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Article

Brand Trust in The Mongolian Cashmere Industry: Mixed Method Analysis

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Abstract: Brand trust holds significant importance in the Mongolian cashmere industry. This study examines the primary predictors of customer brand trust among Mongolian cashmere users. Our research includes a survey with 800 participants and 20 individual interviews conducted among both Mongolian cashmere users and non-users. We utilized an online platform to reach participants, employing convenience sampling. The study investigates the relationship between various factors and brand trust within the context of Mongolian cashmere brands. Through a combination of individual interviews and statistical analysis, we test six hypotheses. The findings indicate that higher brand quality, a strong reputation, greater transparency, effective issue resolution, commitment to environmental and social responsibility, and pre-purchase research on such commitments positively impact brand trust. Key insights gleaned from the interviews emphasize the importance of quality, reputation, transparency, customer service, and environmental responsibility in shaping consumer trust. These results offer valuable implications for cashmere brands aiming to bolster consumer trust and foster loyalty.

keywords: customer brand trust; brand perspectives; customer; responsible business practice; mongolia; cashmere

1. Introduction

Mongolia's cashmere industry ranks third in exports, after copper and gold. It boosts GDP, income, jobs, and foreign exchange[1]. It's key to the success of Mongolian cashmere firms[2]. Mongolian cashmere corporation "GOYO" conducted a study. It revealed that 55.4% of participants used cashmere products, while 44.6% did not[3]. Trust has received a great deal of attention from scholars in many disciplines [4–7]. Earlier literature defines brand trust as when consumers feel safe with a brand. They feel this way because they feel it's reliable and cares about their well-being[8–10]. Aaker (1991) focuses on three dimensions: manufacturing quality (adherence to promised standards), product-based quality (intrinsic attributes), and objective quality (tangible characteristics)[11]. Despite previous research on many aspects of consumer behavior, marketing techniques, and economic consequences[3,12–14], and no previous study has examined customer perspectives on brand trust in Mongolian cashmere brands. Furthermore, while numerous studies concentrate on hypothesis testing, none have tried to answer research questions in the Mongolian cashmere industry using a mixed-method study design. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the primary factors influencing brand trust in the Mongolian cashmere industry and exploring the underlying reasons through both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Theoretical Perspective on Brand Trust

Brand trust can be viewed from various theoretical perspectives based on the research data provided. The cognitive-emotion theory (CET) suggests that brand trust can transition into brand love, especially in uncertain market situations, with brand behavioral characteristics moderating this relationship[15]. Trust-commitment theory emphasizes the importance of online consumer privacy

concerns and social interactions in building an ethical and trustworthy social commerce community for brand value co-creation[16]. Media richness theory and social capital theory highlight the role of social networking sites in influencing brand trust through enhancing social capital and creating a sense of virtual community in consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions[17]. Additionally, the Expectation-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) framework explores how trust, reputation, and sensory attributes impact consumer value judgments, particularly in the context of bottled mineral water purchases[18].

2.2. Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

The core focus of this study integrates fundamental concepts of brand management[19], consumer behavior[20], and trust theory [11,21,22] thereby creating a complete framework to examine the complex dynamics between consumers and brands. Our study attempts to test the following hypotheses.

2.2.1 H1: Higher Brand Quality Positively Influences Brand Trust

Higher brand quality impacts consumer trust[23–25]. Studies on various products like coffee, beauty products, and smartphones show that people's view of product quality affects customer satisfaction, which lead to brand loyalty. This, in turn, leads to more trusts in the brand[9,26]. It is key for building long-term consumer relationships. It also encourages repeat purchases. So, investing in maintaining and improving brand quality can impact trust and loyalty.

2.2.2 H2: Brands with a Strong Reputation Positively Affect Brand Trust

Brand reputation is crucial for fostering brand trust, as evidenced by various studies. A study focused on online reviews and shopping platforms shows that it is hard for consumers to trust a product's quality if it is from a non-famous brand[27]. Similarly, Ali[28,29] emphasizes that a firm's brand reputation significantly impacts customer satisfaction, leading to increased customer trust and loyalty. Moreover, Ngo et al.[3] found that both brand credibility and brand reputation positively affect brand trust in the food sector.

