basis, providing timely and accurate information and updates on services or products and proactively communicating in case of potential problems (Berezan, Krishen, Tanford and Raab, 2017). In the SME environment, communication is critical in creating a long-term relationship through building awareness, developing consumer preference, convincing interested buyers and encouraging them to make the purchase decision (Taleghani, Gilaninia and Mousavian, 2011). Sapepa, Roberts-Lombard and Van Tonder (2015) support this observation and opine that communication is the glue that holds relationships together by strengthening information exchange between parties to fulfil their desired goals. Therefore, the absence of communication in a relationship-building process implies that an organisation-customer relationship cannot exist (Sapepa *et al.*, 2015).

Communication conveys useful information that mirrors the meaning of a brand to consumers and strengthens the brand associations with SMEs (Benoit-Moreau and Parguel, 2011). Cai, Zhao and He (2015) revealed that communication significantly impacts the brand associations formed in the minds of consumers in emerging economies such as China. The empirical work of Sadek, Redding and Tantawi (2015) endorses this argument, arguing that communication leads to a richer value-adding information that contributes to the formation of favourable associations with brands. This implies that communication is a necessary and sufficient factor for building the brand associations of SMEs (Cai *et al.*, 2015). On the basis of this empirical argument, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H₃: There is a significant positive relationship between communication and brand associations

2.5 Brand associations

According to Ranfagni, Guercini and Camiciottoli (2014), brand associations refer to the expression of the personal meanings that consumers attribute to a brand. Thus brand associations play an important role in creating deeper feelings between an SME brand and its consumers, as customers develop favourable and strong perceptions of products and services in the market (Camiciottoli, Ranfagni and Guercini, 2014). Low and Lamb (2000) motivate this view by pointing out that businesses such as SMEs use brand associations to differentiate, position and extend their brands, to create positive attitudes and feelings toward their brands, and to suggest the attributes or benefits of purchasing or using a specific brand. Consequently, the stronger the associations, the more likely for the brand to be recalled from the memory, creating an opportunity to increase competitive advantage (French and Smith, 2013).

Brand associations are regarded as one of the most essential components for building brand reputation in the market place (Keller, 2008). The empirical findings of Han, Nguyen and Lee (2015) also established that brand associations are positively related to brand reputation amongst restaurants in the emerging economy of Japan. Lai, Chiu, Yang and Pai (2010) support this argument and state that a higher level of brand associations induces customers to develop a favourable reputation towards SMEs in Taiwan. This observation indicates that customers who are loyal to a brand often associate an organisation with a good reputation (Han *et al.*, 2015). In the light of this preceding evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₄: There is a significant positive relationship between brand associations and brand reputation

2.6 Brand commitment

According to Kao (2016), brand commitment refers to a deeply-rooted attachment to a preferred brand. From an SME perspective, brand commitment generates a stronger emotional connection to the brand, which in turn enables businesses effectively to retain customers by stimulating positive experiences with the brand, resisting attitude change, and preventing customers from switching brands (Raju, Unnava and Montgomery, 2009). Additionally, the development of brand commitment by SMEs is beneficial to their survival, as customers develop favourable attitudes towards their brands, display increased re-purchase intentions in the future, all of which lead to better market share and strengthen brand performance (Shaari, Salleh and Hussin, 2012). Therefore, a higher level of brand commitment increases customers' positive feelings towards the brand because they feel that the brand values them and makes necessary adjustments to preserve a relationship with them (App and Buttgen, 2016).

Brand commitment is a vital factor in mediating the relationship between brand associations and brand reputation (Stafford, Stafford and Day, 2002). The empirical work of Dwivedi and Johnson (2013) found that brand commitment fully mediates the influence of brand associations on brand reputation in the telecommunications industry of India. This finding is supported by the research of Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2010) which established that brand commitment is significantly related to brand associations and in turn strengthens the extent of this influence on brand reputation amongst hotel service providers in Thailand. This implies that brand commitment is an instrumental element for enhancing the connection between brand associations and brand reputation in the SME environment (Stafford *et al.*, 2002). In the light of this preceding evidence, the following hypothesis is offered:

