An Investigation into the predictors of brand preference towards cement brands available on the South African Market: A Consumer’s Perspective

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ARTICLE INFO

ISSN: 2723-1097

Keywords:
Brand preference; Purchase intention; Word-of-mouth; Perceived product quality, Price; Packaging; Cement industry; South Africa

ABSTRACT

The present study examines the antecedents and outcomes of brand preference in the South African Cement Industry. Due to the unavailability of a sampling frame, non-probability sampling, a form of convenience sampling was adopted to determine suitable respondents. A self-administered questionnaire was utilised to obtain 260 valid responses from individuals identifying as customers of the South African cement industry. To analyse the data, descriptive statistics and hypotheses testing was conducted through SPSS28 and AMOS 28 respectively. The findings of the study revealed that perceived quality, brand image, price and the influence of others positively impact brand preference. Brand preference positively influences word-of-mouth and purchase intentions and packaging do not play significant roles as antecedents of brand preference in the cement industry. It is imperative to allocate most of the organisation’s resources towards increasing brand preference as it has the most impact on purchase intention. This study explored the choice of cement brand from a business-to-business point of view and from a retail to consumer point of view. This is first study to investigate brand preference in the South African Cement Industry.

Introduction

A central issue in brand management is how to build and maintain consumer brand preference (Kao, 2019). It is also important to remember that one of the crucial roles of marketing is the creation, maintenance, and expansion of a brand (Shariq, 2018). The South African Cement Industry is under pressure, according to experts the reasons for this include reduced spending by government on large infrastructure projects (Globenewswire, 2020). Another reason for the decline in the sales of cement is reduced retail demand which was a result of a surge in sales that was experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic as consumers spent money on home improvement (Mofokeng, 2022). However, there are also growth opportunities, for example, the number of homes being built in rural areas in South Africa is growing steadily. One of
the reasons for this is a trend of young people leaving their rural homes and going to metropolitan cities for work and they save money to build a home or start businesses in their rural areas (Hippo, 2019), Laduma Hardware Group which has a business strategy that is targeting the rural and semi-urban communities has enjoyed consistent growth of 6% in annual earnings, 28% of sales coming in the form of the sale of cement which is a base product with which to start building (DIYNews, 2020)

In declining or mature industries, there are numerous advantages of brand preference. Numerous authors have explored various attributes that contribute towards brand preference in different product categories, including factors such as packaging which was explored by Halabi (2021); Waheed, Khan and Ahmad (2018). Brand image was explored by Cham, Cheng, Low and Cheok (2020). In most cases, the brand name is the only difference between the products (De Toni, Pompermayer, Lazzari, & Milan, 2021). Around the world, cement is a crucial component of mortar and concrete which is used as a binder (Garside, 2021). Its origins may be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, approximately 2000 years, when lime was combined with volcanic ash and water to create a binder (Garside, 2021). Today, there are over ten different types of cement with varying compositions and manufactured for various uses in construction (Dunuweera & Rajapakse, 2018). This study investigates the antecedents of brand preference and its consequences in the South African cement industry. The present study was grounded in a unique conceptual mode which made the assumptions that There are studies that have explored the factors influencing brand preference in the cement industry around the African continent, one such study explored various factors which included the price and quality of cement in Ghana (Bonney, Song, Jingwei, & Peng, 2022). Another study extended these factors to include packaging for selecting a cement brand in Ethiopia (Tadesse & Tessema, 2020). The South African cement industry is one of the biggest in the Africa, yet there are limited studies focusing on consumer brand preference in the cement industry.