2.2.3 H3: Greater Transparency Positively Correlates with Higher Level of Brand Trust

Greater transparency indeed positively correlates with a higher level of brand trust[30–33]. Research indicates that brand transparency, achieved through effective brand communications and admitting mistakes, enhances brand trust and quality perceptions[34]. Specifically, transparent communication of production and cost information increases consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity and trust, leading to more positive attitudes and behavioral intentions towards the brand [32,35].

2.2.4 H4: Effective and Timely Issue Resolution Enhances Brand Trust

Effective and timely issue resolution plays a crucial role in enhancing brand trust[36,37]. Research suggests that in the face of product harm crises, strategies such as affective, informational, and corrective approaches can effectively restore brand trust, with perceived justice acting as a key mediator[38]. Moreover, interaction orientation at a strategic level, coupled with quality interactions, can significantly boost brand trust, thereby preventing the escalation of crises and minimizing their negative impact on customers[34,39].

2.2.5 H5: Companies with Strong Commitment to Environmental and Social Responsibility Are Perceived as More Trustworthy

Companies that demonstrate a strong commitment to environmental and social responsibility are indeed perceived as more trustworthy. Research indicates that engaging in social responsibility activities, including economic, legal, ethical, charitable, and environmental responsibilities, significantly impacts trust among stakeholders[40]. Moreover, the presence of social trust, a dimension of informal institutions, influences corporate environmental responsibility positively, highlighting the importance of social trust in environmental governance [41]. Additionally, corporate reputation plays a mediating role in enhancing organizational commitment through signals related

to corporate social responsibility activities, further emphasizing the link between social responsibility and trustworthiness [42]. Overall, a comprehensive approach to social and environmental responsibility not only enhances trust but also contributes to sustainable success and competitive advantage in the business world[43].

2.2.6 H6: Consumers Who Conduct Pre-Purchase Research on a Company's Environmental and Social Responsibility Are More Likely to Trust the Brand

Consumers who conduct pre-purchase research on a company's environmental and social responsibility are more likely to trust the brand. Studies show that authentic corporate social responsibility (CSR) engagement positively influences consumer purchase intention[44]. Additionally, the impact of corporate social responsibility on business image and customer trustworthiness is significant, leading to increased consumer credibility[45]. Furthermore, the relationship between trust and purchase intention is crucial in influencing consumer behavior, especially in the context of sustainability marketing theories[46]. Therefore, consumers who actively seek information on a company's CSR practices are more inclined to trust the brand, ultimately impacting their purchase decisions positively.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Design of the Research

This study used mixed-method research in the cashmere sector of Mongolia. This study investigates the relationship between key factors, such as product quality, brand reputation, transparency and communication, customer service, and environmental and social responsibility, and their impact on customer brand trust.

3.2. Sampling Procedure

The sampling method employed in this study was convenient sampling. The study consists of 815 participants and 20 in-depth interviews, with the aim of providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

3.3. Questionnaire

The core data was obtained using an online self-administered questionnaire. The design of the questionnaire was informed by known instruments and prior research on customer brand trust, as well as the variables that were uncovered. The development of the questionnaire was strengthened by previous studies that investigate the reliability, validity, and cross-context applicability of brand trust scales, thereby increasing the theoretical foundation of the research[47–56] as shown in figure 1, and variables as attached in supplement 1.

