Does brand love matter to casual restaurants? A multi-group path analysis

Previous research indicates that just satisfying customers is insufficient for retaining loyalty. Therefore, this research explores how to inspire and retain loyalty by adding an important construct, brand love, to the value-satisfaction-loyalty chain. Data were collected from guests of casual dining restaurants. The measurement scales adopted in this research were derived from the previous literature and adapted to the restaurant context. A multi-group path analysis was conducted to investigate whether the effects of brand love varied with gender, age, and income groups. This research confirmed that brand love is the outcome of excellent perceived value and a high level of satisfaction, and brand love is more important than perceived value and satisfaction in inspiring revisit intentions. This investigation emphasizes the importance of brand love for certain segments: women, Generation Xers, and people with higher incomes. It fills a gap in the literature by including brand love in the value-satisfaction-loyalty framework.

Keywords: brand love; casual dining restaurants; customer loyalty; perceived value; satisfaction

Introduction

The concept of brand love is gaining increased momentum in the hospitality and tourism literature (Aro et al., 2018; Mody & Hanks, 2019; Tsai, 2014; Wang et al., 2019). Previous researchers have argued that satisfaction strongly influences customer loyalty (Gallarza & Saura, 2006). However, only satisfying customers is not enough for retaining loyalty because satisfied customers still can choose another brand. Brand love is believed to have a more crucial role in retaining customers (Rather & Camilleri, 2019). Its positive impacts on customer loyalty, such as willingness to recommend and intention to repurchase, have been discussed by researchers (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Shin & Back, 2020). As brand love results in a greater commitment to a brand, customers will repurchase a product or service even if offered alternatives. Consequently, brand love is receiving increased interest from practitioners and researchers. For example, McDonalds uses "I'm Lovin' It" as its slogan and makes people feel that McDonalds is a brand that deserves their love. This slogan works very well and has become McDonalds' longest-running slogan in its history (Hogan, 2016).

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An increasing number of studies have investigated brand love in different contexts ranging from psychological to marketing perspectives (Palusuk et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). Previous studies examined brand love as a mediator in the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty (Drennan et al., 2015). However, how brand love influences the perceived value-satisfaction-loyalty chain has not been studied. This may be an obstacle to revealing the complete psychological process of generating customer loyalty, and this may hinder practitioners in building more favorable customer-brand relationships. Furthermore, intention to recommend and revisit are often investigated as one construct (i.e., customer loyalty). Although they are both dimensions of customer loyalty, they may be differently impacted by perceived value, satisfaction, and brand love. Since restaurateurs follow differing strategies – some use word of mouth (WOM) for promotion while others try to attract repeat diners – there is a need to individually test intention to recommend and revisit.

This research chose the context of casual dining restaurants. As the restaurant business is very competitive, establishments must build good brands to attract and maintain customers (Chang, 2013). According to Young et al. (2007), a casual dining restaurant serves "moderately priced food, averaging $10 to $40 for dinner per diner, in an informal and relaxed atmosphere with a full-service wait staff" (p. 89). Casual dining restaurants offer full service, as do fine-dining. However, the price is moderate, and people can visit casual restaurants often. Practitioners have noticed the importance of brand love for casual dining restaurants. Kneeland & Howard (2018) suggested that restaurants should "envelop consumers' lives by becoming so unignorably relevant that they can't help but like – even love – them" (p.5). Brand love is particularly crucial for casual dining restaurants for two main reasons. First, the competition for casual dining is very intense, so a restaurant needs to stand out from competitors by making people feel it is a brand they love (Neshevich, 2015). There are different types of casual dining restaurants, such as chain casual-dining, family casual restaurants, and upscale casual-dining. This diversity and the growing number of casual dining restaurants make the competition very severe (Maze,

2018). Additionally, brand love can help casual dining restaurants to build long-term customer relationships and gain profits. Repeat guests create revenue 16 times more efficiently than one-time guests based on the Pareto Principle (Palnitkar, 2018). Therefore, casual dining is an appropriate focus for this research to test how brand love influences customer loyalty, and if perceived value and satisfaction are antecedents of brand love.

The principal objectives of this analysis were to investigate the relationships among perceived value, satisfaction, brand love, intention to recommend, and intention to revisit casual dining restaurants; and to test the differing impacts of these constructs in enhancing intention to recommend and to revisit. In addition, previous research has suggested the association between customer characteristics and repurchase behavior (Chow et al., 2007); thus, this study also examined potential influencing factors, including gender, age, and income.

The main theoretical contribution is by introducing brand love into the traditional chain of perceived value-satisfaction-loyalty. The framework of value-satisfaction-brand love-loyalty highlights the importance of the perceived value that customers derive from dining experiences and satisfaction. This research contributes to the theory of relationship marketing, which emphasizes that creating a love relationship with customers will eventually help to develop loyalty. The managerial and practical implications may also assist casual dining restaurants in building better and more long-lasting relationships with their customers.

Literature review

Brand love

Brand love was first developed based on Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love (Shimp & Madden, 1988), which is a combination of intimacy, passion, and commitment. Aaker (1997) suggested that

consumers ascribe brands with human personality traits, such as sincerity and competence. This association arises from loving relationships (Fournier, 1998). Some argue that Sternberg's triangular theory applies to interpersonal love, which has bidirectional interaction, but love for an object is unidirectional (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Shimp and Madden (1988) described brand love as a consumer-object relation containing eight levels: non-liking, liking, infatuation, functionalism, inhibited desire, utilitarianism, succumbed desire, and loyalty. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) defined brand love as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (p. 5). They also suggested that brand love consists of passion, attachment, positive evaluations, positive emotions, and affirmation of love for the brand. Wang et al. (2019) examined brand love with three antecedents, including brand intimacy, passion, and commitment. Although researchers conceptualize brand love uniquely, passion and commitment are two common components. Passion refers to motivational involvement, which means people keep thinking of brands. Commitment stands for when people make a short-term decision to love a brand and want to sustain that love for the long-term (Alnawas & Altarifi, 2016).

Brand love can be interpreted in two ways by either emotion or relationship (Alnawas & Altarifi, 2016). The former is "a single, specific feeling, akin to affection"; the latter is "like a friendship relationship, which can last for decades and involves numerous affective, cognitive, and behavioral experiences" (Batra et al., 2012, p. 2). This research interprets brand love as a "love relationship" based on Sternberg's love theory. A love relationship is a strong bond and reflects consumers' desire to maintain that relationship (Alnawas & Altarifi, 2016). If consumers develop love for a brand, they often consider it irreplaceable, and the customer-brand relationship is deep and permanent (Albert & Merunka, 2013).

