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Perceived Guest House Brand Value: The influence of Web Interactivity on brand image and brand awareness.

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of web interactivity and brand experience on the perceived brand value of guest houses, and ultimately, affective commitment towards guest houses. A questionnaire was used to collect data from guest house customers, yielding a total of 300 responses suitable for analysis. Structural Equation Modelling was used to test the hypotheses. The results revealed that web interactive elements of social interactivity, active control and synchronicity positively influence brand awareness, however, both social interactivity and active control influence brand image. Results also confirmed that brand awareness influences brand image. Brand experience and brand image also had an influence on perceived brand value, with the latter influencing affective commitment. Guesthouses owners are recommended to have websites that allow two-way communication. Websites should also have embedded features such as effective navigation tools which allow for active control.

Keywords: Web interactivity, brand awareness, brand image, affective commitment, South Africa, guesthouse

Introduction

The advent of the internet and the rapid evolution of its related technologies have compelled most businesses to reallocate resources from conventional advertising media to more interactive media such as websites (Starkov, 2002; Aziz, Radzi, Zahari & Ahamd, 2011). Most accommodation establishments, whether large or small, are thus creating their own websites to (i) promote their services and (ii) facilitate online reservation. These are the two main objectives of developing websites for accommodation establishments (Huang & Lin, 2006; Abdullah, Jayaraman & Kamal (2016). Moreover, the growing importance of the internet in business transactions and marketing means that websites must not only be functional but also attractive (Palla & Zotos, 2017). The ultimate goal of investing in an attractive website is to maximise customer experience (Shi & Zhang, 2014). Abdullah et al. (2016) contend that interactive websites enhance awareness and visibility, creating a clear image of an accommodation establishment's brand.

Traditionally, accommodation establishments have focused on personal customer service and luxury facilities to differentiate themselves from competitors. However, with developments in technology, establishments are now increasingly looking at how they can capitalise on technology to differentiate themselves (Lu, Hayes & Wang, 2019). This is due to the fact that customers are no longer only looking for a place to stay but now wish to maximise the other elements of their experience. This includes the use of new, advanced technologies such as interactive accommodation establishments websites to connect with service providers or friends (Pallas & Zotos, 2017). Web consumers are increasingly using interactivity to evaluate

the performance and quality of websites (Bao, Li, Shen & Hou, 2016;). Website interactivity is based on issues such as engagement, attentiveness and attractiveness, which are inherent features in most technology-related communities (Palla & Zotos, 2013). In the hospitality industry, website interactivity plays a pivotal role in maximising customer experience (Pallas & Zotos, 2107).

Although website interactivity is a crucial aspect of online marketing, there is scant research on the accommodation industry, investigating the influence of web interactivity on branding elements such as brand awareness, brand image and brand value (Berrada, Okumus, Nusair & Bilgihan, 2016). Experience-related research remains underrepresented in the tourism literature (McLean & Wilson, 2016). Furthermore, most studies on branding, including in the hospitality industry, tend to focus on large businesses (Barreda et al., 2016; Gao, 2010; Ahmad, Khan & Rahman, 2017). This creates a gap which the present study seeks to bridge by focusing on the guest house sector. A guest house can be described as a private house which has been converted to provide accommodation for tourists (Bennet, Jooste & Strydom, 2005). In South Africa, most guest houses are owner-managed, small and medium businesses (Elliot & Boshoff, 2005). The study focused on guest houses because the South African government is currently putting much emphasis on small and medium enterprise (SMEs). Guesthouse constitute a bigger part of small businesses in South Africa; hence it was deemed necessary to investigate their website performance so as to give proper recommendations on how they can use websites to improve their awareness and image. To date, there has been little research on the online experience of guest house customers in South Africa. Moreover, very few studies have evaluated the effect of website interactivity on branding elements such as brand awareness and brand image in the accommodation sector, with a specific focus on guest houses in South Africa. Thus, the effective branding of guest houses, and the role of website interactivity in influencing perceived brand value, remain areas which are largely under-researched. This study examines the

influence of website interactivity as defined by user control, social interactivity and synchronicity on perceived brand value through brand awareness and brand image. The study also investigates the relationship between brand experience and perceived brand value and, in turn, the relationship between brand value and affective commitment of customers towards guest houses.

The study contributes to theory in three ways. Firstly, it contributes to the body of literature on website branding. The ever-increasing use of the internet by both businesses and customers to connect with each other means that the internet will continue to play a significant role as a marketing platform. Understanding how businesses, including SMEs, can capitalise on this platform is key to effective online marketing.

Secondly, the study proposes and tests a comprehensive conceptual model that captures website interactivity and brand experience in explaining perceived brand value and customers' affective commitment. In examining website interactivity, the study looks at the impact of website quality on individual dimensions. This provides insights on the nature and level of influence of website interactivity on brand value and affective commitment.

Thirdly, by testing the model among guest house customers in the South African accommodation sector, this study contributes to a relatively under-researched area in literature. Indeed, Berrada et al. (2016) observes that research on branding in the hospitality industry has been relatively limited. Most studies in this sector have been conducted from the perspective of developed nations (Ahmad, Khan & Rahman, 2017; Gao, 2010; McLean & Wilson, 2016).

The next section of this article provides the theoretical grounding of the study, followed by the hypotheses to be tested and then, the study results. The study concludes with an account of its theoretical contribution and managerial implications.

Grounding theory

The study is centred on the principles of interactive theory, which underpins the relationships between the constructs of the study. Interactivity theory is centred on the exchange of messages and holds that the perceptions of individuals can be affected by the 'supremacy of the interactivity' (Huang & Yang, 2011). The more reciprocal a message exchange is, the stronger the perception of interactivity is (Voorveld et al., 2013). Bucy (2004) mentioned that interactivity in a real online environment involves participation and interaction via online-mediated and communication technologies.

The importance of interactivity theory in online communications has been emphasised by a number of studies (Liu & Shrum, 2002; Pallas & Zotos, 2013; Bao et al., 2016). Interactivity is a multifaceted concept which requires a clear definition (Lu et al., 2019; Barreda et al., 2016). Lilleker and Malagón (2010) add that there is no consensus on a universal definition of interactivity and how it can be applied to website functionality. Campbell and Wright (2008) define interactivity as an association between two or more people who, in some conditions, mutually alter their behaviour towards one another. Eun and Bortree (2017. p731) indicated that "Interactivity rests on the contingent and responsive (back-and-forth) message exchanges between two interactants".