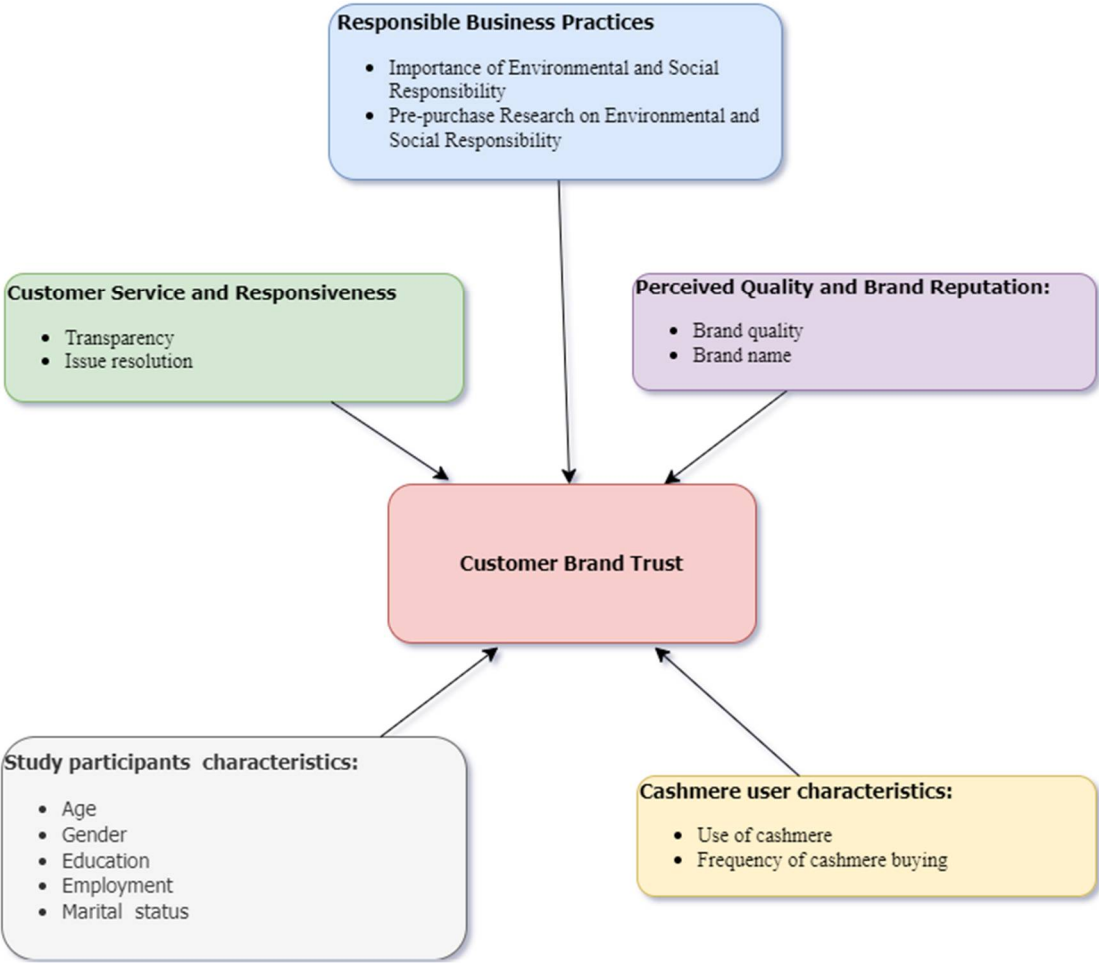


Figure 1. Research model.

3.4. Individual Interview

The study used a purposive sampling strategy with 20 individual cashmere users. The informed permission of the subjects was obtained, ensuring transparency and adherence to ethical principles. The interviews were carried out using a combination of face-to-face and online methods, allowing for flexibility in terms of geographical limitations and participant preferences. The semi-structured interviews were organized by moderator and audio recorded. Qualitative data were analyzed manually according to the thematic analysis theme.

3.5. Statistical Analysis

We used SPSS 27.0, SPSS 23.0 Amos for statistical analysis, including structural equation modelling, correlation analysis and some descriptive statistics. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts highlighted key patterns in the cashmere industry of Mongolia, revealing factors impacting brand trust.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The ethical committee in Mongolia waived the requirement for approval due to the study's complete online anonymity, facilitating voluntary participation while ensuring participants' anonymity throughout the research process.