Customer loyalty

Loyalty has been a key topic in marketing and consumer behavior since the mid-1990s, especially in developing long-term and profitable relationships with customers and promoting a company and shareholder values (Oliver, 1999). Many studies explore the definitions and dimensions of loyalty. Customer loyalty is a strong individual commitment to a brand (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016; Ryu et al., 2012). Oliver (1999) defined loyalty as feeling sufficiently committed to a product to re-purchase the product or re-patronize an establishment, even if other products or establishments offered better deals. This definition indicates that loyalty involves customers who continue to buy a brand despite changes in price, products, or services.

Customer loyalty can be measured using two dimensions: willingness to recommend to others and intention to revisit (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Willingness to recommend is demonstrated by the communication of favorable comments (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Word of mouth (WOM) is considered by consumers as one of the most trustworthy sources of information; it is crucial to building a good brand image (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Intention to revisit means a customer wanting to participate in an activity or visit a place again (Baker & Crompton, 2000). Attracting repeat visitors costs less than acquiring new customers (Wang, 2004). Previous studies show these two dimensions are often investigated as a single construct (i.e., customer loyalty) (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998; Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). However, doing so clouds the relationships between intention to recommend and revisit, which limits the clarity for practitioner action in deciding whether to enhance WoM or attract repeat customers, or both.

Customer loyalty is expressed using a variety of exchangeable terms in hospitality and tourism, such as behavioral loyalty (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016), brand loyalty (Alnawas & Altarifi, 2016; Drennan et al., 2015; He et al., 2012), tourist loyalty (Campo & Yagüe, 2007), destination loyalty (Yoon & Uysal, 2005), and customer loyalty (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998). If customers have loyalty to a

restaurant, they are likely to spread positive WoM and/or revisit the restaurant, which adds to restaurant profits. This argument is supported by the value-satisfaction-loyalty chain (Gallarza & Saura, 2006).

Although the relationships among value, satisfaction, and loyalty have been intensively examined in diverse contexts (Gallarza & Saura, 2006), the value-satisfaction-loyalty chain is questioned by some scholars (Jones & Sasser, 1995; Jung & Yoon, 2012). First, delivering better value may not lead to a significant change in satisfaction levels (Jones & Sasser, 1995). Second, there are customers with high satisfaction but low loyalty (i.e., mercenary in the Apostle Model) (Lee et al., 2001). Satisfied customers may not return because they have a variety of choices (Sánchez-García et al., 2012) or the switching cost is low (Lee et al., 2001). Satisfaction is a cognitive judgement of the performance of a product or service (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), and it is an evaluation based on a specific transaction. Customers may not recommend and repurchase a product or service just because their expectations have been met. As indicated by Pawle and Cooper (2006) in lovemarks theory "Human behavior is heavily influenced by emotions, not solely by reason" (p.39), and emotions play a crucial role in building relationships. Additionally, brand love has a positive direct relationship with perceived value and satisfaction (Drennan et al., 2015; Song et al., 2019a). Therefore, adding brand love as an emotional path to the value-satisfaction-loyalty chain might better explain how to inspire loyalty, and this framework was tested in the current research.

Hypothesis development

Researchers and practitioners are increasingly seeking to understand brand love to learn how to create emotional bonds and maintain long-term customer relationships (Batra et al., 2012). Brand love is a consumption-related emotion, which customers feel in using a product or experiencing a service (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Products and services have extrinsic and intrinsic values (Holbrook, 1999), both of which help in developing positive customer-brand relationships. Extrinsic value refers to the cognitive

evaluation of products or services. In a restaurant context, extrinsic value is embedded in the environment (Meng et al., 2017), well-maintained facilities (Meng & Choi, 2018), food quality (Ryu et al., 2012), and customer service (Qin et al., 2010). When customers enjoy a relaxing environment, high quality of food, and superior service, they develop positive attitudes toward restaurant brands (Holbrook, 1999). In addition, intrinsic value produces fun, enjoyment, and excitement, which can build a strong emotional foundation (Fournier, 1998). Positive cognitive and emotional evaluations lead to emotional attachment to a brand, so perceived value is an essential antecedent of brand love (Long-Tolbert & Gammoh, 2012) and thus, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H1. Perceived value positively influences brand love.

Previous studies have investigated the direct and positive relationship between perceived value and customer satisfaction (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998). Delivering superior value is effective in creating satisfaction (Gallarza et al., 2018). Researchers emphasize that, especially for restaurants, perceived value and service quality generate customer satisfaction (Qin et al., 2010). Offering exceptional customer service leads to desirable outcomes, such as satisfaction and profits, and gives a restaurant a competitive edge (Chow et al., 2007). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Perceived value positively influences satisfaction.

According to the disconfirmation-of-expectations paradigm, customers feel satisfied when the quality of products or services meet their expectations (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998). Researchers argue that high levels of customer satisfaction can lead to brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Long-Tolbert & Gammoh, 2012). If a brand does not satisfy a customer, building an emotional bond between that customer and the brand is difficult (Albert & Merunka, 2013). However, if customers are highly satisfied, they will associate positive impressions with the brand and further develop emotional bonds (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H3. Satisfaction positively influences brand love.

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In addition to value and satisfaction, brand love plays an important role in building customer loyalty because it is a strong emotional bond, which makes a brand recognized, respected, and not forgotten (Roberts, 2004, cited by Song et al., 2019b). These passionate emotions encourage consumers to share information about the brand and make favorable comments; and when consumers love a brand, they are more willing to repurchase (Kang, 2018). Even after a service failure, they seldom switch to other brands (Albert & Merunka, 2013). The positive effect of brand love on WoM and revisit intention is investigated in the contexts of hotels, wine, and coffee shops (Drennan et al. 2015; Kang, 2018; Mody & Hanks, 2019). Consumers are willing to recommend their beloved hotel brand to other people and defend it from other's critiques (Kang, 2018). When consumers have developed a love for a hotel or Airbnb, they consider that brand as their first choice when traveling and choose it for a future trip (Mody & Hanks, 2019). Drennan et al. (2015) found that brand love is a significant mediator and directly influential factor on purchase intentions for wine consumers. Taking Starbucks as a case, Song et al. (2019a) found that consumers who love Starbucks will recommend it to others and continue to use it. Overall, because brand love results in a committed relationship between customers and a brand, it strongly influences customer loyalty (i.e., recommendation intention and revisit intention) (Alnawas & Altarifi, 2016; Fournier, 1998; Liu et al., 2018a; Ong et al., 2018). Thus, the following two hypotheses are suggested:

H4. Brand love positively influences willingness to recommend.