Website interactivity centres on factors such as reciprocity, attentiveness and attractiveness (Palla & Zotos, 2013). A frequently cited definition by Steurer (1992) states that web interactivity is the degree to which website users can take part in altering the form and content of a technology-mediated environment in real time. A more comprehensive definition of interactivity was given by Johnson, Bruner and Kumar (2006) which states that it is the extent to which an actor involved in a communication episode perceives the communication to be reciprocal, responsive, speedy and characterised by the use of nonverbal communication. Since this study is focusing on how guesthouse customers perceive interactivity in technology-mediated environment in real time, the definition by Johnson et al (2006) is adopted.

Facets of interactivity which are frequently cited in literature are two-way communication (reciprocal communication), synchronicity and control (Liu & Shrum, 2002; Bao et al., 2016; Tan et al., 2019). Website interactivity can refer to the online interactive techniques such as the interaction between a business and a customer or interaction between customers (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). The interaction between a business and customers can include online discussion bulletins, games or free customer calls. Interactions between customers can take place on online platforms or through communities where customers share their experiences. Customer-to-customer interactions increase customers' sense of involvement in the purchasing process and fulfil their social connection needs. This can lead to specific brand identification and can enhance a sense of attachment (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004).

This study used the frequently cited web interactivity facets (control, synchronicity and reciprocity) and branding elements to ground the study hypotheses, which were tested in the accommodation sector focusing on guest houses. This was done to determine whether interactivity elements influence the brand awareness and brand image of small accommodation establishments in an emerging African market. The authors are unaware of any other study which has applied interactivity theory to understand the influence of interactivity on brand awareness and future behavioural outcomes focusing on small accommodation establishments in South Africa. Additionally, internet-based advertising has been and continue to grow by leaps and bounds, and companies are now utilizing the website to market their services. Consumers on the other hand, are not only concerned about searching products online but are also concerned about their experience when using the online tools (Pallas & Zotos, 2017). Thus, interactivity theory proposes that customers are much concerned about the supremacy of interactivity. In online environments, in this case when using the website, customers are much concerned about the facets of interactivity. If consumers are satisfied with all the facets, they

are likely to continue interacting with the company through their website. Thus, it was deemed necessary to adopt the Interactivity theory since it more applicable to online advertising tools such as websites.

Theoretical model development

The interrelationship between social interactivity, user control, synchronicity and brand awareness

One of the inherent features of website Interactivity is its ability to facilitate two-way communication or social interactivity (Jiang et al., 2010; McLean & Wilson, 2016) between the website users and the brand. Thus, social interactivity allows for reciprocal communication which according to Jiang et al. (2010) presented on websites as communication tools such as emails and live chats that permits consumers to participate in conversations with a company`s online sales representatives. By doing so, consumers have the ability to ask more questions about the brand and this in turn enhances brand awareness. Through interactivity, a strong link among the users, the business and the brands can be formed. Social interactivity in this study refers to the potential to exchange information between two or more entities (Jiang, Chan, Tan, Chua, 2010; McLean & Wilson, 2016). Control and social interactivity perceptions help to build powerful links whereby a mutual relationship between customers and brands can be reinforced (Barreda et al., 2016). User control can be defined as the degree to which a person selects the information, timing and flow of communication (Dholakia, 2006; Tan et al., 2019) or the power to choose the content and direct an interaction. People involved in two-way communication have the ability to exercise control over how the information is exchanged (Gao, 2010; McLean & Wilson, 2016). Some researchers consider user control to be the primary element of interactivity (Belanche, Flavián & Pérez-Rueda, 2017). User control is based chiefly on the reduction in effort in executing a task and fastness of putting information

(Heeter, 1989). User control and two-way communication are regarded as the main elements of interactivity (Jiang et al, 2010). Since user control is a critical component that influences user's interaction with the website, hence facilitating serious involvement in web navigation (Novak, et al, 2000) and two-way communication activates the perceptions of interaction ease, connection and receptivity (Jiang et al 2010). Previous studies also stressed the importance of Synchronicity in the interactivity concept (McMillan & Hwang 2002, Liu 2003; Tan, Lee, Hew, Ooi & Wong, 2018). Synchronicity refers to how quickly messages can be conveyed and how quickly people can process these messages (Gao, 2010). Synchronicity can also be described as a website's ability to respond quickly and to provide real-time feedback (Yoo, Henfridsson & Lyytinen, 2010). It is assumed when users are able to get instant feedback, they might be tempted to continue using the website to search for more information about the brand. This in turn may also enhances brand awareness. Thus, it was expected in this study that synchronicity can significantly influence brand awareness.

When an interaction occurs and users are able to guide the flow of communication, they will remember and identify the brand better compared to those who did not experience the same interaction (Barreda et al., 2016). The greater the user control the more likely it is for a consumer to remember the experience with that branded website. Previous studies revealed that interactivity specifically assists in developing branding elements to high levels, helps to connect consumers to a specific brand and increases brand awareness, recognition and recall (Islam & Rahman, 2017; Barreda et al, 2016). Since consumers are able to select the content, order of communication and timing represents distinctive chances to be more aware of the brand (Gao, 2010). The interactivity's capacity to product research and knowledge makes it pivotal in brand awareness (Madhavaram et al., 2005). As well, interactivity can improve a customers' level of understanding and comprehension of a brand (Marcias, 2003) thus knowing brand features and benefits through collaboration and participation in their interaction with the

brand (Jiang et al, 2010). The speed at which users get feedback when interacting with the website can also improve their understanding of the brand.

However, to date, there has been only a handful of studies on the relationship between web settings and brand elements, and specifically, brand awareness and brand image (Barreda, et al., 2016; Gao, 2010). Furthermore, these studies did not pay attention to synchronicity, which is one the important dimension of interactivity, hence this study included this facet. Barreda et al. (2016) investigated the relationship between social interactivity and brand awareness as well as social interactivity and brand image, reporting a positive relationship between these constructs. Gao (2010) examined the same constructs and concluded that there is a significant interrelationship between these constructs. Against this context, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H$_{1a}$: Social interactivity has a significant and positive influence brand awareness

H$_{2a}$: User control has a significant and positive influence on brand awareness

H$_{3a}$: Synchronicity has a significant and positive influence on brand awareness

The interrelationship between social interactivity, user control, synchronicity brand image

As mentioned before, one of the inherent elements of website interactivity is that it facilitates form of two-way communications (Jiang & Benbasat, 2007) between brands and the users of the website and offers them form of control over the whole communication process (Song & Zinkham, 2008). Control and two-way communication perceptions assist in establishing a mutual relationship between the brand and its customers which enhances strong connections.