4. Results

4.1. Study Participants Cashmere User and Demographic Characteristics

Table 1. Mongolian cashmere user’s characteristics (N=815).

		N	%
Usage of Mongolian cashmere products	No	120	14.7
	Yes	695	85.3
Familiarity of Mongolian cashmere industry	Not at all	12	1.5
	Not very much	160	19.6
	Moderately	448	55.0
	Well	155	19.0
	Very well	40	4.9
Frequency of buying cashmere products	Regularly	30	3.7
	Occasionally	368	45.2
	Rarely	381	46.7
	Always	36	4.4
Gender	Female	519	63.7
	Male	296	36.3
Education Level	Low	5	0.6
	Medium	188	23.1
	High	622	76.3
Employment	Unemployed	306	37.5
	Employed	509	62.5
Marital status	single	430	52.8
	married	385	47.2
Age group	Under 30	412	52.9
	Over 30	367	47.1

*Incidence percentage of missing data in the table was less than <5%.

Table 1 shows that Mongolian cashmere products are widely known (85.3%) but bought infrequently (91.1% occasionally or rarely). The buyers are mostly female (63.7%), highly educated (76.3%), and employed (62.5%). They are split between single and married (52.8% and 47.2%). And, the age distribution is balanced (52.9% under 30, 47.1% over 30).

4.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The provided Table 1 and Figure 2 present the results of a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) conducted on responses from consumers of a Mongolian cashmere brand. Overall, the results suggest that consumers of the Mongolian cashmere brand have positive perceptions across various factors such as quality, transparency/responsiveness to complaints, influence of environmental/social responsibility, and brand trust. These perceptions are statistically significant, indicating strong relationships between consumers' perceptions and the latent constructs such as brand trust they represent.

