

Click, Gift, Love: Mapping the Influence of Virtual Gifts on Brand Love

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Abstract

This study aims to map the influence of virtual gifts on brand love in the context of live streaming platforms. With a quantitative approach using PLS-SEM, data were collected from 200 respondents who are active users of platforms such as tiktok, youtube, and so on. The results show that the virtual gift dimensions of identification (IDE), incentive (INC), and initiative (INI) significantly influence brand love dimensions such as affection & connection (AF), commitment (COM), and consumer-brand identification (SEL). Meanwhile, direction (DIR) and constraint (LIM) dimensions had limited influence. The findings indicate that virtual gift personalization, functional incentive integration, and symbolic interaction play a critical role in building brand love. The limitation of the study lies in the dominance of the younger generation sample in West Java, so generalization requires further study. This study contributes to the digital marketing literature by mapping the multidimensional relationship between virtual gifts and brand love.

Keywords: virtual gift, brand love, live-streaming.

Introduction

As a new social media, the live-streaming function provides a platform for live streamers to promote real-time broadcasts to online users via the internet (L. Li et al., 2024). In recent years, the live-streaming phenomenon has become one of the most popular forms of social interaction among the younger generation in the world, especially on live-streaming platforms such as twitch (Gong et al., 2023). Live-streaming not only functions as a means of entertainment but also as an effective marketing tool, where interactions between streamers and viewers can influence consumer behavior, including in terms of purchasing and giving virtual gifts (Gong et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2023).

The main profit models for China's social live-streaming services (SLSS) industry are divided into three types, namely: virtual gifts, advertising, and e-commerce (Liu et al., 2022). Virtual gifts are intangible offerings labeled by social networking companies as "gifts," which are intended to help consumers celebrate their relationships with other consumers, whether friends or family members (Song et al., 2021).

Virtual gifting, often in the form of digital items purchased with real money, has become a major source of revenue for the live-streaming industry, particularly in the context of online gaming (Y. Li & Guo, 2021). In this context, virtual gifts not only serve as a form of support for streamers but also as a tool to build social relationships between viewers and streamers, known as "swift guanxi" (Lu et al., 2023). One important aspect of live-streaming is the content delivered by the live streamer, namely, content that is oriented towards social interaction in the streamer's live speech can influence the audience's behavior in terms of purchasing and giving gifts (Yang et al., 2023).

The importance of this research lies in its contribution to a holistic understanding of how virtual gifts through the dimensions of initiative, direction, incentive, identification, and limitation (Skågeby, 2007) can form multidimensional brand love, such as brand relationship,

consumer-brand identification, affection & connection, commitment, and passionate usage (Pontinha & Coelho do Vale, 2020). By investigating the influence of virtual gifts on brand love, this study seeks to address the knowledge gap on: How the psychological and interactive mechanisms of each virtual gift dimension (such as incentives and identification) differently contribute to the brand love dimension, as well as the lack of empirical studies mapping the causal relationships between variables in the context of live-streaming platforms (e.g., tiktok, instagram, twitch).

This study is motivated by the increasing interest in understanding the role of symbolic and non-monetary interactions in building brand love in the digital space, especially post-pandemic, where consumer activities are increasingly digitalized (Hsieh et al., 2023). Virtual gifts, as a popular engagement tool on live-streaming platforms, are considered to have the potential to create a more intimate branded experience. Sending free or paid gifts, watching frequently, or being actively involved in the streamer's channel increases intimacy (Gong et al., 2023). The success of the live-streaming industry can be attributed to virtual gifting, a successful business model that stimulates streamer content creation and interaction between viewers and streamers (Hsieh et al., 2023). The research questions guiding this investigation were designed to explore: (1) How does each dimension of virtual gift partially influence the level of brand love? (2) Is there a dominant dimension of virtual gift that is most critical in triggering brand love?