This study makes the assumption that brand preference is influenced by brand image, perceived product quality, price, packaging, influence of others and sales promotion. O’Cass and Lim (2002) made the assumption that price was an antecedent of brand preference. This study also made the same assumption on this premise. According to the literature, brand preference is influenced by brand image (Sääksjärvi & Samiee, 2011), perceived product quality (Tolba, 2011) and price (Yasri, Susanto, Hoque & Gusti, 2020). It is also influenced by packaging (Wang, 2013), influence of others (Vongurai, 2020) and sales promotion (Schultz & Block, 2014). It is postulated in this study that brand preference is associated with purchase intention (Dam, 2020) and positive word of mouth (Hanaysha, 2016). Brand preference is considered to be closely associated with purchase intention (O’Cass & Lim, 2002), who further went on to state that feelings and experiences attached to a brand also play a key role in brand preference.
The brand is one of the most important factors that contributes to market development, the commercial viability of the organisation and the brand is the soul of the business which resides in the minds of consumers (Duc, Mai, & Anh, 2022). Despite having a production capacity of 20-million tons, the South African cement industry is only producing about 12-million tons and more than one-million tons of cement is imported into the country yearly (Engineering News, 2023). In addition, the South African cement industry suffers from unfair competition and international rivals that dump their produce into the country (Engineering News, 2023). This therefore presents a problem for local cement brands who need to remain competitive and the South African cement industry as a whole because it is operating at just above 50% capacity as according to Engineering News. Given the pressure that is faced by the South African cement industry, the only way a company can step away from price wars, is by offering consumers a valuable brand (Mainardes, Júnior & Andrade, 2020). The South African cement industry forecasts reduced demand in the industry without major government infrastructure projects, this means that retail demand will be a significant driver of growth in the industry. Limited research has been conducted in the South African cement industry to explore the antecedents of brand preference in the local industry. Understanding the drivers of brand preference in the South African cement industry is crucial in the current operating conditions, considering that the hardware industry is on a downward trend.

**Literature Review**

The Brand Equity Theory (Aaker, 2009) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975) form the theoretical grounding for the research study, and these are briefly discussed next.

**Theory of Brand Equity**

Various authors have their definitions of brand equity. However two famous explanations related to brand equity come from Aaker (2009) and Keller, (1993). Brand equity is the collection of brand assets and liabilities associated with the companies’ name (Aaker, 2009). There are two general reasons for studying Brand Equity, the first reason is financially based, and the aim is to estimate the value of a brand for accounting purposes (both for asset valuation and for the balance sheet) (Keller, 2013). The second reason for studying Brand Equity arises from a strategy point of view to improve marketing productivity and this is considering greater competition, increased costs and flattening demand in many industries (Keller, 1993). One of the debates around Keller and Aaker’s determinants of Brand Equity is the element of brand loyalty. Aaker is of the view that brand loyalty is one of the core elements of brand equity. However, Keller believes that brand loyalty is an outcome of brand equity (Kataria & Saini, 2019). However, both authors outline the steps involved in taking a
customer from just being aware and indifferent towards a brand to a state of intense loyalty. This study employs Aaker’s Model of Brand Equity.

**The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TBP)**

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) laid the foundation for the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which proposed that people who are predisposed to engaging in a particular behaviour can do so and that, if they so choose, they can simply cease from engaging in it. It has proven effective to utilise the Theory of Planned Behaviour to explain and forecast behaviour in a variety of contexts, from physical activity to drug usage (Ajzen, 2020). Four predictors are considered by the Theory of Planned Behaviour. These predictors are intention, attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 2020). Furthermore, TRA states that performance of the behaviour should be a direct function of behavioural intentions. Although a favourable attitude and conducive subjective norms provide motivation to engage in certain behaviour, the intention to act is only formed when perceived control over the behaviour is strong (Ajzen, 2020).

**Literature Review**

**Brand image and brand preference**

Brand image is a consumer’s perceptions about a brand (Keller, 2013). When customers must pick one brand over competitor companies, brand image becomes crucial (Kim & Chao, 2019). It is important to remember that consumers form pictures of products and services over time because of their encounters with the brand (Rodrigues, Borges, & Sousa, 2022). In terms of brand preference, Mishra (2019) investigated drivers of brand preference in the cement industry and looked at quality, brand image, product availability, brand advertising, discount sales, promotions, and the willingness to try a new brand. The author used a Likert scale to evaluate the consumers’ perceptions of the various criteria. Consumers gave the least weight to their inclination to try out new brands. In their research, Kim and Chao (2019) examined the relationship between consumer perceptions of several branding elements, which included brand image, trust, attachment, experience, and purchase intention, and how customers develop their purchasing intentions for high and low involvement product categories. The results of the study found that brand image had a positive influence on purchase intention, also, the direct effect of brand image on purchase intention was found to be most influential for the low involvement product category. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

**H1: There is a positive relationship between brand image and brand preference.**
Perceived quality and brand preference