H5. Brand love positively influences intention to revisit.

In addition to brand love, perceived value is crucial to generating behavioral intention. Perceived value is the trade-off between benefits and costs as perceived by consumers (Eggert & Ulaga, 2002). It is a strong predictor for WoM and repurchase intentions (Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000). Consumers tend to have favorable comments and/or repurchase when they perceive high value in consumption (Gallarza & Saura, 2006). Based on Heskett et al. (1997) service-profit chain and Reichheld's (1996) research on

loyalty, Parasuraman and Grewal (2000) put forward a quality-value-loyalty chain that shows how perceived value contributes to customer loyalty. Researchers also reveal the impact of perceived value on customer loyalty in other fields (Eggert & Ulaga, 2002). Therefore, the following two hypotheses are put forward:

H6. Perceived value positively influences willingness to recommend.

H7. Perceived value positively influences intention to revisit.

Researchers conclude that higher levels of satisfaction can also result in customer loyalty (Baker & Crompton, 2000). Customers feel satisfied when the function of a product or the experience of a service meets their expectations. The positive feelings of satisfaction lead to an intention to provide favorable comments or to revisit (Reichheld, 1996). Customer satisfaction also impacts the effect of perceived value on loyalty. Eggert and Ulaga (2002) tested the relationships among customer perceived value, customer satisfaction, repurchase intention, search for alternatives, and WoM. They found that a model incorporating customer satisfaction as a mediator had better predictive power than a model with only perceived value. Moreover, satisfaction is treated as an operational strategy by many managers (Ryu et al., 2012). Therefore, the following two hypotheses are proposed:

H8. Satisfaction positively influences willingness to recommend.

H9. Satisfaction positively influences intention to revisit.

[Insert Figure 1]

Additionally, it was hypothesized that gender, age, and income were moderators that significantly influence the relationships between perceived value, satisfaction, brand love, willingness to recommend, and intention to revisit. Psychologists have demonstrated that females and males significantly differ in their biological and socialization needs. For example, females fulfill their socialization needs by making decisions and establishing identity (McCleary et al., 1994). Because of these fundamental differences, females and males also have significant differences in consumer

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behaviors. Low prices and personal services are more important to females than males (McCleary et al., 1994), and thus females and males have notable differences in expectations and perceptions of services (Oh et al., 2002). Gender is also a moderator in the relationship between customer satisfaction and intention (Han & Ryu, 2007; Rialti et al., 2017). Females have stronger intentions to recommend and revisit a restaurant when satisfied than males (Han & Ryu, 2007). Females also often assign more value to a product or service when they develop emotional attachment to the brand (Kwun et al., 2011).

Age has been deemed a vital market segmentation factor as customer behavior, customer satisfaction, and intention vary with different ages (Chen & Green, 2012). People of dissimilar ages have significantly different cognition, affect, and goals (Cole et al., 2008). As a result, older people have higher brand equity, while younger people are more price sensitive (Chen & Green, 2012). Older people have higher attachment to older brands and decline innovativeness (Lambert-Pandraud & Laurent , 2010). It was also found that age mediates the relationship between perceived value, satisfaction, and brand loyalty (Lee et al., 2018). Age enhances the positive impact of emotional and social value on brand loyalty (Yeh et al., 2016).

Compared to the moderating role of gender and age, the effect of income has been less investigated. People's disposable income significantly impacts how they perceive prices (Chen & Green, 2012), and price sensitivity plays a moderating role in customer experiences: Perceived price negatively influences perceived value, which in turn affects satisfaction and loyalty (Chua et al., 2015). Price perception is also a critical factor influencing the relationship between brand love and willingness to recommend (Karjaluoto et al., 2016), as well as intention to visit (Liu et al., 2018b).

Methods

Survey Instrument

      The measurement scales adopted in this research were derived from previous literature. A pilot study was conducted to examine the reliability of the constructs. The respondents indicated their degree of agreement with each statement in the questionnaires based on seven-point Likert scales where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. Perceived value was measured using four items from Harris and Goode (2004), and the items were adapted to the restaurant context. He et al. (2012) measured customer satisfaction using three items. As food and services are two crucial components of restaurant experiences, six items were developed to measure overall customer satisfaction with restaurant experiences. The measurement of brand love was adopted from Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) using seven items. Three items were deleted because of the low factor loadings in the pilot study. As loyalty-driven behavior includes positive word-of-mouth and repeat purchase, the level of customer loyalty is often measured by willingness to recommend and intention to repurchase (Lai, 2014; Zeithaml et al., 1996). In this research, recommendation intention and revisit intention were used as one-item constructs: "I will recommend this restaurant brand to someone who seeks my advice" (Murray & Howat, 2002) and "Next time I will dine out in this restaurant brand" (Hultman et al., 2015). Despite the concerns for construct validity and reliability associated with the use of single-item measures in structural equation modeling (SEM), the existing literature provides substantial justification that single-item indicators can perform as well as multiple-item measures in empirical analysis (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007; Wanous & Hudy, 2001). Also, it is suggested that single-item indicators can be used if the concepts are directly observable, or simple and easily understood (Hair et al., 2009), including repeat purchase intention (Arnold & Reynolds, 2009), recommendation (Murray & Howat, 2002), revisit intention (Hultman et al., 2015), and overall satisfaction (Prayag, 2009).

Survey Design

The questionnaire was designed based on previous literature, so the items were initially articulated in English. The English questionnaire was translated into Chinese for local respondents. A back-translation process was applied to ensure conceptual equivalence. This process was conducted by the authors and a panel of four bilingual experts, who have proficiency in both English and Chinese. The questionnaire contained four parts. The first was about respondents' dining habits, including how frequently they ate at casual dining restaurants, favorite casual dining brands and how often they dined at these restaurants, and how much they spent. The second part contained questions on dining experiences, satisfaction with restaurant food and service, perceived value, reputation of restaurants, and customer loyalty. The third part dealt with brand love, emotional attachment, and brand romance, and the fourth collected respondents' demographic information, including gender, age, education level, and income.