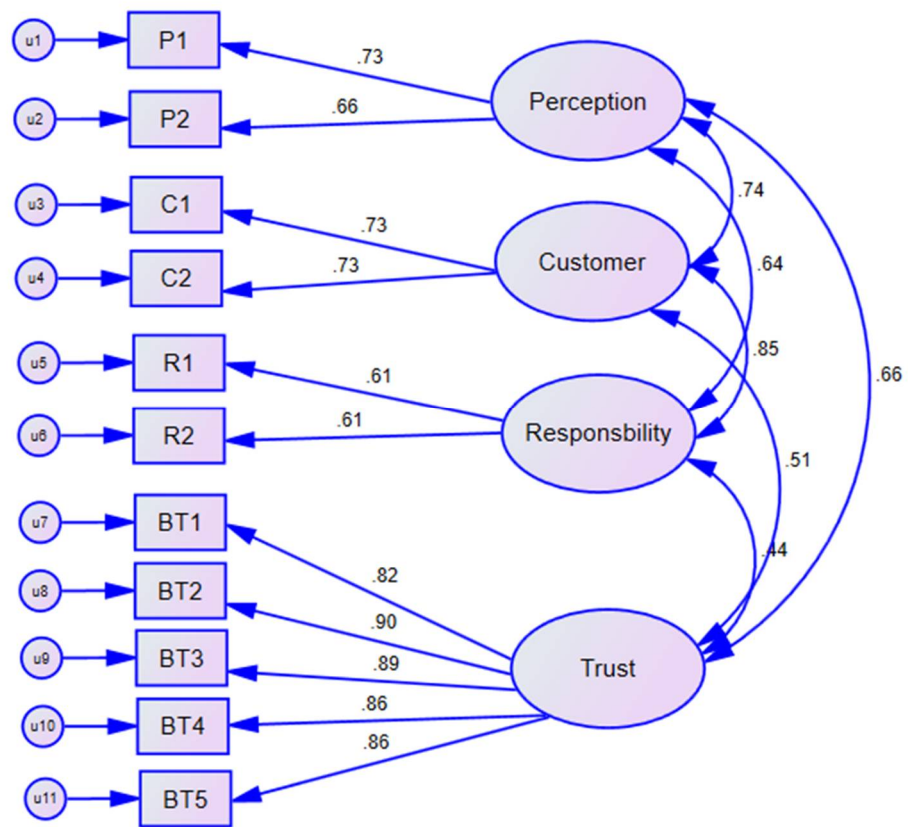


Figure 2. Variables used in the confirmatory factor analysis

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis

Research unit and item. (Please respond to the questionnaire by considering the Mongolian cashmere brand that you often use)	Estimate	S.E.	C.R	P
Quality/name				
U1: I know the quality of the Mongolian cashmere brand I use	3.935	0.031	128.359	***
U2: Before purchasing, I had heard about this Mongolian cashmere brand	3.691	0.037	101.100	***
Transparency/ Responsiveness to complaints				
U3: I perceive this Mongolian cashmere brand to be transparent about its operations	3.130	0.038	82.600	***
U4: This Mongolian cashmere brand responds well to complaints and feedback from customers	3.248	0.037	86.717	***
Influence of Environmental/Social Responsibility on Purchase, Research on Environmental/Social Responsibility				
U5: The environmental and social responsibility of this Mongolian cashmere brand influences on my purchasing decisions	3.620	0.036	99.807	***
U6: Before purchasing, I researched the environmental and social responsibility of this Mongolian cashmere brand	2.720	0.045	60.010	***
Brand Trust				
U7: I have trust in this Mongolian cashmere brand’s ability to perform well	3.446	0.037	91.910	***
U8: I trust this Mongolian cashmere brand	3.499	0.036	96.986	***

U9: I rely on this Mongolian cashmere brand	3.482	0.037	94.602	***
U10: This Mongolian cashmere brand is safe	3.536	0.036	97.839	***
U11: This Mongolian cashmere brand delivers what it promises.	3.473	0.037	93.371	***
<i>Note: Standard Error (S.E.), Critical Ratio (C.R), P value (P)=0.000</i>				

4.3. Testing of research hypothesis

Table 3. Study hypothesis tested using the Structured Equation Modelling

No	Hypotheses	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	remarks
H1	Higher brand quality positively influenced brand trust	3.935	0.031	128.359	***	Supported
H2	Brands with a strong reputation positively affect brand trust	3.691	0.037	101.100	***	Supported
H3	Greater transparency positively correlates with higher level of brand trust	3.130	0.038	82.600	***	Supported
H4	Effective and timely issue resolution enhances brand trust	3.248	0.037	86.717	***	Supported
H5	Companies with strong commitment to environmental and social responsibility are perceived as more trustworthy	3.620	0.036	99.807	***	Supported
H6	Consumer who conduct pre-purchase research on a company's environmental and social responsibility are more likely to trust the brand	2.720	0.045	60.010	***	Supported

H1: Higher brand quality positively influenced brand trust

Product quality has estimate of 3.935 suggest that every unit increase in brand quality, there is an associated increase of approximately 3.935 units in brand trust. Therefore, Mongolian cashmere brand user perceive high quality as more trustworthy. Individual interviews highlighted the varying quality of wool cashmere based on manufacturing processes. Pure cashmere is valued for its adherence to the body, heat retention, and durability with proper washing. Its appeal lies in

perceived quality and longevity, though stretching should be avoided. Comfort and alignment with personal style are key considerations for attire. Quality attributes like durability and secure fastenings are preferred, while proper maintenance is crucial to avoid shape distortion. Washing frequency affects garment longevity, with excessive washing risking loss of shape and tension. Repeat purchases are common, especially if style, color, and price align. However, some garments from reputed manufacturers may lack durability or aesthetics. Cashmere's ability to elevate body temperature reduces the need for layering, making it desirable. Improvement in merchandise quality and variety is desired by consumers.