Perceived product quality is a concept that exists in consumers' minds and is used by people to decide whether a product meets their expectations (Hanifati & Salehudin, 2021). In the construction industry, which is the primary market for the cement industry, Jha and Dahal (2020) conducted a study to determine the factors that construction companies evaluate when choosing a cement brand; the study found that quality was the most important factor, followed by price. Drawing from the work of Tadesse and Tessema (2020) the study found that service is the main attribute that influences consumer preferences, followed by price and quality for cement brand selection. Customers evaluate quality on two levels; technical solutions that solve customer problems, for example, the strength of the cement is a key factor when it comes to influencing consumers. The second dimension is the functional quality that adds value, such as information knowledge and social characteristics (Samudro, Sumarwan, Yusuf, & Simanjuntak, 2018). In the study that was conducted by Vazifehdoost and Negahdari (2018), the authors discovered that perceived quality does positively influence brand loyalty. In addition, the authors highlighted that consumers evaluate perceived quality from their purchase experience (Vazifehdoost & Negahdari, 2018). In another study that was conducted by Mahaputra and Saputra (2022) that explored quality, brand image and price for cooking oil in Indonesia, quality was found to be the most important factor whereas brand image is an indicator of quality of the brand being offered. In cement brand choice, perceived quality influences trust and satisfaction and companies must establish points of differentiation as a kind of added value, whether in the form of a product or a service (Samudro et al., 2018). The studies of Jha and Dahal (2020) and Mishra (2019) found that quality was an important factor when it comes to evaluating cement brands. Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forward.

H2: There is a positive relationship between perceived product quality and brand preference.

Influenced by others and brand preference.

Risk aversion is a significant aspect when customers need to be certain about the goods they are buying, and the customer may be influenced by others. In the case of cement brands, this influence extends to consultants, friends, and relatives where the consultant is considered as the expert and friends/relatives are the prior users of the specific brand. Individuals are influenced through psychological bonds that they have with others (Pamacheche, Chinomona & Chuchu, 2016). Marketers therefore strive to understand various steps involved in the entire process of consumer decision making for the final purchase of a product. Information is the most important factor in the consumer decision making process (Komleh, 2018). In this way, the consumer’s decision process is motivated and comes to the point of purchase (Mishra, 2019). The information search is the initial process of activating internally saved knowledge or
relying on external sources (Shekarchizadeh, Ranjbarian, & Ghasemi, 2018). In the study that was conducted by Rodrigo, Khan and Ekinci (2019), the author employed the Theory of Reasoned Action to investigate consumer purchase intention towards products made in foreign countries. The study found that that subjective norms do not influence purchase intention of products made in foreign countries. However, the study conducted by Núñez-Fernández, Pérez-Villarreal and Mayett-Moreno (2021) revealed that subjective norms do positively influence purchase intention towards eating fast food. There is a link between perceived product quality and the influence of others in the selection of cement brands; this is also emphasised by the finding that consumers’ willingness to try a new brand is not a significant factor when evaluating cement brands. This is also taking into consideration that there are two levels that may influence a consumer, the first level includes psychological influences that are close to an individual, such as perception and learning (Panwar, Anand, Ali, & Singal, 2019). The second level of influence includes influences that have been developed through the socialisation process and includes reference groups and family influences (Panwar et al., 2019)

\[ H4: \text{The influence of others and brand preference have a positive relationship.} \]

**Price and brand preference**

Price from the consumers’ viewpoint, is seen as the amount of money spent to get a specific good or service (Cham et al., 2020). There are two dimensions to consider when it comes to pricing which are perceived pricing which is conceptualised and associated with other constructs, such as benefits, cost, value, and quality (Lai, Yuen, & Chong, 2020). The second dimension of pricing is the monetary aspect which is regarded as the objective price, which is the actual price of the product or service (Cham et al., 2020). Further, the consumer’s perceived value reflects a trade-off between perceived benefits and the value spent (Mainardes et al., 2020). Businesses must consider price sensitivity when developing pricing strategies (Cakici & Tekeli, 2021). In the study conducted by Jha and Dahal (2020), the weighting of price was less then then the weighting of quality as a criterion used in the selection of cement brands, however in the study conducted by Mishra (2019), price was not included in the criteria used to evaluate cement brands. In the study conducted by Roy and Malhotra (2018), the authors investigated the factors which impact the brand preference of milk and the results of the study found that price was the most important marketing mix variable that influenced preference. In terms of brand choice, Lema and Negash (2018) investigated the determinates of brand choice in the bottled water category; the authors explored various factors and price was one of them. The authors found that price had a significant impact on consumers’ selection of bottled water. Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forward.