The more brands know about their consumers and about the information they seek, the more positive the brand is perceived by consumers. Madhavaram et al. (2005) and Fiore and Jin (2003) propose that when users perceive that they have control, or they can guide the interaction they tend to positively perceive brand image and brand association. Voorveld et al. (2013) suggest that apart from influencing a more favourable brand evaluation, website interactivity also influences the formation of positive perceptions that are in consonance with image portrayed on the brand's website. Also, those who perceive that the website has the ability to provide real time feedback quickly, tend to positively perceive the brand image (Gao, 2010). Based on the above, it is expected that the three facets; user control, two-way communication and synchronicity can influence the guest house brand image. Thus, the following hypotheses are thus formulated:

H_{1b}: Social interactivity has a significant and positive influence on brand image

H_{2b}: User control has a significant and positive influence on brand image.

H_{3b}: Synchronicity has a significant and positive influence on brand image.

The interrelationship between brand awareness, brand image and customer brand value

Brand awareness can be described as how strong the presence of a brand is in consumers' minds and how well a brand name is known (Kim, Choe & Petrick, 2018) or a customer's ability to recognise (Romaniuk, Wight, & Faulkner, 2017) and recall (Liebers, Breves, Schallhorn & Schramm, 2019) a particular brand. It can also be defined as how consumers can relate the brand to a particular product that they intend to buy (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). It is also regarded as an outstanding factor affecting customers' purchase decisions (Ansary & Hashim, 2017). In addition, brand awareness plays an important role in ensuring that customers think about a certain brand when they imagine a certain product (Ansary & Hashim, 2017).

Kilei, Iravo and Omwega (2016) contend that brand awareness with robust relationships can evolve into an absolute brand image and can be included in consumer decision-making when purchasing a product or service. Moreover, Cakmark (2016) indicated that brand awareness which is accepted as the beginning of brand equity forms the brand knowledge with brand image. As suggested by (Yasin, Noor, & Mohamad, 2007) when customers have high brand awareness, it may mean that the brand is well known, respected and common. Thus, a relationship exists between brand awareness and brand image.

According to Kim and Kim (2004), brand awareness is associated with consumer brand value. Mohd Yasin et al. (2007) also suggest that consumer-based brand value is partially evaluated in terms of the awareness it evokes. Thus, brand with an outstanding awareness tend to be valued by customers. Huang and Sarigollü (2012) investigated the relationship between brand awareness and brand perceived value and corroborate that a strong link exists between the two. Barreda *et al.* (2016) concurs that perceived brand value is, to some extent, assessed based on the awareness it brings.

Brand image can be defined as concepts that correlate a consumer's memory with a specific brand name (Rubio, Oubiña & Villaseñor, 2014). It can be viewed as the compound effect of brand associations (Barreda, et al., 2016) and is an essential element of consumer-perceived brand value. Esch, Tobias, Bernd and Patrick (2006) describe brand image as powerful, appropriate and distinctive brand associations. These associations can emanate from experience with the brand, details of the product and its benefits, product price and packaging (Esch et al., 2006) and the interaction of consumers with the brand can influence these associations.

The main goal of hospitality establishments is to instil a positive perception in customers' minds to gain a competitive edge in the market (Ryu, Letho, Gordon & Fu, 2019). Brands with high value tend to have a higher positive brand image than brands with lower value (Ryu et al., 2019). Davies, Golicic and Marquardt (2008) tested the relationship between brand image and brand value in a service context and confirmed that a significant relationship exists between the two. This is supported by Berrada et al. (2016) who found a causal positive relationship between brand image and perceived brand value.

According to Ansary and Hashim (2018), the awareness of a particular brand leads to its attractiveness. This suggests that there is a relationship between these two variables. Gao (2010) concluded that a positive relationship exists between brand awareness and brand value as well as brand image. Huang and Sarigollü (2012) also established a relationship between brand awareness and brand value. Similarly, Ansary and Hashim (2018) concluded that a relationship exists between brand image and brand awareness. Cakmark (2016) also established a positive significant relation between brand awareness and brand image. From the discussions above, it is assumed that brand awareness has an influence on brand image and perceived brand value in the hospitality industry. The following hypotheses are thus formulated:

H_4: Brand awareness has a significant and positive influence on (a) brand image and (b) customer perceived brand value.

H_5: Brand image has a significant and positive influence on customer perceived brand value.

The interrelationship between brand experience and customer-perceived brand value

Brand experience can be described as general feelings and behavioural responses induced by brand-related stimuli derived from the design of the brand, packaging, identity and how the brand is communicated to consumers (Spence, Puccinelli & Roggeveen, 2014). It can also be defined as the customer`s perception founded on his or her contacts with the brand (Wulandari, 2016). Today's customers are no longer seeking only functional value, but they also desire the symbolic value of a brand (Walter, Cleff & Chu, 2013). Thus, the variations and distinctiveness of experience can be used as an appropriate competitive tool by hospitality establishments (Ong, Lee & Ramayah, 2018).

Brand experience in the new millennium measures the powerfulness of each experience stimulated by the brand. In the hospitality industry, when factors such as quality of food, furnishing, interaction with employees and perceived value are favourable, customer satisfaction is guaranteed (Voon, Jager, Chitra, Kueh & Jussem, 2013). Perceived value is elucidated by the customer based on the benefits the customer gets from using and experiencing the service. That is how customer perceive they have gained or benefited from the service provided and whether their expectations and requirements have been met (Johnston and Kong 2011). A customer can only be able to tell the benefits received from a brand after interacting with the product or service. Thus, brand experience to a certain extent influences how customers perceive brand value. According to Holbrook (2006), when customer experience luxury hotel brand, their value perception arises from the customer's own pleasure. The leisure activities provided by an establishment or personal services such as complimentary drop-off or pick-up services can lead to emotions and moods like happiness.

Customer brand experience is gained from interactions with the product and the employees of the service establishment (Hussein, 2018). Delivery of outstanding brand experience results in

long-term relationships between the customer and the hospitality brand, which may give the establishment a sustainable competitive edge in the market (So & King, 2010). Guest house brand experience in this research was measured using the five dimensions proposed by Khan and Rahman (2017), although only four were adopted for the purposes of the study.

Previous studies on the hospitality industry (Ong et al., 2018; Hussein, 2018; Pollalis & Niros, 2016; Cleff, 2013) assessed the relationship between brand experience and customer loyalty and found a significant relationship between the two. Cleff, Lin and Walter (2014) examined the relationship between brand experience and brand equity. However, studies which attempted to examine the relationship between brand experience and customer perceived brand value are scarce. An exception is the work of Wiedmann, Labenz, Hasse and Hennigs (2018) which focused specifically on the relationship between brand experience and customer perceived value and established a strong relationship between the two. It is assumed in this study that if brand experience can influence brand equity and brand loyalty, it can also influence customer perceived brand value. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_6: Brand experience has a positive and significant influence on customer-perceived brand value.