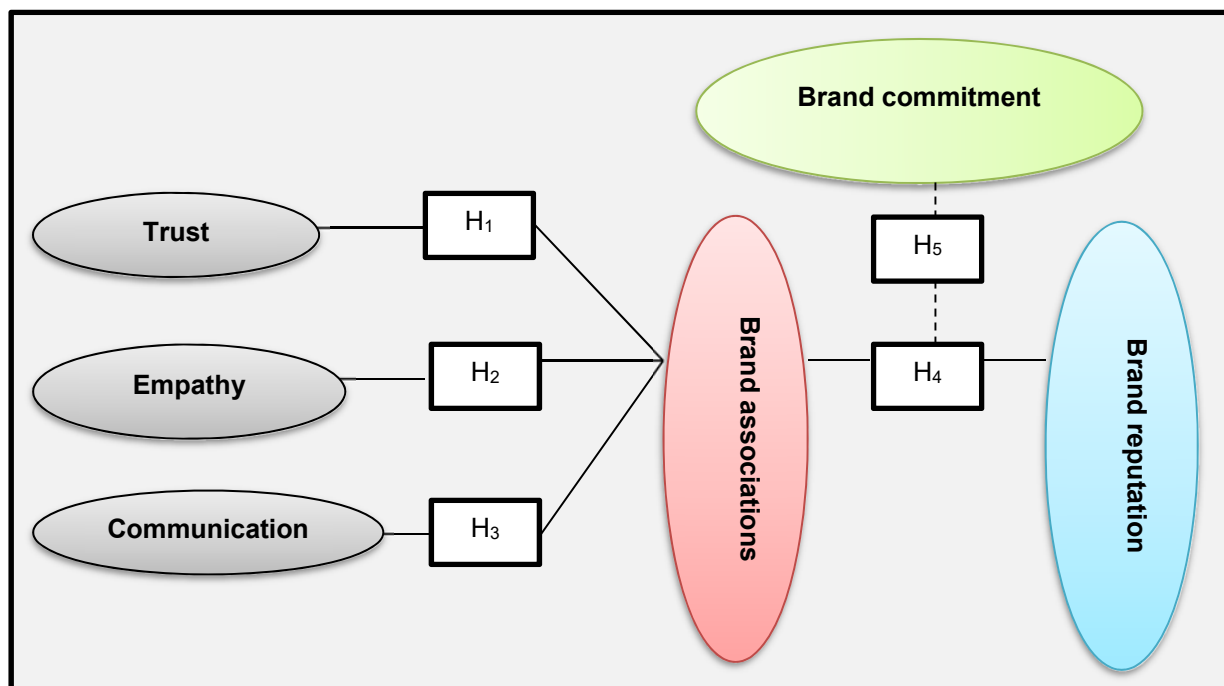
H₅: Brand commitment fully mediates the effect of brand associations on brand reputation

2.7 Brand reputation

Tournois (2015) described brand reputation as the consumers' post-purchase evaluation of a brand's offering in the market place. From an SME perspective, brand reputation is an important differential tool for emphasising relationships with customers and managing competitive pressures by presenting the image of a business that is knowledgeable, and helpful in the minds of consumers (Gilgorijevic and Leong, 2011). This argument is supported by Smith, Venter and Turyakira (2014), who established that SMEs with a good reputation provide opportunities for consumers to give the organisation feedback and lodge complaints, ensuring that their products and services are priced fairly for all customers. Therefore, customers of SMEs with a favourable brand reputation assign higher levels of expertise and quality to such organisations, and are more likely to support them over time (Sung and Yang, 2008).

Figure 1 depicts the proposed theoretical model for this study, illustrating the six constructs of the study, as well as the hypothesised relationships between these constructs.

FIGURE 1: PROPOSED THEORETICAL MODEL



Note: -----indirect relationship (mediation) and — direct relationship.

3. PROBLEM INVESTIGATED

Extant literature has primarily focused on the interrelationships between trust, empathy, communication, brand associations and brand reputation in different market contexts, but no emphasis has been placed on examining the connection between these selected factors from an SME perspective (Molinillo *et al.*, 2017; Syed Alwi *et al.*, 2016). In addition, the researchers could not identify any specific research that studied the theoretical linkage between these selected factors in the apparel industry of a developing economy such as Botswana, or internationally. However, this gap in the literature provides an opportunity for the study to provide insights and understanding of how SMEs in the apparel industry of Botswana can stimulate trust, empathy and communication in an effort to enhance brand associations, thereby leading to increased brand reputation in the long run. Based on the foregoing discussion, the problem statement can be described as follows:

The relationship between trust, empathy, communication, brand associations, brand commitment and brand reputation amongst SMEs operating in the apparel industry of Botswana tends to be unexplored and remains unclear.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Based on the preceding discussion on the literature review and problem statement, the main objective of this study is to investigate the interrelationships between trust, empathy, communication, brand associations and brand reputation amongst SMEs operating in the apparel industry of a developing economy of Botswana. Furthermore, the study also examines the mediating role of brand commitment on the linkage between brand associations and brand reputation.