To understand the complexity of the dynamics of virtual gifts and brand love, it is important to examine the relationship between virtual gift technical design factors (such as personalization or temporality of the limitation dimension) and consumer psychosocial factors (such as the need for social recognition or self-expression) in shaping brand love. The main objective of this study is to explain the factors that influence the formation of brand love through virtual gifts and the design constraints that may hinder or strengthen the relationship.

This literature review will critically examine the existing literature on the role of virtual gifts as a non-monetary interaction tool in shaping brand love, with a focus on the dynamics of the technical (initiative, direction, limitation) and psychosocial (Incentive, Identification) dimensions of virtual gifts, as well as their relevance to brand love dimensions such as brand relationship, consumer-brand identification, affection & connection, commitment, and passionate usage. Although there has been no research that holistically examines the role of virtual gifts in brand love, separate findings from the virtual gift literature (Gong et al., 2023) and (Skågeby, 2007) provide a basis for the theoretical propositions proposed in this study. The literature suggests several unanswered questions, including: (1) How does the limitation dimension (e.g., exclusivity or temporality of rewards) influence the relationship between functional incentives and brand identification? (2) Is the passionate usage dimension of brand love more influenced by the direction (privacy vs. publicity) or identification (anonymity vs. identity recognition) aspect?

Contrary to the common view in the literature, some studies argue that virtual gifts are merely a transactional tool to increase sales conversions (Lin & Lee, 2024). However, studies such as (Y. Li & Guo, 2021) and (Skågeby, 2007) show that virtual gifts also function as symbols of social identity and media for emotional expression, which are more relevant for building long-term brand love.

Previous researchers have argued that existing frameworks in the literature oversimplify the concept of brand love as a unidimensional construct that focuses only on emotional attachment (Raza et al., 2025), whereas consumer-brand relationships are dynamic and contextual (Pontinha & Coelho do Vale, 2020). Likewise, virtual gifts are often reduced to “motivational incentives” (Gong et al., 2023), while dimensions such as limitation (design constraints) and direction (direction of interaction) are rarely explored.

While existing literature highlights the role of social interactions in shaping brand loyalty, this study will extend it by integrating the technical design perspective of virtual gifts (e.g., temporality of Limitation) with Self-Brand Connection theory (DelVecchio et al., 2024) and Social Exchange Theory (Ahmad et al., 2023). In addition, this study examines the effectiveness of virtual gifts in creating emotional bonds. Based on the gaps identified in the literature, this study will address the following questions: (1) How does each dimension of virtual gifts (initiative, direction, incentive, identification, limitation) partially influence the dimensions of brand love? (2) Which dimension of virtual gifts is the most dominant in triggering brand love?