The interrelationship between customer-perceived brand value and affective commitment

Affective commitment plays a pivotal role in the development and maintenance of relationships in so far as it links consumers to selling organisations (Cossío-Silva, Francisco-José, Revilla-Camacho, Vega-Vazquez, Manuela & Palacios, Beatriz, 2015). It is described by Ramirez, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas (2017) as a long-lasting desire to sustain a relationship with a brand, based on a psychological attachment. There are multiple forms of customer commitment, such as normative, continuance or affective commitment (Silva et al., 2015).

Normative commitment can be seen as a moral obligation to commit whereas continuance commitment can be described as the cost of abandoning the product or service provider (Cossío-Silva *et al.,* 2015; Fernandez-Lores, Gavilan, Avello & Blasco, 2016). Affective commitment can be described as the customers' desire to commit themselves to a product or service. This form of commitment was used in this study since it is more likely to be related with constructive attitudes and behaviours than the other two types of commitment (Fazal-e-Hasan, Ahmadi, Mortimer & Grimmer (2018). Other forms of commitment are less likely to influence future behaviour or attitude (Cossío-Silva et al.*,* 2015).

Several studies have been conducted on the influence of customer-perceived brand value on commitment (Fazal-e-Hasan et al., 2018; Krisnanto, 2017; Hsu, 2018). Krisnanto (2017) asserts that to the customer, perceived value depends on a number of factors which include functional value, monetary value, emotional value, adjustment value and relational value. These factors can influence loyalty and commitment to a brand. Seminal work by Bretherton (1985) shows that if customers perceive that the brand contributes to their overall well-being, they may have a positive attitude towards the brand or may be motivated to continue purchasing the brand. Thus, customers who perceive the value of the brand in a positive way or feels that the brand meets their requirements are likely to experience hope to continuing a positive relationship with the brand. Chiu, Chen, Du and Hsu (2018) establish that customer-perceived value has an influence on customer commitment. Fazal-e-Hasan et al. (2018) concur, stating that a relationship does indeed exist between perceived value and customer commitment. Against this context, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Customer-perceived brand value has a significant and positive influence on customer affective commitment.

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical model proposed for this study, showing clearly the study constructs as well as the relationships between them.

[*Insert figure 1 here*]

Methodology

This study investigated the relationship between website attributes and guest house brand image and awareness. Quantitative data was collected by means of a structured questionnaire. Since a model was developed from the interactivity theory, a quantitative approach was deemed to be best-suited to testing the model to see the applicability of the theory (Glasow, 2005).

The target population included individuals in the Gauteng province of South Africa who had booked into a guesthouse using the guest house's website during the past 12 months. Customers who have booked into any registered guesthouse were included. A period longer than 12 months was excluded to ensure that respondents could recall their experience at the establishment as well with the website. To curb measurement errors, all the measurements were double checked for accuracy and the field workers who collected data were well trained. Moreover, pilot testing was done on a small group of people to check if there were no ambiguous statements as well as checking the memory of the respondents regarding to the website they have used. Lastly, the questionnaire was constructed in such a way that all the variables used were measured by three or more scales. A cross-sectional approach was adopted for data collection, which was gathered through a questionnaire. The data were thus collected by a professional data collection company from January to March 2019. The questionnaires were administered by the company's field workers and English was the main language used. A convenient sampling technique was used since a database of people who have booked into guest houses using could not be established . In the absence of a definite population, Saunders,

Lewis and Thornhill (2012) recommend non-probability sampling. Thus, convenient sampling was used. The field workers distributed the questionnaire to individuals explaining the requirements of the questionnaire and screening question. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed and 320 questionnaires were returned. After inputting the data into SPSS, it was determined that 20 of the respondents did not fully complete the questionnaire and were eliminated, therefore 300 were left for analysis purposes.

The questionnaire was dived into two sections: the first section elicited demographic information from the respondents whereas the second section focused on the variables of the study. The scales used in the questionnaire were based on previous studies on a similar subject. The scales were adapted from the following sources: (i) social interactivity and active control were adapted from Jiang et al (2010) and Gao (2010); (ii) synchronicity was adapted from Gao (2010); (iii) brand awareness was adapted from Kilei et al. (2016) and Barreda et al. (2016); (iv) brand image was adapted from Huang and Sarigollü (2012); (v) guest house brand experience was adapted from Ahmad and Khan and Rahman (2017); (vi) brand value was adapted from Barreda et al. (2016) and); and (vii) affective commitment was adapted from Cossío-Silva (2015) and Fernandez-Lores et al. (2015). A five-point Likert scale was used to measure each construct, ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree". The questions used to measure each construct are presented in Table 1.

Once the data was edited, it was entered into SPSS 23. Descriptive statistics were then used to extract the profile of the respondents and the responses to the 66 questions contained in the questionnaire. The reliability of the constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Hu & Bentler, 1999) whereas factor analysis was used to check the loading and validity of the constructs.

Sample

In terms of the respondents surveyed, 52.3% were male and 47.7% were female. The majority (68.7%) were in the 23-30 age group, followed by 12% in the 31-36 age group, 7% in the 37-41 age group, 4.7% in the 42-48 age category and 3.7% were below 25 years of age. The smallest number of respondents were in the 49-54 age group (2.3%), the 55-60 age group (1.3%) and 60 years and over (0.3%). The results revealed that the respondents had different levels of education. The majority (41%) had a bachelor or honours degree while a little over a quarter (26%) had a matric certificate This was followed by 11.3% who had a post-matric certificate or diploma and 9% who had a master's degree. Only 0.7% of the respondents had a doctoral degree. In terms of race, the majority of the respondents were Black (77.3%), followed by White (9%), Indian (5.7%) and Coloured (5.3%). A total of 2.7% indicated that they were of other races not included in the questionnaire.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses in Figure 1, using AMOS version 23.0. SEM permits the testing of interrelations between constructs (Hair, Hult, Ringle & Sarstedt, 2010). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to establish the loadings of the constructs. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha, while Average Variance Extraction (AVE) was used to check the validity of the constructs. Table 1 shows the CFA results. All the factor loadings were above 0.5 which is the cut of point (Segars, 1997).