\[ H4: \text{There is a positive relationship between price and brand preference.} \]
Packaging and brand preference

Product packaging refers to the container of the product. It includes the design, colour, shape, labelling and materials which encompass the physical appearance of the product (Beneke, Mathews, Munthree, & Pillay, 2015). In retail outlets, cement comes in 50Kg paper bags and packaging serves a critical role in protecting the cement throughout the entire process, from the facility where it is made to its final consumers (Shupackaging, 2022). Various authors have explored the role of packaging and its impact on brand selection and include Halabi (2021), Setiowati and Liem (2018) and Wang, Wang & Cho, (2022). The packaging of a product has a significant impact on the purchasing intention and product choice of consumers (Halabi, 2021). Bonney et al. (2022) found that packaging had a positive and significant influence on brand preference for cement. Packaging plays an essential part in the branding process to communicate the company’s image and identity, thus differentiating the company from its competitors. Packaging is an effective sales promotion tool that stimulates impulse-buying behaviour (Setiowati & Liem, 2018). Packaging design plays a significant impact in influencing consumer perceptions in a favourable way (Wang et al., 2022). Setiowati and Liem (2018) investigated how visual packaging design affected brand preference, perceived quality value, and repurchase intentions. The authors found that packaging design has a significant impact on perceived product quality and that positively aided perceived product value. The study did not, however, support the link between brand choice and packaging design. Based on the empirical literature that has been reviewed, the following hypothesis is put forward

\[ H5: \text{There is a positive relationship between packaging and brand preference.} \]

Sales promotion and brand preference

Sales promotion is defined as activities that provide additional benefits for customers to encourage them to take immediate responses and it usually takes place during certain time periods at certain locations or among a fixed customer group (Gorji & Siami, 2020). The concept of bulk discounts was explored by Iranmanesh, Jayaraman, Zailani and Ghadiri (2017); according to the authors, retailers prefer certain sales from customers now over uncertain future sales, so the capacity of retailers to sell more units to the consumers reduces the chances that consumers will run out and make purchases from competitor brands (Iranmanesh et al., 2017). When consumers are exposed to more frequent brand promotions, they develop brand awareness, brand associations and positive perceptions of brand quality (Kaswengi & Lambey-Checchin, 2020). To attract customers and expand their clientele, retailers use sales promotions in a variety of ways, such as price reductions, volume discounts, gifts, and competitions (Iranmanesh et al., 2017). In the study conducted by Langga, Kusumawati and Alhabsji (2021) which explored the influence of incentive distribution and sales promotion towards customer-based brand equity, repurchase
intention and word-of-mouth, the author found that sales promotion do not have a significant influence towards brand loyalty, brand awareness or brand association; three out the five dimensions of brand equity. However, sales promotions did have a positive influence on word-of-mouth. Further, the study found that incentives distribution had significant and positive influence towards brand equity and repurchase intention. Akbar, Ahmad, Asif and Siddiqui (2020) investigated the influence of sales promotion and emotional brand attachment on post-purchase dissonance. One of the hypotheses in the study was to test the relationship between sales promotion and impulse buying, and the study found a significant relationship between sales promotion and impulse buying. Based on the above, the following hypothesis has been put forward

\[ H_6: \text{There is a positive relationship between sales promotion and brand preference.} \]

**Brand preference and purchase intention**

Brand preference is the choice of one brand over another and it occurs because of past experience and brand preference is closely linked with purchase intention (Briliana & Andrianto, 2019). According to Junarsin, Pangaribuan, Wahyuni, Hidayat, Putra, Maulida and Soedarmono (2022), brand preference is the equivalent of purchase intention and a consumer’s attitude towards a brand plays an important role in determining brand preference. Preference for a brand has generally been considered to be a direct precursor of purchase intention (Venter, Chinomona & Chuchu, 2016). Interestingly, Bashir, Faheem, Hassan and Shaikh (2019) mentioned that brand equity reflects brand preference, and that brand preference and purchase intention are related in a similar manner. Junarsin et al. (2022) looked at green products and investigated the influence of green awareness, green trust, and green brand preference in green purchase intention. The results of the study revealed a positive relationship between green awareness on green trust and green brand preference and green purchase intention. The study also looked at the relationship between green awareness and green purchase intention without green trust and green brand preference as mediators, however the relationship between awareness and purchase intention was not confirmed. Brilliana and Andrianto (2019) explored the antecedents and outcome of brand preference towards the purchase of instant noodles. The results of the study found that brand preference has a positive impact on purchase intention. Bashir et al. (2019) investigated the impact of brand equity on consumer brand preference and brand purchase intention. The results of the study revealed that consumer brand preference has a positive impact on purchase intention. Therefore, based on the above, the following hypothesis is proposed.