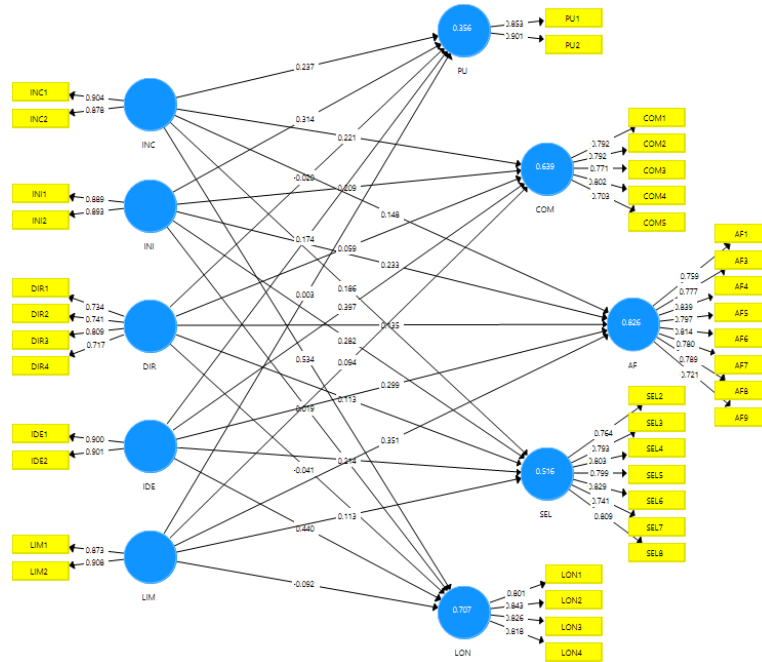


Figure 1. Research Model
Source: Processed data, 2025

Research Method

By adopting a quantitative approach, this study aims to generate new insights into the influence between virtual gift dimensions (initiative, direction, incentive, identification, and limitation) on brand love (brand relationship, consumer-brand identification, affection & connection, commitment, and passionate usage) in the context of live-streaming platforms, such as social media (tiktok, instagram, online games and the like).

Following the research objectives mentioned above, the quantitative research design with the survey method used for this study is an online survey, where data is collected through google forms from respondents who actively use the virtual gift feature on the live-streaming platform. The data analysis method in this study uses Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The reason behind choosing PLS-SEM as a data analysis method is based on its relevance to the ability to test complex relationships between multidimensional latent variables, validate theoretical models, and evaluate the direct influence of each virtual gift dimension on brand love (Hair, Jr. et al., 2022). To meet the research objectives, an online questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale was used as the main data collection technique. This instrument was compiled based on operational indicators of the virtual gift dimension (Skågeby, 2007) and brand love (Pontinha & Coelho do Vale, 2020), by targeting the active user population of live-streaming platforms that have given virtual gifts.

Respondents

Table 1 describes the profile of 214 respondents. However, 14 respondents stated that they had never given virtual gifts to live streamers, so the total number of respondents used was 200. Based on the data analyzed, the majority of respondents were dominated by the young generation aged 17-26 years (82.7%) from West Java. In terms of education, most were bachelor's degree graduates (47.2%) and diploma (41.1%), with the majority working as employees (57%). The live-streaming platforms most often used by respondents were tiktok (56.1%) and youtube (55.1%). In addition, the majority of respondents' income in a month was around IDR 3,000,000 - IDR 5,000,000 (40.8%), and the frequency of giving virtual gifts was mostly sometimes (57.9%), and finally, the majority of respondents spent < IDR 100,000 (48.1%) and IDR 100,000 - IDR. 500,000 (36%).

Table 1. Respondents' Profile

Profile		Frequency	%
Age	< 17	7	3,3
	17 - 26	177	82,7
	27 - 35	29	13,6
	36 - 45	1	0,5
	> 46	0	0,0
Education	High school or below	20	9,3
	Diploma 1-4	88	41,1
	Bachelor's Degree	101	47,2
	Master's Degree	5	2,3
	Doctoral Degree/PhD	0	0,0
Occupation	Student	13	6,1
	College Student	22	10,3
	Employee	122	57,0
	Freelance	34	15,9
	Entrepreneur	21	9,8
	Unemployed	2	0,9
Domicile	West Java	206	96,3
	East Java	2	0,9
	Central Java	2	0,9
	DKI Jakarta	2	0,9
	DI Yogyakarta	1	0,5
	Banten	1	0,5
	Outside Java Island	0	0,0
Most used live-streaming platforms	Tiktok	120	56,1
	Youtube	118	55,1
	Twitch	37	17,3
	Instagram	64	29,9
	Facebook	22	10,3
	Nimo TV	16	7,5
	In-game Live-streaming	39	18,2
	Others	1	0,5
Income per month	< Rp. 1.000.000	17	7,9
	Rp. 1.000.000 - Rp. 3.000.000	60	28,0
	Rp. 3.000.000 - Rp. 5.000.000	87	40,8
	Rp. 5.000.000 - Rp. 10.000.000	33	15,4
	> Rp. 10.000.000	17	7,9

Virtual gift & donation frequency	Every time I watch live-streaming	20	9,3
	Every time my favorite livestreamer livestreams	16	7,5
	A few times a month	40	18,7
	Occasionally	124	57,9
	Never	14	6,5
Virtual gift purchased (per month)	< Rp. 100.000	103	48,1
	Rp. 100.000 - Rp. 500.000	77	36,0
	Rp. 500.000 - Rp. 1.000.000	20	9,3
	Rp. 1.000.000 - Rp. 5.000.000	13	6,1
	> Rp. 5.000.000	1	0,5

Source: Processed Data, 2025

Result & Discussion

This section explains the results of the research model analysis using SEM-PLS software. To meet the criteria for convergent validity, the values of the loading factor, Cronbach's alpha (α), and composite reliability (CR) must be ≥ 0.7 , and the average variance extracted (AVE) must be ≥ 0.5 (Hair, Jr. et al., 2022).