Reliability and validity

Table 1 shows that the factor loading for the measures was above 0.5. All the constructs obtained a Cronbach coefficient above 0.7, which is the cut-off point confirming internal consistency. Both Cronbach's alpha (CA) value and the composite reliability (CR) value should be greater than 0.7 (Hu & Bentler 1999) for the scales to be considered reliable. The results

therefore had high internal consistency. Convergent validity was also confirmed as the AVE values were higher than 0.5. For convergent validity to be confirmed, the AVE value and factor loading of the items should be above 0.5 (Hair et al., 2014).

[*Insert Table 1 here*]

As recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), the Average Variance Extracted and Shared Variance between the variables were compared to assess discriminant validity. The AVE of the different variables must be higher than the squared correlation between variables for discriminant validity to be confirmed (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results are presented in Table 2. All the square roots of the AVE (highlighted in bold) are higher than the correlations between variables, demonstrating the discriminant validity of the variables.

[*Insert table 2 here*]

Model fitness

Measurement of model fitness

AMOS 23.0 was used to perform confirmatory factor analysis on the 11 constructs and 46 items of model to evaluate its psychometric properties. The fitness of the model was assessed through chi-square $\chi2$ statistics, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), normative fit index (NFI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI) and comparative fit index (CFI). The obtained $\chi 2$ (chi-square) of 138.26, degree of freedom = 115 and p value = 0.00, χ^2 / df =1.20 confirmed the fitness of the model. The $\chi2$/df value should be smaller than or equal to 3 for a fit model (Hooper, Coughlan & Mullen, 2008). The RMSEA was 0.05, TLI was 0.98, NFI was 0.97, GFI was 0.91 and CFI was 0.91. According to MacCallum, Browne and Saugawara (1996), for a fit measurement model, the TLI and the NFI should be higher than

or equal to 0.9, the RMSEA should be less than 0.06 while the GFI and CFI should be greater than or equal to 0.90. These values are shown in Table 3.

[*Insert table 3 here*]

Structural model fitness

All the fit indices for the different constructs in the study scored values that were within the recommended value range. RMSEA should be less than 0.06, GFI and CFI should be greater than or equal to 0.90 (Kline, 1998) while TLI and NFI should be more than or equal to 0.95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).   The measurement model's $\chi2$ value was 156.46, with 128 degrees of freedom and a p value of 0.05, $\chi2$ / df was 1.28, the RMSEA = 0.05, TLI = 0.98, GFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.95, and NFI = 0.96, suggesting good model fit. The results of the fit indices are shown in Table 4.

[*Insert table 4 here*]

The structural model was used to test the hypotheses and coefficient of determination while R^2 was used to assess the model's explanatory power. The results indicate that 51% of variance in brand awareness was covered by social interactivity, active control and synchronicity while 40% of the variance in brand image was explained by social interactivity, active control synchronicity and brand awareness. The results also show that 45% of the variance in brand value was covered by brand experience, brand awareness and brand image. Lastly, the results reveal that 56 % of the variance in affective commitment was covered by brand value, which

is acceptable in the social sciences (Chin, 1998). Thus, it can be concluded that the model offers satisfactory explanatory power.

The results of the hypothesis testing are presented in Figure 2.

[Insert figure 2 here]

Figure 2 shows that social interactivity (β=.48, p<.001), active control (β=.12, p<.05) and synchronicity (β=.29, p<.01) positively influence brand awareness. Social interactivity (β=.48) has a strong influence on brand awareness compared to active control and synchronicity. This result supports H1a, H2a and H3a. The results also revealed that social interactivity (β=.18, p<.05) and active control (β=.36, p<.01) significantly influence brand image, supporting H1b and H2b. However, synchronicity (β=.08, p<.12) was found not to influence brand image. This result did not support H3b. Brand awareness (β=.19, p<.05) significantly influences brand image whereas brand awareness (β=.03, p<.17) was found not to influence brand value. Thus, hypothesis H4a was supported and H4b was not supported. Furthermore, the results show that brand image (β=.38, p<.001) and brand experience (β=.17, p<.05) both influence brand value, although brand image (β=.38) seems to have the greatest impact on brand value. Lastly, the results show that brand value (β=.21, p<.01) influences affective commitment, supporting hypotheses H5, H6 and H7.

Part of the model was hierarchical because one of the constructs (brand experience) constituted a number of dimensions (Wentzels, Odekerken-Schroder & van Oppen, 2009). Four dimensions exist in brand experience, hence, the significance of each dimension in the production of second-order constructs was also taken into account. The results in Figure 2 show that guest house ambience (GA) (.89) displays a value which is statically different and greater than other dimensions (L, SC & GE). Therefore, GA has the highest impact on building the second-order construct, brand experience. This is followed by staff competence (SC) (.71)

and guest house location (GL) (.67). The least important dimension in measuring guest house experience was shown to be guest-to-guest experience (.54).

Table 5 presents a summary of the hypothesis results. Nine out of eleven hypotheses could be accepted, determining nomological validity.

[Insert tale 5 here]

Discussion of results

The advent of the internet and its related technologies has forced businesses, including those in the hospitality industry, to use the internet for marketing purposes (Aziz et al., 2011). Over the last decade, most hospitality businesses have adopted the internet, and in particular, websites, to keep pace with these new technology trends. The current study formulated a model to assess the importance of different website features. The results are intended to help small accommodation establishments to market their services more effectively by creating solid brand knowledge in the minds of their customers.

The results revealed that website features such as social interactivity, active control and synchronicity influence guest house brand awareness. This finding is in line with previous studies such as that of Barreda et al. (2016), who established a positive relationship between web configuration (active control) and elements such as brand awareness and brand image. Gao (2010) also concluded that a relationship exists between web configurations and brand elements such as a brand awareness and brand image. In contrast, however, the present study could not establish a relationship between synchronicity and brand image. The possible reason might be that the of survey was conducted in a developing market and previous studies focused on developed markets where technology is highly advanced, hence the expectations regarding the performance of websites differs and this also as a bearing on how customers evaluate the

image of a brand. Instead, synchronicity was found to influence only brand awareness. By designing interactive websites which can be easily used by customers, guest houses can build a solid brand knowledge through increased awareness levels and brand image.

The findings of this study also support the assumption that brand awareness has an impact on brand image. These findings are corroborated by Ansary and Hashim (2017) and Barreda et al. (2016). No relationship was found between brand awareness and perceived brand value. Similarly, Barreda et al. (2016) also could not establish a relationship between brand awareness and customer-perceived value. Thus, being aware of a brand or being able to recall a brand especially in the service industry in which the products offered are experiential cannot influence the value you attach to that brand, rather it is the interaction with the brand that enables customers to attach value. Guest houses would be advised to increase their brand awareness as it has a bearing on the image of their brand. The results also confirmed that a strong positive relationship exists between brand image and customer-perceived brand value. Thus, impression that customers have about a brand can influence the value they attach to the brand.