\[ H_7: \text{There is a positive relationship between brand preference and purchase intention.} \]
Brand preference and word-of-mouth (WOM)

Word-of-mouth refers to people informally talking about their experiences with a particular brand without being paid and is an inexpensive form of marketing communication (Chokpitakkul, Anantachart, & Hamilton, 2020). According to Hilal (2019) word-of-mouth is a source of competitive advantage as it creates interest in purchasing and induces new purchases. That means word-of-mouth goes hand in hand with purchase intention. In addition, word-of-mouth enhances brand equity through creating awareness and providing assurance about the products and services provided by a brand (Hilal, 2019). Due to consumers’ lack of technical knowledge regarding cement, it is difficult to convince them of the superiority of one cement brand over another (Taher, 2020). When a consumer who lacks technical knowledge is looking for information about cement, external influencers like masons, contractors, and architects act as a catalyst for selecting a cement brand (Taher, 2020). In the study that was conducted by Hilal (2019), one of the objectives of the study was to investigate the impact of word-of-mouth to the brand equity of fashion clothing stores. The study concluded that word-of-mouth positively contributes to the brand equity of fashion clothing stores. In the study that was conducted by Chokpitakkul et al. (2020), the authors investigated the role of brand preference on brand loyalty and how brand loyalty impacts word-of-mouth. The study revealed that brand loyalty does impact word-of-mouth (Chokpitakkul et al., 2020).

H8: There is a positive relationship between word-of-mouth and brand preference.

Source: Author’s own work (2022)

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

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Based on the literature review conducted on the study’s constructs, the conceptual model above has been developed. The following section presents the results of the study.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 Reliability Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
<th>Composite Reliability</th>
<th>Average Variance Extracted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SN</td>
<td>0.864</td>
<td>0.867</td>
<td>0.799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PQ</td>
<td>0.864</td>
<td>0.867</td>
<td>0.827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>0.840</td>
<td>0.843</td>
<td>0.832</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BI</td>
<td>0.865</td>
<td>0.868</td>
<td>0.789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>0.690</td>
<td>0.686</td>
<td>0.547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>0.860</td>
<td>0.866</td>
<td>0.740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WM</td>
<td>0.886</td>
<td>0.900</td>
<td>0.803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PI</td>
<td>0.871</td>
<td>0.884</td>
<td>0.727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BP</td>
<td>0.822</td>
<td>0.827</td>
<td>0.739</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own work (2022)


Table 1 above indicates that all reliability estimates were above the required thresholds, with the Cronbach’s alpha exceeding 0.7 for all constructs and the composite reliability and average variance extracted surpassing 0.6 and 0.5 respectively. Factor loadings were all acceptable as they were above 0.5.

Convergent validity

Convergent validity, see Table 1, is suggested by evidence that multiple indicators of theoretically linked constructs are highly associated (Teo, 2014). For convergent validity to be present in the latent variables, the Average Value Extracted must be greater than 0.5. The AVE values of the latent variables are above 0.5, which means that convergent validity is present.

Model fit assessment
The goal of SEM and CFA is to identify latent variables using a set of manifest indicators and to then evaluate the hypotheses regarding the relationships among the latent variables (Teo, 2014). Table 2 illustrates the model fit indices.

### Table 2 Model Fit Indices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model Fit Indices</th>
<th>Acceptable Threshold</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CMIN/DF</td>
<td>&lt;3</td>
<td>1.657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GFI</td>
<td>&gt;0.900</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFI</td>
<td>&gt;0.900</td>
<td>0.927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RFI</td>
<td>&gt;0.900</td>
<td>0.906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFI</td>
<td>&gt;0.900</td>
<td>0.969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLI</td>
<td>&gt;0.900</td>
<td>0.954</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
<td>&gt;0.900</td>
<td>0.967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMSEA</td>
<td>&lt;0.08</td>
<td>0.057</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own work (2022)


### Hypotheses Testing

The study found evidence to support all the hypothesised relationships, of which two did not have a significant impact on brand preference. The results of the hypothesised relationships are illustrated in the tables below.