Data Collection

This research involved surveys conducted in four large Chinese cities, Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou, and Guangzhou. There were three reasons for selecting China and these cities. First, with China's rapid income growth and fast urbanization, Chinese customers have been increasingly eating at restaurants of various types. Second, Chinese residents are exposed to diverse brands including local restaurants (e.g., Lü Yin Ge - Greenery Café, HaiDiLao Hot Pot, and Wai Po Jia - Grandma's Home) and Western brands (e.g., Tasty and Pizza Hut). These restaurants offer distinct products and services (Figure 2). For example, HaiDiLao Hot Pot provides a free hand-pulled noodle performance, snacks, and entertainment in addition to Sichuan style hot pot. However, whether these products and services lead to customer brand love has not been examined. Understanding the factors that affect customers' brand love and loyalty will provide guidance on how to build stronger customer relationships and maintain loyalty.

Third, the four urban areas are the top cities in terms of GDP, and they are in the Northern, Northeastern, and Southern parts of China. They have relatively good representativeness.

[Insert Figure 2]

The survey was administered face-to-face by two Chinese researchers. Respondents who were 18 years of age or older and who dined out regularly were invited to fill in the survey on-site while they were waiting for meals or right after they had eaten at casual restaurants. The target group for this research was repeat customers who had been in that restaurant more than once. Therefore, the restaurant patrons waiting for meals but familiar with the service and food of the restaurant were qualified for this research. The two researchers who collected data asked the participants to evaluate their overall experiences of dining in the restaurant instead of their last experience. Each participant was provided with 5 RMB (about 0.76 US dollars; 1 US dollar equals 6.54 RMB) as an incentive for completing questionnaires. Only one respondent at each table participated in the survey. The two interviewers handed out a total of 410 surveys in the four cities (Beijing, 110; Shanghai 100; Guangzhou 100; and Suzhou 100), and 350 were returned with 346 valid responses. The refusal rate was about 14.6%.

Data analysis

This research followed the two-stage testing procedure recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to estimate the measurement scales. The relationships among the observed variables (measurement items) and the latent variables were determined. Second, the nine research hypotheses were examined using covariance-based SEM. The two-stage testing procedure was conducted in SPSS 20.0 and Amos 21.0. Since Amos requires a dataset without any missing values, all the missing values were replaced by the corresponding mean values. Also, a multi-group path analysis was conducted in Amos to test whether the effects varied with gender, age, and income.

Results

Demographic information

Among the 346 respondents, males accounted for 52.8%, and slightly outnumbered females (47.2%). The respondents' ages were from 18 to 62, with an average of 32 and a standard deviation of 7.6. Most were between 25 and 44 (79.2%). Only 0.3% of the respondents were 55 or older. In terms of income, 66.5% earned from 3,001 RMB (approximately 459 US dollars) and 9,000 RMB (approximately 1,376 US dollars) per month. Overall, the respondents had relatively high educational levels; 48.7% had earned university degrees (Table 1).

[Insert Table 1]

Confirmatory factor analysis

The CFA was conducted before SEM to examine the structure of each latent variable (Table 2). The standardized coefficients of the items of perceived value ranged from 0.824 to 0.907, and those of satisfaction were from 0.686 to 0.927. In terms of brand love, two items were deleted due to insufficient loadings (factor loading < 0.6); the rest of the items ranged from 0.617 to 0.888. This is based on the rule that the removal of indicators with factor loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 should be considered if the removal increases the composite reliability or AVE (Hair et al., 2011). Also, brand love in this research was measured using a reflective model, indicating that all items reflect the same construct and are highly correlated. Different from in a formative model, eliminating a single item in a reflective model will not change the construct's meaning, given that sufficient reliability is met (Hair et al., 2018).

In addition to examining measurement scales, standardized coefficients can be used to explain which items have a greater effect on the latent variables. Among the four items of perceived value, "I am happy with the value for money I get from the restaurant experience" had the highest standardized

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coefficient (0.907). This indicated that good value for money perceived in the dining experience plays a vital role in forming high perceived value. For generating satisfaction, letting the consumer feel pleased with (0.927) and delighted by (0.903) the restaurant service was also very essential. In terms of brand love, making people feel good (0.888) was more important than feeling passionate (0.617).

All three latent variables had satisfactory composite reliabilities. The lowest reliability was 0.881 but was above the cut-off point of 0.7. The average variance extracted values (AVEs) of perceived value, satisfaction, and brand love were 0.734, 0.679, and 0.601 respectively. They were all greater than 0.5, showing good convergent validity. Additionally, as the lowest square roots of AVE ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}_{\text{brand love}}} = 0.775$) was larger than any correlation between two constructs, discriminant validity was achieved (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

This model also had a good fit: $\chi^2 = 242.930$ (df = 79), $\chi^2/ \text{df} = 3.075$, p<0.001; GFI = 0.913; IFI = 0.964, NFI = 0.947, CFI = 0.964. The goodness of fit index (GFI), incremental fit index (IFI), and normed fit index (NFI) all exceeded 0.9; the comparative fit index (CFI) was over 0.93 (Byrne, 1994). The RMSEA was 0.078, less than 0.1 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

[Insert Table 2]

Path analysis in SEM

The relationships among the latent variables and two one-item constructs were analyzed using SEM (Table 3). Except for the path between perceived value and revisit intention, the other relationships had statistically significant t-values. This indicated that perceived value had no direct effect on revisit intention and H_7 was rejected. For the remaining relationships, all the standardized coefficients were positive, indicating that the constructs had positive relationships. H_1 to H_6, as well as H_8 to H_9 were all supported by the results.

[Insert Table 3]

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Since there was no direct relationship between perceived value and revisit intention, the model excluded this path, and the remaining paths are shown in Figure 3. This model had a good fit: $\chi^2 =$ 327.089 (df = 102), $\chi^2/$ df = 3.207, p<0.001; GFI = 0.901; IFI = 0.957, NFI = 0.939, CFI = 0.957. All standardized coefficients were positive, and t-values were less than 0.05, indicating all the constructs were meaningful additions to the model.

[Insert Figure 3]

The standardized regression weights indicated the predictive powers of each construct. Perceived value explained 50.27% and 20.34% of the variance in satisfaction and brand love respectively. This suggested that when customers are satisfied with a restaurant, they may not necessarily develop love for it. Satisfaction is an important antecedent of brand love, and it explained 16.08% of the variance in brand love. Moreover, satisfaction and brand love explained 10.05% and 8.9% of the variance in recommendation willingness, respectively, suggesting that they have similar predictive powers for recommendations. However, brand love (25.7%) was a more powerful predictor for revisit intention than satisfaction (9.3%).