5. RESEARCH METHOD

The researchers followed a descriptive and quantitative design to conduct the survey. The target population of the study comprised of all retail customers of three major SME brands (Brands A, B and C) operating in the metropolitan city of Gaborone in Botswana. These customers are regarded as key influential and revenue generators of SMEs in the apparel industry. Accordingly, the metropolitan city of Gaborone was selected because it contributes 80% towards the productivity, development and sustainability of businesses such as SMEs (MTI, 2017). A targeted sample of 450 customers (150 from each SME x 3) who meet the sample requirements was included in this study.

A stratified probability sampling technique was utilised for partitioning the population into subgroups in accordance with the size category of each SME, namely small (Brand C) and medium (Brands A and B collectively) enterprises. Within the identified subgroup, a convenience sampling approach was used for drawing a sample that was willing to participate in the study. These combined sampling methods enable the researchers to gather a large number of responses at a lower cost and within a short span of time, thereby leading to sample adequacy (Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson, 2014).

Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data for the empirical phase of the study. The questionnaires were distributed by fieldworkers at the service points of each SME brand in the metropolitan city of Gaborone, Botswana. The first part of the questionnaire gathered the demographic information of respondents, while the remaining part focused on the scales of the constructs observed in this study. Furthermore, the respondents were requested to rate a series of statements on the questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated 'strongly disagree' and 5 indicated 'strongly agree'. The measurement scales for the different constructs were adopted from the empirical studies of Almeida and Coelho (2017), Alsaad, Mohamad and Ismail (2017), Balaji, Roy and Wei (2016), Izogo and Ogba (2015), Sasmita and Suki (2015) and Li, Robson and Coates (2014).

The data was collected over a five-week period. Out of the total of 450 questionnaires that were distributed, only 260 complete questionnaires were retrieved for further analysis, hence representing a response rate of 58%. Therefore, the realised sample falls within the minimum sample size as recommended by Hair *et al.* (2014).

After the data had been coded, captured and edited, AMOS version 24 was used to conduct the statistical analysis. Cronbach's alpha values were determined to assess the reliability of the measuring instrument. Further statistical techniques employed included structural equation modelling (SEM) to determine the model fitness, construct reliability and to evaluate the hypothesised relationships in this study.

6. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

6.1 Respondent profile

The majority of the respondents who took part in this study were female (51.5%) within the age group of 18 to 30 years old (49.20%), in possession of a university degree qualification (52.69%), predominantly single (73.50%), working full time (65.38%) and maintaining an average standard of living (61.92%).

6.2 Reliability and validity of the measurement model

The reliability and validity of the measurement model were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE) and shared variance. As indicated in Table 1, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, factor loadings and AVE

achieved the recommended thresholds of 0.70 and 0.50 respectively (Hair *et al.*, 2014). These results suggest an evidence of reliability and convergent validity of the measuring instrument. Face validity was ensured by using parsimonious scales from previous studies that were found to be reliable and valid. Additionally, the researchers conducted a pilot test on a small representative sample (n=15) to ensure the validity of the scale items. Accordingly, the AVE values for each construct were greater than the corresponding shared variances, thereby indicating an evidence of discriminant validity. Table 2 provides support for nomological validity, as all the hypotheses for the study were accepted. The measurement model further provided good fit statistics (refer to Table 1) as indicated by Chi-Square/degrees of freedom ($\chi^2/df=2.02$), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI=0.921), Comparative Fit Index (CFI=0.934) and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA=0.070) and as such confirmed construct validity. Therefore, the measurement model fits the data satisfactorily.