H2: Brands with a strong reputation positively affect brand trust

The estimate of 3.691 suggests that brands with a strong reputation are associated with approximately 3.691 units higher brand trust. Hence, brands with strong reputations tend to be trusted more by consumers. Individual interview further highlighted that Mongolian cashmere is valued for its proximity and high quality, with brands like Gobi renowned for setting a standard. Brand trust is crucial, with preferences often leaning towards established names like Gobi, Goyo, and Evseg.

H3: Greater transparency positively correlates with higher level of brand trust

The estimate of 3.130 suggests that greater transparency leads to an increase of approximately 3.130 units in brand trust. Therefore, brands that are transparent in their operations are perceived as more trustworthy. Individual interview revealed that transparency and communication are crucial factors, with participants emphasizing the need for details on cost, sourcing, quantity, and care instructions for cashmere products. Authenticity is often determined through direct inquiry or personal conviction. Proficiency in marketing and word-of-mouth referrals are vital for purchases. Trying on garments before buying is recommended for satisfaction. Providing comprehensive product discussions, including manufacturing details, enhances interest. Cost reduction is desired in Mongolian production. Utilizing various communication channels and offering customized information fosters consumer interest.

H4: Effective and timely issue resolution enhances brand trust

The estimate of 3.248 indicates that effective and timely issue resolution results in an increase of approximately 3.248 units in brand trust. As with the previous hypotheses, the small standard error, critical ratio, and p-value indicate statistical significance. Consequently, brands that handle issues effectively and in a timely manner are trusted more by consumers. Individual interviews with cashmere users further revealed that customer service is highly valued by participants, with the ability to identify the appropriate size and congenial salesmanship influencing customer satisfaction and longevity. Gobi and Goyo receive praise for satisfactory conditions, while Bodios faces criticism for poor demeanor. Positive interactions, like personalized treatment after a high-value purchase, are appreciated. Recommendations for vintage garment restoration and clear washing instructions are desired. Proficient articulation of product attributes by vendors is important. Customer-centricity is crucial in retail, with a comprehensive understanding of goods expected. Challenges in distribution and delivery efficiency are noted, particularly in comparison to e-commerce giants like Amazon.

H5: Companies with strong commitment to environmental and social responsibility are perceived as more trustworthy

The estimate of 3.620 suggests that companies with a strong commitment to environmental and social responsibility are associated with approximately 3.620 units higher brand trust. Thus, companies demonstrating environmental and social responsibility are perceived as more trustworthy by consumers. In the individual interview, while some individuals dispute the correlation between environmental/social responsibility, efforts such as managing pasture capacity and sustainable waste management can enhance brand effectiveness. Environmental concerns are paramount, with

initiatives like tree planting and water conservation desired. Responsible practices like reusing and repairing items can reduce waste.

H6: Consumer who conduct pre-purchase research on a company's environmental and social responsibility are more likely to trust the brand

The estimate of 2.720 suggests that consumers who conduct pre-purchase research on environmental and social responsibility are associated with approximately 2.720 units higher brand trust. Therefore, consumers who research a company's environmental and social responsibility are more likely to trust that brand.

This suggests that pre-research on company have a favorable link with brand trust. Employee well-being and efficient time management are crucial regardless of business size, contributing to trust establishment. Future products are expected to prioritize health and environmental openness.

5. Discussion

The structured equation modelling analysis results provide significant insights into the factors that drive brand trust in the cashmere business in Mongolia. According to the findings, product quality, brand reputation, and customer service all play important roles in determining customers' opinions of brand trust. The positive and significant link between brand trust and both product quality and brand reputation (H1 and H2) are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the relevance of both characteristics in establishing customer trust[57,58]. The individual interviews provide valuable insights into the diverse perspectives on cashmere quality, encompassing elements such as its ability to conform to the body, its capacity to retain heat, and its durability, all of which contribute to its designation as a high-grade material. The significance of authenticity, longevity, and conformity with individual preferences becomes apparent, illuminating the interaction between product qualities and brand trust.