The standardized total, direct, and indirect effects revealed the varying roles of each construct (Table 4). Satisfaction was a mediator between perceived value and brand love. The standardized total effect (direct and indirect) of perceived value on brand love was 0.736, suggesting that when perceived value goes up by one unit, brand love is expected to increase by 0.736 units. The total effect consists of a direct and indirect effect. The indirect effect of perceived value (0.284) on brand love was much lower than its direct effect (0.451). This indicated that although satisfaction was a mediator between perceived value and brand love, perceived value itself still had an important role. Also, satisfaction had a direct effect on brand love (at 0.401).

[Insert Table 4]

In addition, the findings demonstrated how perceived value could lead to revisit intentions. Perceived value had no direct effect on revisit intentions, which means even if consumers perceive high value from their dining experiences, they may not revisit the restaurant if they are not satisfied or if they have not developed brand love. Satisfaction and brand love were full mediators. The indirect impact of perceived value on revisit intentions was 0.589, which was through satisfaction (0.216), brand love (0.229), as well as both satisfaction and brand love (0.144). The mediating effects of satisfaction and brand love were similar.

The results also suggested that brand love partially mediates the relationship between satisfaction and the intention to recommend, as well as between satisfaction and revisit intentions. Satisfaction and brand love had similar direct effects on recommendation intentions, at 0.317 and 0.298, respectively. The indirect effect of satisfaction on recommendation intentions was 0.120, relatively small compared to its direct effect. In terms of revisit intentions, the direct effect of satisfaction was 0.305, much smaller than that of brand love (0.507). Satisfaction had an indirect effect of 0.203 on revisit intentions through brand love as well, indicating that brand love is important in forming willingness to revisit.

Overall, the model explained the relationships among perceived value, satisfaction, brand love, and customer loyalty. Satisfaction and brand love partially mediated the relationship between perceived value and willingness to recommend; however, they fully mediated the path between perceived value and intentions to revisit. This suggests that if consumers perceive high value from their dining experiences, they may recommend the casual restaurants to other people, but they may not themselves revisit. Thus, making consumers feel satisfied and developing brand love for restaurants are crucial.

Multigroup analysis in SEM

The differences between females and males were tested by comparing the unconstrained and constrained models in AMOS. In the nested model comparison, when all structural weights were constrained, the

chi-square was 77.897 and p-value was 0.000, indicating that gender was a moderator in this model. To better understand how gender influenced each path, two models were freely estimated except constraining one path to be equal across groups. Chi-square analysis showed that several relationships were moderated by gender (Table 5). First, the positive effect of perceived value on satisfaction was significantly stronger ($p = 0.014 < 0.05$) for females than males ($r_{females} = 0.753$, $r_{males} = 0.632$). Females were more likely to feel satisfied when they perceived high value from restaurants. Second, the effects of perceived value and satisfaction on recommendation intentions were not significant for females ($p_{perceived\ value} = 0.301 > 0.05$, $p_{satisfaction} = 0.189 > 0.05$). This highlighted the importance of brand love for females. Although females feel satisfied or perceive high value, they may not necessarily recommend casual restaurants to others. Only if they develop brand love for a restaurant, are they likely to recommend it. Importantly, brand love had a stronger effect on motivating females to revisit a restaurant ($r_{females\_brand\ love\ and\ revisit} = 0.517$) compared to satisfaction ($r_{females\_satisfaction\ and\ revisit} = 0.335$), indicating that brand love is crucial for attracting female diners. Third, the impact of satisfaction on brand love ($p = 0.103 > 0.05$) and the impact of brand love on recommendation intentions ($p = 0.132 > 0.05$) were not significant for male diners. They may not develop brand love even when they feel satisfied, and brand love is not a key factor influencing whether they are willing to recommend a casual dining restaurant. Satisfied male diners are likely to recommend a restaurant no matter whether they love that brand ($r_{males\_satisfaction\ and\ recommend} = 0.396$).

Generation X (born in the years between 1964 and 1979) and Millennials (born in the years between 1980 and 2000) were compared. These two groups had significant differences (chi-square = 54.118, $p = 0.000 < 0.001$), suggesting that age was an influencing factor for this model. For Generation X, perceived value had no significant influence on recommendation intentions ($p = 0.805 > 0.05$), indicating that although Generation X perceived high value from a restaurant, this did not influence their willingness to recommend. Satisfaction and love for the brand motivated Generation X to give favorable

comments. Differently (p = 0.009 < 0.01), Millennials are likely to recommend a restaurant when they perceive high value ($r_{\text{millennials\_perceived value and recommendation}}$ = 0.266). Overall, cultivating brand love is essential for serving Generation Xers, their revisit intentions were crucially influenced by brand love: The standardized regression weight was 0.628, suggesting that almost 40% of the variance in revisit intention was explained by their love for the brand.

The model was significantly different for the groups of people whose monthly income was equal or less than 6,000 RMB and more than 6,000 RMB (approximately 920 US dollars) (chi-square = 32.192, p = 0.03 < 0.05). When the lower income group felt satisfied, they were more likely to revisit restaurants ($r_{\text{lower income\_satisfaction and revisit}}$ = 0.403) while no significant relationship existed between satisfaction and revisit for the higher income group (p = 0.183 > 0.05). The effect of satisfaction on recommendation was also weaker for the higher income group compared to the lower income group ($r_{\text{lower income}}$ = 0.454, $r_{\text{higher income}}$ = 0.199). Additionally, brand love had different effects on recommendation intentions for these two groups ($r_{\text{lower income}}$ = 0.235, $r_{\text{higher income}}$ = 0.596, p = 0.026 < 0.05). The results showed that brand love played a much more important role in motivating the higher income group to recommend and revisit.

[Insert Table 5]

Discussion and conclusions

Discussion

The framework of value-satisfaction-brand love-loyalty highlights the importance of the perceived value that customers derive from dining experiences and satisfaction. The study findings supported the notion that all four components (food, service, dining experience, and price) of the perceived value function are strong contributors to satisfaction and brand love. The restaurants in this investigation serve moderately priced food in a casual atmosphere, so customers expect good food and outstanding service for what

they pay. Customers choose casual dining restaurants because they want to have a dining experience beyond just the food. This finding supports the recent dining consumption phenomenon in North America. Even fast-food patrons want to see more menu items prepared with healthier and fresher ingredients and their food often to be brought to their table (e.g., Panera Bread). Providing higher quality service and food to their customers is becoming more important to survive in an age of fierce competition. Additionally, perceived value and satisfaction together explain half of the variance in brand love, indicating both are important in generating brand love, but these two are not the only constructs leading to brand love. To develop an emotional attachment, other constructs should be considered, such as trust (Erciş et al., 2012), authenticity (Mody & Hanks, 2019), impressions in memory (Manthiou et al., 2018), and self-congruity (Roy et al., 2013), which possibly increase brand love and contribute to customer loyalty.