Table 2. Validity (Convergent and Discriminant) and Measurement Items

Code	Measurement Items	Loading Factor
VIRTUAL GIFT (X):		
DIMENSION-1: Initiative $\alpha = 0.741$, CR = 0.885, AVE = 0.794		
INI1	I feel happy when I give virtual gifts while watching live streams.	0.889
INI2	I feel satisfied when I see my virtual gifts received by live streamers I like.	0.893
DIMENSION-2: Direction $\alpha = 0.742$, CR = 0.838, AVE = 0.564		
DIR1	I prefer to give virtual gifts privately (only to my favorite live streamers).	0.734
DIR2	I like to share virtual gifts when a few of my close friends are watching the livestream with me.	0.741
DIR3	I like to give virtual gifts that are only accessible to a small group of people.	0.809
DIR4	I like to give virtual gifts that can be watched by many viewers in one livestream session.	0.717
DIMENSION-3: Incentive $\alpha = 0.741$, CR = 0.885, AVE = 0.794		
INC1	I am motivated to give virtual gifts if there is a certain bonus or reward (for example, gifter level on tiktok).	0.904
INC2	I like to give virtual gifts voluntarily (sincerely).	0.878
DIMENSION-4: Identification $\alpha = 0.767$, CR = 0.895, AVE = 0.811		
IDE1	I feel comfortable giving virtual gifts without revealing my identity.	0.900
IDE2	I want to be known as a generous virtual gift giver (recognized by many people).	0.901
DIMENSION-5: Limitation $\alpha = 0.740$, CR = 0.884, AVE = 0.793		
LIM1	I am comfortable with unlimited access to sharing gifts.	0.873
LIM2	I agree if there is a limit to the number of virtual gifts to maintain the quality of the interaction.	0.908
BRAND LOVE (Y):		
DIMENSION-1: Passionate Usage $\alpha = 0.703$, CR = 0.870, AVE = 0.770		

PU1	I am very excited to watch live streams from my favorite live streamers.	0.853
PU2	I have a strong desire to watch and support my favorite live streamers again.	0.901
DIMENSION-2: Commitment $\alpha = 0.831$, CR = 0.881, AVE = 0.597		
COM1	I always focus on watching live streams from my favorite live streamers.	0.792
COM2	My favorite live streamers are always my first choice when I watch live streams.	0.792
COM3	If my favorite live streamer is live, I will not switch to another live streamer.	0.771
COM4	I want to continue supporting my favorite live streamers in the long term.	0.802
COM5	My favorite live streamers cannot be replaced by other live streamers.	0.703
DIMENSION-3: Affection & Connection $\alpha = 0.911$, CR = 0.928, AVE = 0.617		
AF1	I feel happy when watching live streams from my favorite live streamers.	0.759
AF4	I always want to give my best support to my favorite live streamers.	0.839
AF5	Interactions with my favorite live streamers feel natural and enjoyable.	0.797
AF6	I feel emotionally connected to my favorite live streamers.	0.814
AF7	My feelings towards my favorite live streamers are very positive.	0.780
AF8	I am committed to continuing to support my favorite live streamers.	0.789
AF9	I would do anything to support my favorite live streamers.	0.721
DIMENSION-4: Consumer-brand Identification $\alpha = 0.900$, CR = 0.921, AVE = 0.626		
SEL2	If I have to switch to another live streamer, I feel like I'm losing something valuable.	0.764
SEL4	My favorite live streamer helps me become a better version of myself.	0.803
SEL5	My favorite live streamer makes my life more colorful.	0.799
SEL6	My favorite live streamer gives new meaning to my daily activities.	0.829
SEL7	I often think about my favorite live streamer outside of watching live streams.	0.741
SEL8	I always look forward to new content from my favorite live streamer.	0.809
DIMENSION-5: Brand Relationship $\alpha = 0.841$, CR = 0.893, AVE = 0.676		
LON1	I plan to continue supporting my favorite live streamers for a long time.	0.801
LON2	I will continue to follow my favorite live streamers in the future.	0.843
LON3	If my favorite live streamers stop going live, I will be disappointed.	0.826
LON4	I worry that I will not be able to enjoy my favorite live streamers' content anymore if they stop.	0.818
LON3	Jika livestreamer favorit saya berhenti live, saya akan merasa kecewa.	0.826
LON4	Saya khawatir tidak bisa lagi menikmati konten dari livestreamer favorit saya jika mereka berhenti.	0.818