Similarly, the considerable positive impact of customer service (H3 and H4) on brand trust emphasizes the significance of providing exceptional customer service experiences. Customers' trust in a cashmere brand is likely to improve when they are satisfied with the customer service given by the brand and believe the brand to be attentive to their enquiries and complaints[59,60]. Individual interviews provide valuable insights on the importance of friendly sales encounters, accurate size guidance, and overall customer happiness. The accounts highlight the significant impact of customer service on the building of trust, wherein a welcoming demeanor and well-informed salespeople lead to favorable opinions. This statement aligns with the emphasis of the commitment-trust theory on the establishment and cultivation of relationships[22]. In this analysis, the results indicate the influence of communication and transparency (H3 and H4). This result was consistent to the previous studies[61–63]. The conducted conversations shed light on the importance of openness within a sector that commonly associates cashmere with luxury. The incorporation of specific cost information, animal origins, and guidelines for proper care serves to augment the authenticity and foster client confidence. The need of effective communication is emphasized as a strategy to establish trust, wherein thorough product conversations and expertise in marketing contribute to generating consumer interest and fostering participation.

There are persons who have expressed the viewpoint that there exists no discernible correlation between environmental responsibility and social responsibility(H5 and H6). The findings from individual interviews indicate a wide range of viewpoints, wherein certain people place significant emphasis on the influence of sustainable practices in the development of brand trust. Discussions revolve around sustainable endeavors, afforestation, and waste mitigation, exemplifying a growing consumer preoccupation with ecological accountability.

Study Limitations: Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, it is essential to recognize the limitations that may affect the generalizability and interpretation of the results. First, the study was limited to the Mongolian cashmere industry, limiting the applicability of its findings to other industries or contexts. The unique characteristics and dynamics of the Mongolian cashmere industry, such as its geographical location, cultural aspects, and market conditions, may impact the results and restrict their applicability to other regions or industries. Second, the study utilized a cross-

sectional design to collect data at a specific time point. This hinders the capacity to establish causal relationships between the investigated variables. The evidence of causality would be strengthened by longitudinal studies or experimental designs. Thirdly, the compilation of data relied on self-report measures, which are susceptible to respondent biases and limitations, such as social desirability bias and recall bias. Participants may still provide socially desirable responses or have difficulty accurately recalling their attitudes and behaviors despite efforts to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality. In addition, the study employed purposive sampling, which can result in selection bias. The sample may not be representative of the entire population of interest, and the results may not be applicable to larger groups. Additional research employing random sampling techniques could improve the study's external validity. In addition, the study centered on the impact of specific variables (product quality, brand image, transparency and communication, customer service, and environmental and social responsibility) on consumer brand trust. Other factors that may impact brand trust, including price, promotions, and cultural factors, were not investigated. Future research could consider a broader range of variables to provide a more comprehensive comprehension of customer brand loyalty in the Mongolian cashmere industry. The study relied on quantitative methods, which may have overlooked qualitative insights with nuance. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could provide a more in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of cashmere industry stakeholders.

It is crucial to recognize and resolve these limitations in future research to advance the understanding of customer brand trust in the Mongolian cashmere industry and to increase the applicability and generalizability of the findings. Significance of these characteristics in general, but rather emphasizes the study's specific context. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of product quality, brand reputation, customer service and responsible business in establishing brand trust in the cashmere business. To establish and sustain customer trust, cashmere brands should focus on continuously producing high-quality items, building a strong brand image, and giving great customer service experiences. To acquire a fuller knowledge of these interactions, more study is needed to investigate the impact of communication, transparency, and environmental and social responsibility on brand trust in the cashmere business.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the present study investigated a variety of brand trust factors within the context of the Mongolian cashmere industry. the findings of this study illuminate the complex relationships between various factors and brand trust in the Mongolian cashmere industry. Product Quality, Brand Reputation, and Efficient Customer Service and Responsible Business Practice were found to be significant brand trust determinants. These results highlight the intricate interplay of factors that influence consumers' trust in brands in the context of the Mongolian cashmere market. Additional research and investigation may yield a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play and provide avenues for enhancing brand trust in this industry.

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