Over the last 10 years, the marketing term of 'brand advocate' has received more attention from academics and practitioners. Brand advocates can be defined as "highly satisfied customers and others who go out of their way to actively promote the products they love and care about" (Fuggetta, 2012, p. 1). Highly satisfied customers can be strong brand advocates or "volunteer marketers" who not only more frequently revisit a restaurant, but also pass on positive WoM to others, are willing to pay a premium price, and defend the brand from criticisms (Crouch et al., 2016). Therefore, restaurateurs need to better understand how to meet customer needs for perceived value and their expectations to generate brand love, which plays a key role in brand loyalty.

Conclusions

This research has both theoretical contributions and managerial and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, it fills a gap in the literature by including brand love in the value-satisfaction-loyalty chain. Previous models, like the quality-value-loyalty (Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000) and value-

satisfaction-loyalty chains (Gallarza & Saura, 2006), did not include brand love, which may be more important for building superior customer-brand relationships. Although scholars have tested the effects of brand love by itself, they have not investigated its effects in combination with perceived value and satisfaction within the restaurant context. However, these three constructs may have interactive relationships that could lead to a better understanding of how to increase loyalty. Perceived value, satisfaction, and brand love were examined to see how they enhanced the intention to recommend and to revisit. The framework of value-satisfaction-brand love-loyalty bridges a previous literature gap and gives deeper insights into customer-brand relationships. Additionally, gender, age, and income were found to be factors influencing the effects of brand love.

This research contributes to the theory of relationship marketing, which emphasizes that creating a sound relationship with customers will eventually help to achieve long-term commitment and assist in developing customer loyalty. Brand love, as an emotional relationship, is more important than perceived value and satisfaction in inspiring revisit intentions. The results show that satisfaction and brand love are full mediators in the relationship between perceived value and revisit intentions, indicating that good food quality and service are not enough. This empirically explains why some people perceive high value with a restaurant, but they are not willing to revisit. With a lack of brand love, consumers can easily switch to other brands. Therefore, satisfying customers and making them fall in love with the brand is crucial to the success of restaurants. Furthermore, brand love has a more direct effect on revisit intentions than satisfaction. This study found a strong relationship between brand love and revisit intentions. The existing literature suggests that customers with strong brand attachment or love influence other potential customers and become external brand champions for restaurants.

In addition, the framework of value-satisfaction-brand love-loyalty was tested for different customer groups and emphasizes the importance of brand love for certain segments of the market. It contributes to marketing and branding literature. Women will not recommend a restaurant just because

they feel satisfied or perceive high value. When they love a restaurant brand, they become strong advocates and are more likely to share their pleasurable dining experience. Brand love is also crucial in motivating Generation Xers, who are the most powerful spending group in China, to recommend casual restaurants. For patrons with higher incomes, brand love more strongly affects their willingness to recommend restaurants to others. Previous research has not examined brand love with different groups, leading to limited conclusions on the role of brand love in generating customer loyalty. The findings of this research shed light on the importance of brand love for different market segments.

Implications

From a managerial perspective, casual restaurant owners should acknowledge the importance of having emotional bonds with consumers, which greatly increase customer loyalty. With the rapid rise in average household incomes and increased urbanization, China's restaurant business continues to see strong growth, as well as experiencing more intense competition. Consumers have more choices to select from, and they are likelier to switch to new restaurant brands. Especially, over 80 percent of middle-income Chinese consumers actively dine out at new restaurants (Chuang, 2016). For casual restaurant owners, this trend can be an opportunity and a curse, and thus they must maximize the value they provide so customers are satisfied, evoking greater emotional attachment. We all know that restaurants sell food, beverage, and dining experiences. What is a key driver of a strong restaurant brand dining experience? It is an emotional connection, which facilitates customer attachment and builds stronger loyalty.

Causal restaurants have been implementing different strategies to build beloved brands. Based on the framework of value-satisfaction-brand love-loyalty, providing extra value is an effective way to generate brand love. Restaurants can provide customers with small gifts, making customers feel that they gain additional value from their dining. For example, HaiDiLao Hot Pot gives each customer a

small gift package, which includes wipes, oil absorbing sheets, and lipstick. The gift package is especially favored by female customers. With the HaiDiLao's logo on it, these gift packages also become a promotion for the brand. Another initiative that restaurants can take is to expand the retail mix offers to cater to the target market. Cracker Barrel offers vintage sodas, candies, and fashionable retro-inspired apparel. It makes younger diners feel not only interested, but also is completely relatable (Kneeland & Howard, 2018).

Furthermore, casual restaurant owners should especially focus on developing emotional bonding with women, Generation Xers, and guests with higher incomes. Without brand love, these three groups of consumers are less likely to recommend or revisit restaurants. Realizing this, some Chinese casual restaurants have initiated actions to attract and better serve these markets. For example, HaiDiLao Hot Pot offers free manicures and Chinese origami to guests. In addition to its high-quality food, these services create pleasant dining experiences and evoke consumers' brand love, resulting in repeat consumption. Some female guests visit HaiDiLao Hot Pot weekly to get manicures and enjoy the food (Chen & Wee, 2018). The traditional restaurant ethos and authentic food better engages Generation Xers and increases their attachment to brands (Pomranz, 2017). A good case of this is Grandma's Home, where authentic Hangzhou cuisine is provided at a place decorated with bamboo chairs, wooden grilles, and tiles. Additionally, offering a tier-based or VIP loyalty program (e.g., point earning and redemption for money spent and frequency of visits, discounts, referral incentives, reservations in advance, member-only seating areas, and other valuable rewards) is also a good strategy to build emotional bonds with guests as it increases customer engagement and makes them feel that their experiences are excellent value for money.

From a practical perspective, restaurant managers and staff should realize the importance of establishing a long-term relationship with customers – brand love. With high perceived value and satisfaction with memorable dining experiences, consumers are more likely to develop brand love with a

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restaurant and its brand, and then become brand advocates, who will voluntarily promote the brand by WoM and will revisit. Without emotional attachment to a brand, consumers can easily switch to other brands if their dining experiences are spoiled by poor-quality food and service failure. As a part of dining experiences, restaurant staff play a crucial role in developing consumers' brand love. The restaurant staff of HaiDiLao Hot Pot offer customized and caring service, which makes guests feel that they are a family member of the staff and have emotional connections (Chen & Wee, 2018). When customers come to HaiDiLao in winter, they are provided with warm towels. All these small details lead customers to think this brand is caring and has great value. Furthermore, as restaurant staff are the ambassadors for the brand, showing their love for the restaurant brand is very critical. For instance, the servers at Grandma's Home are very proud of their restaurants and food, so when they introduce different dishes to customers, they always show their inherent happiness and love, making customers feel that the food at that restaurant is the most authentic and fresh.