Source: Processed data, 2025

Of the total 40 items, 38 items of convergent validity were met because all of the items met the criteria. This shows that the indicator strongly represents its construct and has good internal consistency. The exceptions are for items AF2 and SEL1 because they do not meet the criteria so that both are discarded and cannot be processed further.

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	AF	COM	DIR	IDE	INC	INI	LIM	LON	PU	SEL
AF	0.785									

COM	0.752	0.773								
DIR	0.637	0.528	0.751							
IDE	0.753	0.726	0.470	0.900						
INC	0.698	0.673	0.513	0.690	0.891					
INI	0.684	0.588	0.624	0.483	0.499	0.891				
LIM	0.721	0.507	0.400	0.504	0.454	0.425	0.890			
LON	0.667	0.577	0.415	0.752	0.784	0.433	0.363	0.822		
PU	0.576	0.552	0.381	0.482	0.505	0.505	0.324	0.524	0.877	
SEL	0.738	0.660	0.531	0.589	0.584	0.597	0.470	0.508	0.534	0.791

Source: Processed data, 2025

For its discriminant validity, the fornell-larcker criteria are met because the square root of AVE (diagonal value in Table 3) is higher than the correlation between constructs (off-diagonal value). In addition, the AVE value of all dimensions is ≥ 0.5 , confirming that each construct is unique. Thus, this research model is statistically valid and reliable, supporting the analysis of the relationship between virtual gifts and brand love. The implication is that the instrument used is accurate in measuring the dynamics of virtual gifts and their impact on brand love on the live-streaming platform.

Table 4. Path Coefficient - Direct Impact

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
DIR -> AF	0.135	0.135	0.046	2.916	0.004
DIR -> COM	0.059	0.063	0.082	0.723	0.470
DIR -> LON	-0.041	-0.044	0.050	0.821	0.412
DIR -> PU	-0.020	-0.023	0.104	0.193	0.847
DIR -> SEL	0.113	0.127	0.065	1.742	0.082
IDE -> AF	0.299	0.294	0.045	6.571	0.000
IDE -> COM	0.397	0.394	0.071	5.606	0.000
IDE -> LON	0.440	0.440	0.070	6.270	0.000
IDE -> PU	0.174	0.167	0.080	2.184	0.029
IDE -> SEL	0.214	0.213	0.081	2.628	0.009
INC -> AF	0.148	0.149	0.058	2.556	0.011
INC -> COM	0.221	0.220	0.069	3.192	0.002
INC -> LON	0.534	0.534	0.067	7.966	0.000
INC -> PU	0.237	0.238	0.111	2.147	0.032
INC -> SEL	0.186	0.176	0.087	2.131	0.034
INI -> AF	0.233	0.239	0.055	4.202	0.000
INI -> COM	0.209	0.212	0.077	2.703	0.007
INI -> LON	0.019	0.025	0.048	0.388	0.698
INI -> PU	0.314	0.328	0.101	3.108	0.002
INI -> SEL	0.282	0.285	0.083	3.407	0.001
LIM -> AF	0.351	0.347	0.044	7.917	0.000
LIM -> COM	0.094	0.096	0.061	1.550	0.122
LIM -> LON	-0.092	-0.096	0.045	2.040	0.042
LIM -> PU	0.003	-0.002	0.071	0.048	0.962