The findings validate that brand experience influences brand value. This is supported by previous research (Cleff et al., 2014)). It is interesting to note that of the three variables (brand awareness, brand image and brand experience) which were assumed to influence customer-perceived brand value, brand image had the greatest impact on brand value. This suggests that guest houses should make greater efforts to improve their brand image.

The results also revealed that from the dimensions used to measure brand experience, guest house ambience (.89) was more important for customers in recalling their experience, followed by staff competence (.71). Thus, customers will recall their stay at the guest house, how the staff treated them and the general atmosphere of the guest house.

Lastly, a relationship was established between customer-perceived value and affective commitment. This has been confirmed in previous studies (Chiu et al., 2018; Fazal-e-Hasan et al., 2018). It can thus be deduced that the value that a customer attaches to a particular brand will, in turn, determine their commitment to that brand. Guest houses should therefore examine ways of influencing customer perceptions of their brands.

From these results, it can be implied that customers who perceive active control in their communication through the guest house website, experience two-way communication and are able to obtain the information they want quickly and instantly, tend to positively perceive brand image thereby facilitating brand recognition. They may also form a good impression of the brand which, in turn, influences their perceived brand value, eventually leading to brand commitment.

Theoretical contribution

This study has contributed to the literature is in several ways. Firstly, it confirmed the validity and reliability of the items used to measure the constructs used in this study. The proposed model has thus confirmed the relationships between the constructs in an emerging market. The study also sheds light on the relations between website configuration, brand elements and customer-perceived brand value. The present study supports the existing body of literature (Barreda et al., 2016; Huang & Sarigollü, 2012; Cleff et al., 2014;Chiu et al., 2018; Fazal-e-Hasan et al., 2018) in which a relationship was established between web configuration, brand elements, customer-perceived value and affective commitment. A multi-dimensional model has been developed and tested which can also be adopted by future studies in the same domain.

Secondly, the study establishes the applicability of interactivity theory in online marketing communication environments. The findings revealed that website features such as two-way

communication (social interactivity), user control and synchronicity influence brand awareness in the hospitality industry. Since web interactivity is centred on how well website users perceive the communication to be reciprocal, responsive and speedy, these features are used by customers to evaluate the image of the brand (guesthouse) and they enhance brand awareness. Thus, studies focusing on accommodation establishments websites and branding cannot afford to ignore the importance of interactivity in enhancing brand awareness and image. These findings are valuable as they also provide baseline information for future studies in the hospitality industry in developing countries.

Thirdly, this study established that brand experience influences customer-perceived brand value, and area which has been under-researched to date. Experience emerged as one of the factors that influences one judgement of a particular brand. This was tested and confirmed, indicating that future research focusing on branding and its relationship to brand value and customer commitment should also include the experience of the customer with that brand.

The study added to the literature on web interactivity in the hospitality industry as it focused on small accommodation establishments in an emerging market. Previous studies focused chiefly on large hotels and in developed markets (Barreda et al., 2016; Gao, 2010; Ahmad, et al, 2017). Thus, the study provides recommendations suited for small accommodation establishments in the African hospitality industry.

Lastly, the results can also be linked to the AIDA (Attention/Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action) concept of marketing which specifies that a company has to first ensure that customers know about the existing of a service or product. The company must advertise its products in such a way that it attracts the attention of the customers. Thus, social interactivity can attract the attention of the customers thereby increasing the awareness of a brand. If people have the control of the information, flow of communication on the website, and they can get feedback

timeously they may develop an interest to find more about the company. The interest can lead to the desire to purchase a product or service which eventually leads to the final decision. Thus, websites can be used as branding ploys to raise brand awareness.

Managerial implications

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations can be made to assist small accommodation establishments to effectively design their websites.

Improvements in the features of the websites

Guest houses should design websites which offers ways to respond to the content posted and offer a number of ways for visitors to communicate on their websites. Customers who experience reciprocal communication with the guest house through the website are likely to develop positive perceptions towards the brand.

Social interactivity and active control were also established to have an impact on brand image. Thus, guest houses would be encouraged to consider user control as an essential component of their website; websites should therefore be designed in such a way that they allow customers to freely search for information. Thus, the design of the website should have structures which give users control and facilitate two-way communication. For instance, having some structures which allow customers to chat with the guest house employees or guest-to guest chat facilities would be useful features.

In addition, the provision of opportunities for easy customisation and personalisation can assist in improving active control. If customers are able to easily customise web navigation in line with their needs, they develop a sense of active control. Aspects such as 'share' buttons should be incorporated into the design for customers to be able to share information with others.

Finally, if guest houses wish to increase their brand awareness, they should design websites which can process information rapidly so that customers can receive prompt feedback. Guest houses should also have employees in place who can provide information quickly, for example, through having a facility for chatting with customers on the website. Alternatively, automatic feedback facilities can also be used. If web users obtain information quickly through the website, they can also spread news to others which, in turn, can enhance awareness of the brand.

Improvements in the image of the establishment

Guest houses should put more effort in improving the image of their brand so that customers have a positive impression towards the brand. Customers should be able to rely on the brand to develop a positive impression. This can be done by offering seamless customer service and having interactive websites which are user-friendly. Guest houses should be trustworthy in their dealings with the customers, for example, by providing quality service that meets the expectations of the customer; website information should always be up-to-date. It is also important to ensure that all information on the accommodation, meals and other services is posted on the website and that customers are not challenged when making a booking. The guest house should also avoid over-booking the number of guests that it can accommodate.

Enhancing perceived brand value through customer experience

Guest houses must have standard facilities and services to ensure that guests enjoy their stay. For example, room service or Wi-Fi are some of the services that a guest house could add to increase the satisfaction of its customers. The general atmosphere (ambience) of the guest house is also taken into account by the guest when recalling their experience. Guest houses should ensure that the lighting, décor, layout and furnishings are attractive for the guest to enjoy

their stay. In addition, having trained and qualified employees, especially the direct employees interfacing with customers can help to provide memorable experiences. Staff training should be aimed at improving communication skills, listening skills as well as conflict resolution skills. A pleasant customer experience has a positive bearing on the customer's perception of the value of the brand which in turn, influences their attachment towards the brand. Also, guesthouse must make use of elements such as entertainment and wellness activities to create unique and exclusive experiences for the guests.