Limitations and future studies

There are some limitations to this research. A value-satisfaction-brand love-loyalty framework was proposed and tested with casual restaurants in major cities of China. Data were collected in four large Chinese cities, Beijing, Shanghai, Suzhou, and Guangzhou. Some western cities, such as Chengdu and Chongqing, were not surveyed. The results may not be generalizable to other dining settings or geographic regions. Different contexts are likely to influence results, so future studies are needed to test the model in other situations. Another limitation is that this research has limited generalization because of its relatively small sample. As a questionnaire-based survey, it has a small group representation of the opinions of larger groups.

This study also focused on examining the relationships among perceived value, customer satisfaction, brand love, and loyalty. Certain other constructs are potential antecedents (e.g., trust,

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authenticity) of brand love. In particular, many restaurant brands in North America utilize social responsibility as another key driver of emotional connection to their brands. For example, LYFE Kitchen, a fast-food restaurant chain operating in the Chicago area, has the mission to, "Eat good, feel good, do good." These constructs should be included and examined in the proposed framework in future research. In addition, the common method variance (CMV) has become an increasingly important concern in hospitality and tourism studies (Min et al., 2016). To mitigate the potential risks of CMV, this research collected data from different sources and applied Harman's one-factor test, which indicated no single factor accounted for more than 50% of the variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). However, future research can benefit from implementing procedural remedies (e.g., marker variables, multiple scales, negatively-worded questions, and psychological separations) from the start of study design and statistical control (e.g., a common method factor) to reduce the CMV (Min et al., 2016). Another limitation of this research is that a one-item construct was used to measure intentions to recommend and to revisit. It is argued that a unidimensional scale fails to adequately reflect the complexity of intention (Zeithaml et al., 1996), so multi-dimensional constructs are recommended for measuring intentions in future studies.

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Tables

Table 1. Demographic information on sample (n = 346)

Characteristics	Percentage (%)	Characteristics	Percentage (%)
Gender		*Income*	
Male	52.8	Less than 3,000 RMB	12.7
Female	47.2	3,001-6,000 RMB	45.4
Age		6,001-9,000 RMB	21.1
18-24	9.8	9,001-12,000 RMB	12.1
25-34	53.8	More than 12,001RMB	8.7
35-44	25.4	*Education*	
45-54	10.7	High school or less	11.6
55 and above	0.3	College, including vocational school	26.9
		University	48.7
		Graduate school	12.8

Table 2. Scale reliability of perceived value, satisfaction, and brand love

Construct and item	Std. coefficient	Composite reliability	AVE
Perceived value (Harris & Goode, 2004)			
The restaurant experience was excellent value for money.	0.824	0.917	0.734
I am happy with the value for money I get from the restaurant experience.	0.907		
The restaurant services are excellent value.	0.866		
The restaurant food is excellent value.	0.827		
Satisfaction (He et al., 2012)			
I am completely satisfied with the restaurant service.	0.867	0.926	0.679
I am very pleased with the restaurant service.	0.927		
I am absolutely delighted by their service.	0.903		
I am completely satisfied with this restaurant's food.	0.786		
I am very pleased with this restaurant's food.	0.748		
I am absolutely delighted by the food.	0.686		
Brand love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006)			
This is a wonderful brand.	0.844	0.881	0.601
This brand makes me feel good.	0.888		
This brand is totally awesome.	0.842		
I love this brand!	0.645		
I am very passionate about this brand.	0.617		

Table 3. Results of the model and goodness-of-fit indices

	Hypotheses	Std. coefficient	p-value
H_1	Perceived value → Brand love	0.437	***
H_2	Perceived value → Satisfaction	0.707	***
H_3	Satisfaction → Brand love	0.411	***
H_4	Brand love → Recommendation	0.263	***
H_5	Brand love → Revisit	0.455	***
H_6	Perceived value → Recommendation	0.205	0.005
H_7	Perceived value → Revisit	0.098	0.144
H_8	Satisfaction → Recommendation	0.294	***
H_9	Satisfaction → Revisit	0.272	***

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4. Standardized total, direct, and indirect effects

Hypotheses		Std. total effect	Std. direct effect	Std. indirect effect
H₁	Perceived value → Brand love	0.736	0.451	0.284
H₂	Perceived value → Satisfaction	0.709	0.709	0.000
H₃	Satisfaction → Brand love	0.401	0.401	0.000
H₄	Brand love → Recommendation	0.298	0.298	0.000
H₅	Brand love → Revisit	0.507	0.507	0.000
H₆	Perceived value → Recommendation	0.585	0.141	0.444
H₇	Perceived value → Revisit	0.589	0.000	0.589
H₈	Satisfaction → Recommendation	0.436	0.317	0.120
H₉	Satisfaction → Revisit	0.508	0.305	0.203

Table 5. Results of the nested model comparisons

Hypotheses	Gender			Age			Income		
	Std. coefficient		Nested model comparison	Std. coefficient		Nested model comparison	Std. coefficient		Nested model comparisons
	Female	Male	p-value	Generation X	Millennials	p-value	< 6,000 RMB	> 6,000 RMB	p-value
Perceived value → Brand love	0.392[***]	0.497[***]	0.353	0.310[**]	0.494[***]	0.228	0.358[***]	0.590[***]	0.052
Perceived value → Satisfaction	0.753[***]	0.632[***]	0.014	0.649[***]	0.722[***]	0.589	0.690[***]	0.729[***]	0.869
Satisfaction → Brand love	0.543[***]	0.161[n.s.]	0.070	0.500[***]	0.375[***]	0.380	0.454[***]	0.300[**]	0.401
Brand love → Recommendation	0.558[***]	0.132[n.s.]	0.007	0.396[***]	0.226[*]	0.272	0.235[*]	0.596[***]	0.026

Brand love → Revisit	0.517***	0.412***	0.403	0.628***	0.459***	0.136	0.407***	0.677***	0.089
Perceived value → Recommendation	0.082[n.s.]	0.165*	0.406	0.021[n.s.]	0.266***	0.009	--	--	--
Satisfaction → Recommendation	0.150[n.s.]	0.396***	0.012	0.459***	0.258**	0.177	0.454***	0.199*	0.053
Satisfaction → Revisit	0.335***	0.359***	0.274	0.256*	0.320***	0.728	0.403***	0.127[n.s.]	0.032