TABLE 1: OVERALL STATISTICS OF THE MEASUREMENT MODEL

Construct and items	Factor loadings	Composite reliability	AVE	Shared variance	Cronbach's alpha (α)
Trust					
B1.4	0.852	0.857	0.670	0.421	0.858
B1.5	0.837				
B1.6	0.763				
Empathy					
B2.3	0.657	0.806	0.583	0.364	0.807
B2.4	0.840				
B2.5	0.782				
Communication					
B3.3	0.756	0.838	0.634	0.421	0.839
B3.4	0.871				
B3.5	0.756				
Brand associations					
C1.1	0.714	0.836	0.560	0.364	0.837
C1.2	0.762				
C1.3	0.740				
C1.4	0.775				
Brand commitment					
D1.1	0.815	0.883	0.655	0.421	0.884
D1.2	0.847				
D1.3	0.849				
D1.4	0.719				
Brand reputation					
E1.1	0.728	0.846	0.524	0.364	0.847
E1.2	0.621				
E1.3	0.744				
E1.4	0.801				
E1.5	0.715				
Model fit statistics					
χ^2/df	2.020				
TLI	0.921				
CFI	0.934				
RMSEA	0.070				

6.3 Path modelling and hypothesis testing of the structural model

The structural model was built after confirming the validity and reliability of the measurement model. More specifically, the structural model was used to assess the relationships between the constructs, and to validate the research hypotheses (H₁-H₄) formulated for this study. The theoretical model (refer to Figure 1) was therefore tested by means of SEM, with maximum likelihood estimates of the model parameters. These parameters include standardised regression weights (β) and p-values of the different paths. The results from this analysis are presented in Table 2 and Figure 2 respectively.

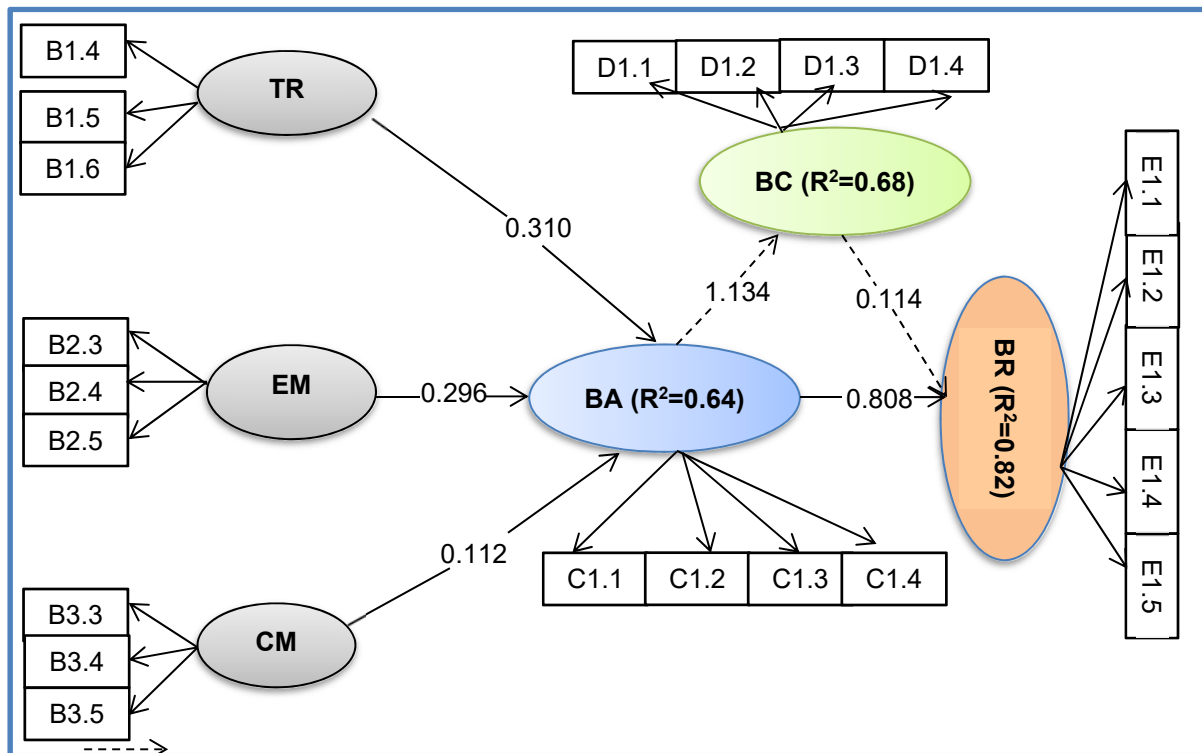
Table 2 and Figure 2 indicate that there is a statistically significant interplay between trust, empathy, communication, brand associations and brand reputation. The results provide evidence for H₁ (trust and brand associations: $\beta=0.310$, $p=0.000$), H₂ (empathy and brand associations: $\beta=0.296$, $p=0.000$), H₃ (communication and brand associations: $\beta=0.112$, $p=0.041$) and H₄ (brand associations and brand reputation: $\beta=0.808$, $p=0.000$). Therefore, all the hypotheses are supported. Remarkably, the structural model indicates that trust, empathy and communication explained up to **64%** of the brand associations of customers of the selected SME brands in the apparel industry of Botswana. In addition, brand associations explained up to **82%** of the brand reputation of customers of the selected SME brands in the apparel industry of Botswana.