### Table 3 Hypotheses Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>P-value</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BP ---&gt; BI</td>
<td>H1</td>
<td>0.431</td>
<td>*** Supported and significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BP ---&gt; PQ</td>
<td>H2</td>
<td>0.459</td>
<td>*** Supported and significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BP ---&gt; PP</td>
<td>H3</td>
<td>0.205</td>
<td>0.009 Supported and significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BP ---&gt; PM</td>
<td>H4</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>0.434 Supported and insignificant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BP ---&gt; SN</td>
<td>H5</td>
<td>0.247</td>
<td>*** Supported and significant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion and Theoretical Implications

This section provides an in-depth explanation on the nexus between the results of the hypotheses testing and its implications. The first hypothesis, H1 (BI: brand image directly and positively influences BP: brand preference) has an estimate of 0.431 and a p-value of a $p<0.01$ (denoted by ***) suggesting that the relationship is both supported and significant at the $p<0.01$ level of significance. The implication is that brand preference was a result of the customers’ perception of the brand. The implication is that the more positive a brand’s image is, the more likely it will be deemed as favourable by customers. This finding is supported by Sääksjärvi and Samiee (2011) who established that the relationship between brand image and brand preference have are associated with the former influencing the later. Furthermore, it can be said that marketers ought to focus on improving the perceptions or their brands in order to increase the chances of being preferred over rivals. This could involve making every effort to counter any negative associations linked to the brand or actively seeking customer feedback on the brand’s perceived image.

The second hypothesis, H2 (PQ: perceived quality directly and positively influences BP: brand preference) has an estimate of 0.459 and a p-value of a $p<0.01$ (denoted by *** ) revealing that this relationship is both supported and significant at $p<0.01$. This implies that brand preference was a result of the customers’ perception of the brand. This finding implies that brand preference is a direct result of customers’ perception of a products quality. Therefore meaning that the more a brand is considered to have high quality or better quality in relation to rival brands the higher the preference toward the brand. It therefore appears to also imply that quality control is crucial for gaining customers trust which eventually leads to brand preference. The findings from this hypothesis is supported by Chi, Yeh and Yang (2009) found that it is necessary for customers to first hold a favourable view about a brand’s quality prior to purchasing it. As customers make show preference for a brand based on quality, they also develop loyalty to that brand as well (Chi et al., 2009).
The third hypothesis, H3 (PP: price directly and positively influences BP: brand preference) reveals an estimate of 0.205 and a p-value of a p<0.009 showing that this relationship is both supported and significant at the p<0.01 level of significance. This result implies that the price of a product directly influences the extent to which customers would prefer a brand over others. This then means that marketers need to carefully strike a balance between what is charged for their products or brands and retaining their customers. However, based on the outcome of this hypothesis, higher prices are associated with preference. Probably, it could be that low-priced goods may be viewed as having lower quality resulting in being less-desired by customers. In other worth, the implication is that customers view favourably brands priced higher to competitors on the market.

The fourth hypothesis, H4 (PM: packaging material directly and positively influences BP: brand preference) produced an estimate of 0.049 and a p-value of 0.434. This relationship is supported, though it is weak. It is not significant as it has a p-value of over 0.01. In addition, the p-value reveals a week association especially relative to the outcomes of the other tested hypotheses. This implies that packaging, if improved, or perceived to be attractive, the preference for that brand also rises. It would therefore suggest that the attractiveness of a brand’s packaging plays a role in influence customers on which brands to prefer. It should however be noted that this role is small and maybe the contents of the product matter more to the customer.

The fifth hypothesis, H5 (SN: social networks directly and positively influence BP: brand preference) has an estimate of 0.247 and a p-value of a p<0.01 (denoted by ***) showing that this relationship is both supported and significant at p<0.01. This means that social networks are necessary for brand preference to occur. They significantly influence consumer decision-making regarding the preferred choice of brands. This finding is in-line with that of Pentina, Gammoh, Zhang and Mallin (2013) who confirmed that social networks are necessary for a brand to be perceived as desirable by the consumer. This finding implies that the more informative, effective or active a social network is the more likely it is capable of convincing a consumer in selecting or showing preference for one brand over another.