Furthermore, a well-crafted website gives a clear picture of the company through the information that is presented and how it is presented, and the user experience of the site. Thus, through getting instant feedback, customers can get a clear picture of the company. A well-developed, website where users can easily get the information gives an organization a great foundation for an online presence which in turn enhances the company`s brand image.

Conclusion, limitations and areas of further research

The objectives of the study were to investigate the influence of website interactivity features on brand awareness and brand image. The study also examined the influence of brand image elements on brand value, and ultimately, the influence of brand value on affective commitment to guest houses. The results revealed that web elements such as social interactivity, active control and synchronicity influence brand awareness. Only two elements – active control and social interactivity – influence brand image. It was also revealed that brand value is influenced by both brand image and brand experience, and eventually, brand value influences affective commitment. Thus, any future research focusing on brand value and customer commitment should also consider brand experience as it was revealed to be one of the antecedents of brand

value. The study also added to the literature on web interactivity in the hospitality industry especially in the small accommodation sector.

It is recommended that website designers take into account the features of the website which can have a bearing on the guest house image. Guest houses are also urged to design websites which allow for two-way communication and have navigation tools which can improve active control. Guest houses can also put more effort in improving the image of their brand through offering seamless services, improving the quality of their websites and always update information on their websites. Moreover, guesthouse should also strive to find ways of enhancing customer experience as it has a bearing on the value of their brand.

The present study has some limitations. The first limitation is that the research only focused on guest houses, which constitute small accommodation establishments. The results cannot therefore be generalised to the entire hospitality industry in South Africa. A cross-sectional approach was used where data were collected at a particular point in time; no follow-ups were therefore made to check whether there was an improvement in the guest house's websites. A comparative study could be conducted between smaller accommodation establishments and larger hotel chain brands to gain a clear picture of online activities of the entire accommodation sector. Finally, a longitudinal study could be conducted to verify if there were any improvements implemented by guest houses pertaining to their websites. However, despite the above limitations, the findings of this study are in line with previous studies findings.

Declaration of interest statement
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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Table 1: Constructs and construct item reliability

Construct	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extraction
Social Interactivity (SI)		.856	.973	.567
SI1: This guest house has an online forum which is effective in gathering visitors' feedback.	.811			
SI2: This guest house encourages visitors to offer feedback through online communities.	.773			
SI3: This guest house website provides some links for customers to have conversations with the guest house's employees.	.854			
SI4: This guest house facilitates two-way communication between the visitors and the employees.	.781			
Active Control (AC)		.904	.959	.681
AC1: I felt that I had a lot of control over my visiting experience on the guest house website.	.844			
AC2: While surfing the guest house website, I felt I could choose freely what I wanted to see.	.753			
AC3: While surfing the guest house's website, I had control over what I could do on the site.	.782			
AC4: While surfing the guest house's website, I felt my actions decided the kind of experiences I got.	.689			
Synchronicity (S)		.811	.932	.678
S1: While surfing the guest house's website, I could give my response without delay.	.882			
S2: While surfing the guest house's website, I could get desired answers fast when I request for further information.	.598			
S3: While surfing the guest house's website, I could get instantaneous information when I asked something.	.775			
S4: While surfing the guest house's website, my input was processed very quickly.	.716			
S5: While surfing the guest house's website, I was able to get the information I wanted without delay.	.621			
Brand Awareness (BA)		.861	.843	.712
BA1: After viewing this guest house's website, I could tell that in comparison to other guest houses, this one was a leading brand in the industry.	.763			
BA2: After viewing this guest house's website, this brand name comes to mind as a top choice when I am thinking of visiting a guest house.	.814			
BA3: After viewing this guest house's website, I can now quickly recognise this guest house's brand among other competing brands.	.782			
BA4: After viewing this guest house's website, I am aware of this guest house brand.	.631			
BA5: After visiting this guest house's website, I can quickly recall some features of this brand.	.530			
Brand Image (BI)		.915	.891	.734
BI1: After viewing this guest house's website, I could tell that this brand was reliable.	.759			

BI2: After viewing this guest house's website, I could tell that this guest house brand was credible.	.858			
BI3: After viewing this guest house's website, I could tell that this brand was trustworthy.	.714			
BI4: After viewing this guest house's website, I could tell that this brand was dependable.	.741			
B15: After viewing this guest house's website, I could tell that this brand was attractive.	.633			
Brand Experience				
Guest House Location (GL)		**.798**	**.931**	**.567**
GL1: The location of this guest house's brand stimulates my senses.	.789			
GL2: I find the location of this guest house appealing.	.633			
GL3: The location of this guest house is convenient and makes me feel relaxed.	.811			
Guest House Ambience (GA)		**.844**		**.767**
GA1: The ambience of this guest house is very relaxing to me.	.611			
GA2: This guest house brand has attractive architectural design.	.631			
GA3: The cleanliness and deco of this guest house are pleasing.	.725			
Staff Competence (SC)		**.801**	**.811**	**.691**
SC1: The staff at this guest house are friendly and bring out emotions.	.712			
SC2: The staff at this guest house are helpful.	.673			
SC3: The way in which the staff at this guest house serves is excellent.	.876			
SC4: I feel good at this guest house because of staff attentiveness.	.881			
SC5: The appearance of this guest house staff is impressive.	.793			
Guest-To-Guest Experience (GE)		**.791**	**.932**	**.641**
GE1: The guests at this guest house valued the privacy of other guests.	.655			
GE2: The conduct of the other guests at this guest house was gentle.	.784			
GE3: Other guests at this guest house made me feel comfortable.	.715			
Brand Value (BV)		**.881**	**.861**	**.623**
BV1: This guest house is reasonably priced.	.981			
BV2: This guest house offers value for money.	.873			
BV3: I consider this guest house a good buy.	.752			
BV4: This guest house is good value for money.	.891			
Affective Commitment (AC)		**.913**	**.901**	**598**
AC1: I have developed a strong bond with this guest house.	.589			
AC2: I am emotionally attached to this guest house.	.678			
AC3: I remain steadfast in my commitment to this guest house.	.736			
AC4: My commitment to this guest house is long-term.	.687			
AC5: I am fond of this guest house.	.597			