Finally, as evidenced in Table 2, adequate model fit results ($\chi^2/df=1.959$, TLI=0.938) CFI=0.947) and RMSEA=0.061) were obtained and it can be concluded that the structural model supports the data, as suggested by Hair *et al.* (2014).

TABLE 2: HYPOTHESIS TESTING AND GOODNESS-OF-FIT RESULTS FOR THE STRUCTURAL MODEL

Hypotheses	Direct path estimates (β)	Probability value (p)	Hypothesis result ($p<0.05$)	Variance explained (R^2)
H ₁ Trust \longrightarrow Brand associations	0.310	0.000	Supported	0.640
H ₂ Empathy \longrightarrow Brand associations	0.296	0.000	Supported	
H ₃ Communication \longrightarrow Brand associations	0.112	0.040	Supported	
H ₄ Brand associations \longrightarrow Brand reputation	0.808	0.000	Supported	0.820
Model fit statistics				
χ^2/df	1.959			
TLI	0.938			
CFI	0.947			
RMSEA	0.061			

FIGURE 2: SEM MODEL



Note:-----> indirect relationship (mediation) and —> direct relationship. TR=trust, EM=empathy, CM=communication, BA=brand associations, BC=brand commitment and BR=brand reputation.

6.4 Mediation analysis

A mediation procedure via SEM was performed in AMOS version 24, in order to evaluate the mediating effect of brand commitment on the relationship between brand associations and brand reputation in order to confirm H₅. The results of the mediation analysis are detailed in Table 3. Bootstrapping (1 000 re-samples approach) technique enabled the computation of the estimates of the indirect effect and 95% biased-corrected *p*-values.

Table 3 also indicates a positive and significant total effect of brand associations on brand reputation ($\beta = 0.778$, $p = 0.030$). When adding brand commitment as mediator, brand associations increases its influence on brand reputation ($\beta = 1.134$, $p = 0.020$) and its effects become significant. This suggests a total mediation of brand commitment on the relationship between brand associations and brand reputation (Boot lower confidence limit=0.944, Boot upper confidence limit=1.364, $p = 0.020$). Furthermore, this is in conjunction with H₅ and the prediction is accepted. This also implies that in order to maximise the effect of brand associations on brand reputation, brand commitment should be included as a mediator.

TABLE 3: TOTAL, DIRECT AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF THE MEDIATION ANALYSIS

Total, direct and indirect effects	Path estimates (β)	Probability value (p)	Boot Standard error (SE)	Boot lower confidence level	Boot upper confidence level
Direct effect of brand associations on brand reputation					
Brand associations \rightarrow Brand reputation	0.770	0.001	0.052	0.561	0.879
Total effect of brand associations on brand reputation					
Brand associations \rightarrow Brand reputation	0.778	0.030	0.063	0.596	0.947
Total mediation (indirect effect of brand commitment)					
Brand associations \rightarrow Brand commitment \rightarrow Brand reputation	1.364	0.020	0.022	0.944	1.364
Hypothesis conclusion					
	Indirect path estimates (β)	Probability value (p)	Hypothesis result ($p < 0.05$)	Variance explained (R^2)	
H ₅ Brand associations \rightarrow Brand commitment \rightarrow Brand reputation	1.364	0.020	Supported	0.680	

6.5 Discussion

The results indicate that retail customers of the selected SME brands in the apparel industry of Botswana perceive trust, empathy and communication to significantly influence brand associations. More specifically, trust ($\beta=0.310$, $p=0.000$), empathy ($\beta=0.296$, $p=0.000$) and communication ($\beta=0.112$, $p=0.041$) exerted a positive and significant relationship on brand associations, therefore H₁, H₂ and H₃ were accepted. These findings are congruent to the empirical studies of Majid *et al.* (2016), Cai *et al.* (2015) and Loureiro (2013) which established trust, empathy and communication as the strongest predictors of brand associations. This suggests that the greater the level of trust, empathy and communication, the stronger the level of brand associations.