Note: *** $p<0.001$, ** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$

Figures

Figure 1. Model and hypotheses
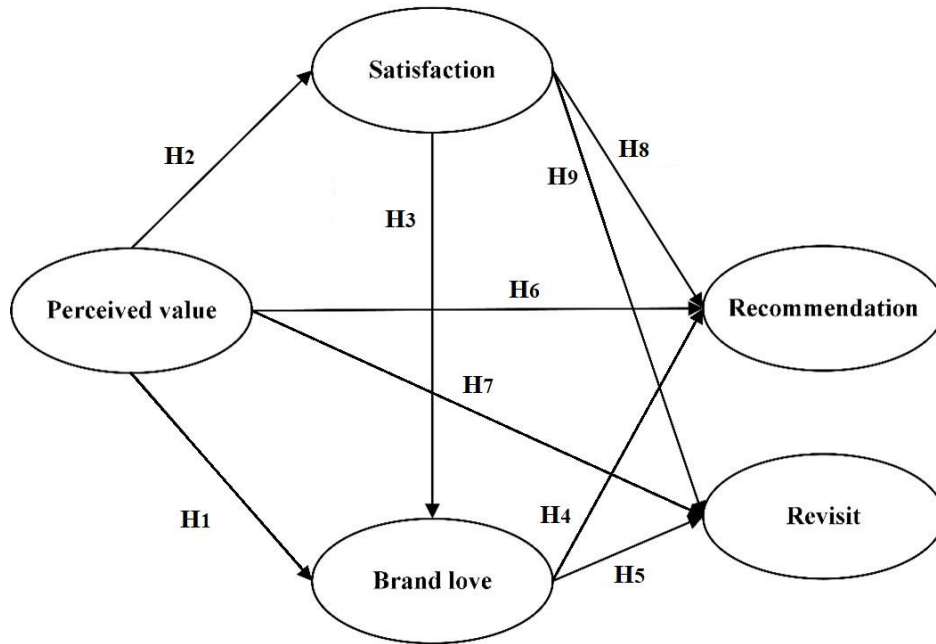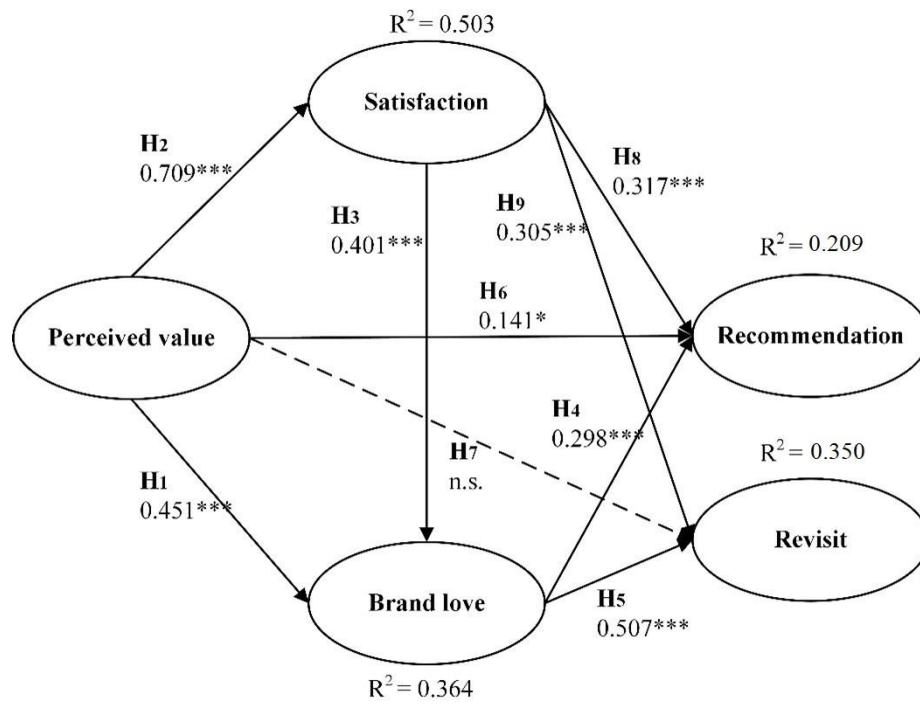
Figure 2. Chinese casual restaurant brands and their distinct product and service concepts

Restaurant brands	Features	Photos
HaiDiLao Hot Pot 海底捞 (Pinyin: Hai Di Lao) Hai Di Lao means "fortune" in Sichuan mah-jong. This brand was established in 1994 in Sichuan Province, and it has expanded to many other provinces in China and overseas markets, including Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, the U.S., and Canada. 海底捞火锅 Haidilao Hot Pot	Product: Sichuan style hotpot Services: HaiDiLao Hotpot provides excellent customer service. Different from other hot pot restaurants, it offers a free hand-pulled noodle performance. Customers can watch a skillful man displaying hand-pulled noodles on the spot. In addition to the enjoyable dining experience, it provides customers who are waiting in line with free snacks and entertainment, like board games and manicures.	
Grandma's Home 外婆家 (Pinyin: Wai Po Jia) Grandma's Home was founded in 1998 in Hangzhou, China. The brand focuses on comfort and care. It has developed and expanded to more than 20 cities in China. 外婆家® GRANDMA'S HOME	Product: Hangzhou cuisine. The famous dishes include West Lake vinegar fish, braised Dongpo pork, and Longjing tea prawns. Service: Grandma's Home restaurants are nicely decorated with bamboo chairs, wooden grilles, and tiles. The decorations not only create a relaxing and enjoyable ambience, but also make customers feel that they are in Hangzhou.	
Greenery Cafe 绿茵阁(Pinyin: Lü Yin Ge) Founded in 1989 in Guangzhou, the Greenery Café has become one of the biggest restaurant chains for Western food in China, winning various prizes in the food and beverage industry nationally. With more than 110 stores across the country, the Greenery Café maintains the lead in operations management, marketing, and food production and distribution. GREENERY CAFE 1989 绿茵阁	Product: Steakhouse. It offers a wide range of Western food, including entrées, steak, seafood, salad, spaghetti, and drinks. Service: It aims to provide lavish experiences for mass consumption and use innovation to create localized Western food for modern Chinese consumers. It brings customers the novel experience of Western food and culture for a high quality of life.	

Figure 3. Results of path analysis

Notes: * p<0.05, *** p<0.001