Table 2: Discriminant validity

Latent variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
					correlations						
1. Social Interactivity	.921										
2. Active Control	.612	.897									
3. Synchronicity	.714	.532	.973								
4. Brand Awareness	.566	.654	.621	.851							
5. Brand Image	.631	.556	.634	.532	.967						
6. Location	.604	.542	.531	.542	.713	.877					
7. Guest House Ambience	.522	.712	.612	.744	.723	.671	.855				
8. Staff Competence	.655	.684	.571	.631	.631	.567	.754	.839			
9. Guest-To-Gest Experience	.551	.624	.647	.631	.532	.731	.534	.651	0981		
10. Brand Value	.643	.725	.613	.725	.632	.643	.651	.731	.661	.897	
11. Affective Commitment	.711	.638	.561	.614	.672	.512	.543	.734	.593	.671	.966

Table 3. Measures for goodness-of-fit (measurement model)

CMIN	DF	P	CMIN/DF	NFI	GFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
138.26	115	0.00	1.20	0.97	0.91	0.98	0.91	0.05

Table 4: Measures for goodness-of-fit (structural model)

CMIN	DF	P	CMIN/DF	NFI	GFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
156.46	128	0.05	1.28	0.96	0.91	0.95	0.98	0.05

Table 5: Hypothesis results

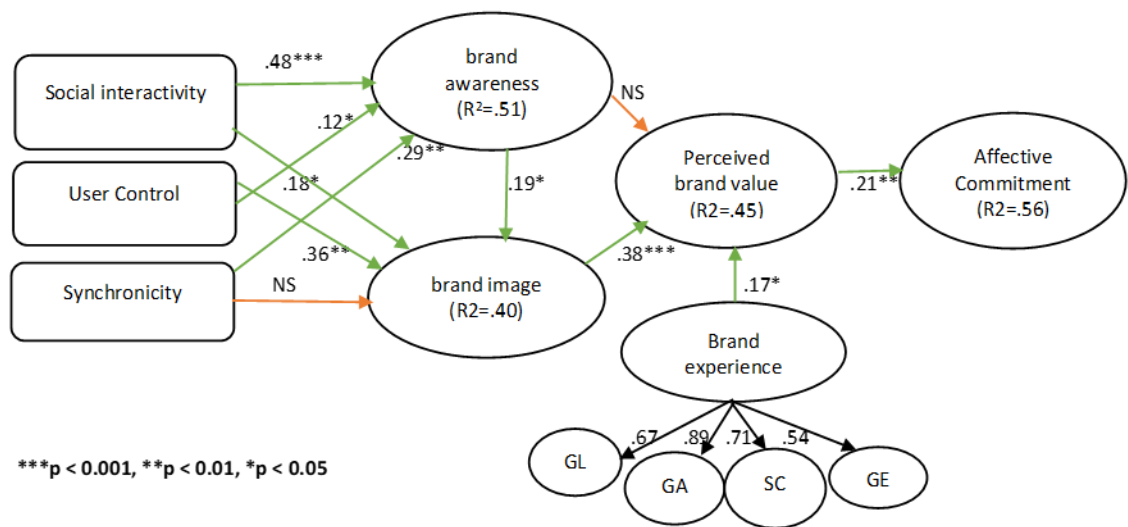| Hypothesis	Variable	Variable	β	Sig.	Supported / Not supported
H_{1a}	Social interactivity	Brand awareness	0.48	0.001	Supported
H_{2a}	Active control	Brand awareness	0.12	0.05	Supported
H_{3a}	Synchronicity	Brand awareness	0.29	0.01	Supported
H_{1b}	Social interactivity	Brand image	0.18	0.05	Supported
H_{2b}	Active control	Brand image	0.36	0.01	Supported
H_{3b}	Synchronicity	Brand image	0.08	0.12	Not Supported
H_{4a}	Brand awareness	Brand image	0.19	0.05	Supported
H_{4b}	Brand awareness	Perceived brand value	0.03	0.17	Not Supported
H_5	Brand image	Perceived brand value	0.38	0.001	Supported
H_6	Brand experience	Perceived brand value	0.17	0.05	Supported
H_7	Perceived brand value	Affective commitment	0.21	0.01	supported
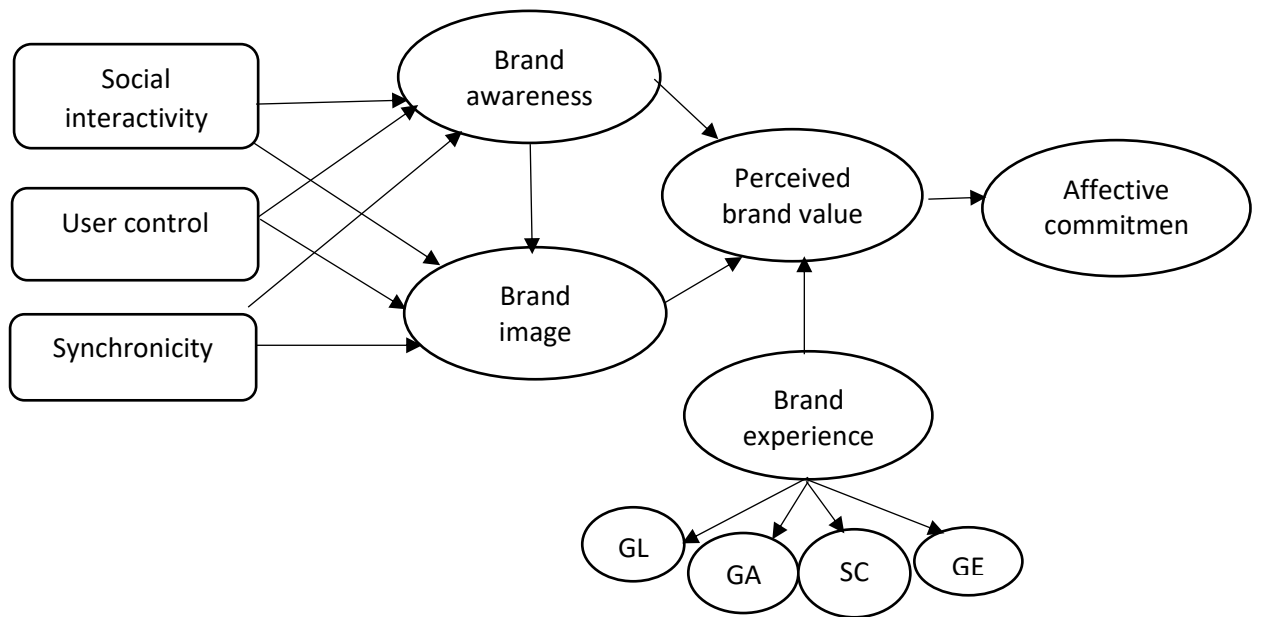
Figure: Proposed model

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05

Figure 2: Hypothesis results