Contrary to expectations, evidence was found for the positive influence of brand associations on brand reputation amongst selected SME brands in the apparel industry of Botswana. Consistent with H₄, this shows that brand associations ($\beta=0.808$, $p=0.000$) had a direct impact on the level of brand reputation. This finding is consistent with the results of Han *et al.* (2012), who established that the cultivation of brand associations leads to an increased level of brand reputation. Thus, building a genuine and favourable brand reputation requires the inclusion of brand associations.

Furthermore, the study established that brand commitment significantly moderated the influence of brand associations on brand reputation amongst selected SME brands in the apparel industry of Botswana. The results from Table 3 support H₅, suggesting that brand commitment ($\beta=1.134$, $p=0.020$) increased the total effect of brand associations on brand reputation. This finding is in line with the empirical work of Dwivedi and Johnson (2013), who found that brand commitment fully mediates the impact of brand associations on brand reputation. This suggests that a stronger brand commitment level between SME brands and their customers can enhance the impact of brand associations on brand reputation.

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, Table 4 provides insight into the findings with respect to the hypotheses formulated for the study. As a result, all five hypotheses can be supported.

TABLE 4: SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis	Variable	Variable	β	Sig.	Finding
H ₁	Trust	Brand associations	0.310	0.000	Supported
H ₂	Empathy	Brand associations	0.296	0.000	Supported
H ₃	Communication	Brand associations	0.112	0.040	Supported
H ₄	Brand associations	Brand reputation	0.808	0.000	Supported
H ₅	Brand commitment	Brand associations and brand reputation	1.364	0.020	Supported

7. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

The study offers both a theoretical and a practical contribution. From a theoretical perspective, the results confirm that the measurement scales used to measure trust, empathy, communication, brand associations, brand commitment and brand reputation are reliable and valid. The theoretical model as proposed has been verified, confirming the interrelationship between trust, empathy, communication, brand associations, brand commitment and brand reputation from a developing market context.

From a managerial perspective, the study contributes in potentially assisting SMEs in the apparel industry of Botswana to understand how the cultivation of trust, empathy and communication can enhance brand associations, ultimately leading to increased brand reputation. It is also important to note that the strength of the relationship between brand associations and brand reputation can further be improved by the inclusion of brand commitment as a mediating variable. The outcome of these hypothesised relationships rest upon whether the customer perceives trust, empathy, communication, brand associations and brand commitment as satisfactory. However, Syed Alwi *et al.* (2016) opine that customer needs change continuously due to market competition, economic trends and product/service expectations, which influence the degree of their relationships with SMEs. It therefore becomes important for SMEs in the apparel industry of Botswana to differentiate their offerings, conduct market research and enhance the longevity of their relationships with customers to ensure business survival and competitiveness. As a result, SMEs in the apparel industry of Botswana will experience higher levels of trust, empathy, communication, brand associations and brand commitment, thereby attaining higher levels of brand reputation in the long term.

From a theoretical perspective, the study makes three contributions. Firstly, it establishes that the promotion of trust, empathy and communication do lead to the positive brand associations of selected SMEs in the apparel industry of Botswana. It can therefore be argued that the different constructs claimed by the theories of Relationship Marketing and brand equity to drive brand associations do have an influence on the brand associations of SMEs in a developing economy, as hypothesised in this study.

Secondly, the study provides insights into how brand associations can enhance the levels of brand reputation among selected SMEs in the apparel industry of Botswana. It should be noted that the theoretical connection between brand associations and brand reputation is a new research focus area and limited studies have been found to prove the linkage between these constructs. This finding is thus important as it highlights what constitutes brand associations and how it influences brand reputation. Therefore, the interrelationship between brand

associations and brand reputation can be used by future researchers to develop useful measures for understanding the connection between these two variables, as contextualised in the theoretical model of this study.

Lastly, the study provides an improved understanding of the mediating impact of brand commitment on the relationship between brand associations and brand reputation from the perspective of a developing economy (i.e. Botswana) and a competitive industry such as the apparel industry. The research study proposes a theoretical model that clarifies how the cultivation of brand commitment can strengthen the linkage between brand associations and brand reputation. Therefore, the positive impact of brand commitment on the degree of brand associations, can ultimately lead to sustained brand reputation, which in turn creates competitive advantage and improves customer retention (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2010).