The sixth hypothesis, H6 (SP: sales promotions directly and positively influence BP: brand preference) generated an estimate of -0.072 and a p-value of a 0.318. This means that the relationship between the two constructs is neither supported nor is significant. This implication of the outcome is that sales promotion do not influence brand preference or lead to brand preference thus it is not required for brand preference. This possibly suggests that consumers do not need marketers’ active advertising of the brand to choose it over competitors’ brands. That being said, it could be because of the product being marketed and in the context of this study it was cement. This then suggests that promotion of cement brands in not necessary as the customers do not need it. Customers of cement brands may look at other factors to prefer one brand over another.
the other but as this study has established, sales promotion is not one of them. This result however contradicts that of Mendez, Bendixen, Abratt, Yurova and O’Leary (2015) and Schultz and Block (2014) who found that sales promotions actually induces preference of one brand over another.

The seventh hypothesis, H7 (BP: Brand preference directly and positively influences PI: Purchase Intention) produced and estimate of 0.906 and a p-value of a p<0.01 (denoted by **). This relationship is both supported and significant meaning that for purchase intention to occur, consumer have to first develop preference for a particular brand. This implies that purchase intention is dependent on how desirable a brand appears to the consumer thus the more preferred or desirable a brand is, the more the likelihood of it being purchased by the consumers. This finding is in-line with that of Dam (2020) who established that purchase intention is indeed a result of brand preference added that brand preference is made-up of brand trust and perceived quality. Furthermore, the notion that brand preference is necessary for purchase intention to occur is reinforced by Moradi and Zarei (2011) who found that brand preference is an antecedent for purchase intention and added that country of origin moderates this relationship.

The eighth hypothesis, H8 (BP: Brand preference directly and positively influences WM: Word of Mouth) revealed an estimate of 0.887 and a p-value of a p<0.01 (denoted by **). This relationship is both supported and significant. The implication of this finding is that if customers have preference for a brand, they will spread the word and share it positively. In other words customers who like a brand tend to say good things about that brand to their peers. The suggestion that positive word of mouth is linked to preference for a brand is supported by Hanaysha (2016) who proposed a relationship between brand preference and word of mouth ultimately confirming that the two as significantly associated. Furthermore, Hwang, Joo and Kim (2023) also confirmed that word of mouth is an outcome of brand preference and in addition, the influence that brand preference has on word of mouth is moderated by country of origin.

Conclusions

This research made an attempt to explain the relationships that connect preference toward certain cement brands. It was revealed that brand preference and purchase intention were the most closely associated constructs which highlights the ever-growing need to drive preference for a brand as this directly ties to purchase intention. It was interesting to note that sales promotions do not lead to brand preference, contradicting the hypothesis proposed in this study. This also did not align with literature and possibly the product in question (cement) could have played a role in this outcome. Comprehension of these findings is essential for gaining competitive
advantage and purchases within the cement industry. The following reflects on the limitations of the research as well as exploring further research on the topic.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The study used a quantitative research design and quantitative research explains phenomena by collecting numerical unchanging detailed data that are analysed using mathematical based methods and SPSS 28 was used in this research. The limitation with the quantitative design is that it generally ignores some important human elements such as the ability to fully express oneself which can be addressed by a qualitative-based study using in-depth interviews. The sample lacked diversity as far as the respondents were concerned, this could have led to participant bias is the collect data. The study only used self-administered questionnaires and perhaps more insight could have been gained with interviews into respondent’s preference of various cement brands. For example, most respondents were neutral when it came to packaging and if the study was qualitative, the researcher could have discussed further with the respondents to understand why they were neutral with regards to packaging. Although there were participants from all nine provinces in South Africa, 90.2% of respondents resided in only two provinces, which were the Gauteng and North–West province. This research revealed that there is more to brand preference than the antecedents that were explored in the study, there are other elements to consider that were outlined in the literature reviewed, elements like trust and customer satisfaction which act as mediators and moderators. Future studies should develop a conceptual framework that has trust as a mediator or moderator when it comes to determining brand preference. Future research on the topic can expand on the extent of product availability and proximity to hardware stores that may impact brand preference within the cement industry.

**References**


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