8. PRACTICAL MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, SMEs need to enhance their trust level with customers by improving product quality through fine-tuning the customers' expectations that are generated by the design elements of the product, and to enhance the speed with which a consumer can access the product from the service points of SMEs. This can be done by training and developing employees in service delivery skills and conducting market research by interviewing customers about the product features and benefits, in order to ensure that the SME products become more in demand and exceed the expectations of consumers. This would capture the interest of consumers, foster their emotional bond with the brand, and create a favourable association in their minds.

Secondly, the management of SMEs need to stimulate empathy by generating a memorable experience with the brand and facilitating the creation of favourable memories, emotions and knowledge in the minds of consumers. This can be achieved by continuously encouraging employees to engage positively with customers before, during and after service intervention by treating customers politely, showing a concern for their needs, and having timely conversations with them to secure their positive associations with the brand. In order for customers to develop favourable associations towards the SME, the frontline staff have to become more involved and connected with customers by being flexible and responsive to their specific needs and contacting customers regularly to keep them informed about the business' offerings, thereby promoting emotional feelings of trust.

Thirdly, SME owners need to develop an internal communication plan that addresses the consumers' communication needs. This communication plan will include activities such as providing customers with multiple ways to contact the business and capturing customer database information to be able to communicate the business' product and service offerings. The implementation of this communication plan should also consider whether the customer prefers leaflet communication, cell phone communication or email communication, in order to communicate effectively and smoothly, thereby supporting a customer-oriented approach to communication. Therefore, when an SME fulfils the communication needs of its consumers, they are more likely to develop favourable impressions about the business, leading to improved brand associations.

Fourthly, SMEs need enhance brand associations by providing employees with a level of guidance and commitment to product development and service excellence that enhances the strength of relationships with customers. This can be achieved by creating an open and interactive work space between all levels of management, which enables employees to voice out their opinions and concerns freely, conducting regular appraisals to reward employees for their positive behaviours, and displaying a concern for the personal development and growth of employees in order to produce good perceptions of the brand in the eyes of consumers. These perceptions can further be strengthened by motivating employees to put more effort into service delivery and empowering them to share the mandate of the business with

customers effectively. This would elevate the reputation of the business as customers become appreciative of its efforts in meeting their needs.

Lastly, the owners of SMEs can improve brand commitment by demonstrating that the business is truly concerned about the well-being of the customers. This can be achieved by contacting them every quarter (telephonically or via email) to remind them about current and new product offers, accrued benefits and the possibility of renewing their contracts with the SME. This will provide customers a good opportunity to voice their opinions and expectations about the relationship, which can further assist the SME to make the necessary adjustments to the customers' product portfolio. Consequently, the customer will feel valued and respected by the business because it shows an interest in their individual needs; and that will enhance their commitment to the brand and promote a favourable association of the SME, which in turn leads to higher levels of brand reputation in the long run.

9. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study aimed at determining the interrelationship between trust, empathy, communication, brand associations and brand reputation of the selected SME brands in the apparel industry of Botswana. The findings supported all five the hypotheses (H_1 , H_2 , H_3 , H_4 and H_5) for the study. These results indicated that trust, empathy and communication had a positive and significant influence on brand associations. In addition, brand associations was found to have a direct impact on the level of brand reputation and this relationship was strengthened by the inclusion of brand commitment as mediating variable. Subsequently, the impact of this paper was to provide recommendations and strategies to SME brands on how to cultivate the levels of trust, empathy and communication to ensure a stronger brand association. As a result, improved levels of brand associations would then be strengthened by enhancing the quality of brand commitment, thereby promoting the longevity of brand reputation. The implementation of these proposals could result in SME brands to provide better service and differentiated products to their current and prospective customers by focusing on strategies to build trust, empathy, communication, brand associations and brand commitment, leading to sustained brand reputation.

While the results from this paper provide a number of managerial implications, the research is not without its limitations. The study was based on three predominant SME brands in Botswana operating within the metropolitan city of Gaborone. However, the results from these SMEs may not be a true reflection of the entire apparel industry and cannot be generalised to the entire population in Botswana. It is therefore recommended that a future study may be conducted amongst all apparel clothing customers in Botswana in all the different sub-district areas of the country to obtain greater insights on the interrelationship between the constructs identified in this study.

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