LIM -> SEL	0.113	0.109	0.066	1.699	0.090
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Source: Processed data, 2025

When testing the hypothesis using statistical and probability values, the t-statistic value for $\alpha = 5\%$ is 1.96. Therefore, if the p-value < 0.05 , the hypothesis is considered accepted (H_a), and otherwise it will be rejected (H_o). Table 4 above illustrates the relationship between the dimensions of virtual gifts (DIR, IDE, INC, INI, and LIM) and the dimensions of brand love (AF, COM, LON, PU, and SEL). Based on the analysis of the table, it can be concluded that the dimensions of virtual gifts have varying influences on the dimensions of brand love. In general, the dimensions of IDE, INC, and INI show a positive and significant influence on most of the dimensions tested, with a p-value < 0.05 . This indicates that the hypothesis stating that there is a positive influence from these dimensions is accepted. However, the DIR and LON dimensions showed mixed results, where only their effects on AF were significant, while on COM, LON, PU, and SEL were not (p-value > 0.05), so the hypothesis was rejected for these relationships. Thus, this study provides evidence that virtual gift dimensions have a role in influencing the dimensions of brand love, although the level of significance and direction of influence vary across dimensions and variables.

The results of the study show that virtual gift dimensions such as identification (IDE), incentive (INC), and initiative (INI) significantly influence brand love dimensions, especially affection & connection (AF), commitment (COM), and consumer-brand identification (SEL). This finding is in line with the theory of self-brand connection and social exchange theory, where virtual gifts function as symbols of identity and emotional transaction tools. The IDE dimension, which includes anonymity and social recognition, has been shown to be critical in building brand love, as it fulfills consumers' psychosocial needs for self-expression and recognition. Meanwhile, INC related to functional incentives (e.g., bonuses) encourages long-term commitment, indicating that the combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is effective in maintaining loyalty. These results strengthen Li et al.'s (2021) argument that virtual gifts are not only transactional but also symbolic.

On the other hand, the direction (DIR) and limitation (LIM) dimensions show limited influence. DIR (privacy vs. public gift giving) is only significant for AF, possibly because private interactions trigger more emotional closeness. Meanwhile, LIM (design constraints) is not significant for most brand love dimensions, except AF. This indicates that the platform has not optimally utilized the temporal or quantity limitations of gifts to strengthen brand bonds. This finding contradicts the assumption that gift exclusivity (as part of LIM) can increase brand appeal, so further exploration of the cultural context or preferences of the younger generation is needed.

Conclusion & Suggestion

This study confirms the research questions through PLS-SEM analysis, which shows the partial and dominant influence of virtual gift dimensions on brand love. The results reveal that the three virtual gift dimensions of identification (IDE), incentive (INC), and initiative (INI) have a significant influence on most of the brand love dimensions. IDE, which includes aspects of anonymity and social recognition, strongly influences brand relationship (LON) with the highest path coefficient ($\beta = 0.440$, $p = 0.000$) and Commitment (COM) ($\beta = 0.397$, $p = 0.000$). Meanwhile, INC, related to functional incentives such as bonuses, recorded the highest absolute influence on LON ($\beta = 0.534$, $p = 0.000$) and was significant on the other four brand love dimensions. INI, which reflects users' voluntary initiative, is dominant in passionate usage (PU) ($\beta = 0.314$, $p = 0.002$) and consumer-brand identification (SEL) ($\beta = 0.282$, $p = 0.001$). On the other hand, direction

(DIR) is only significant in affection & connection (AF) ($\beta = 0.135$, $p = 0.004$), while boundary (LIM) only influences AF ($\beta = 0.351$, $p = 0.000$) and LON ($\beta = -0.092$, $p = 0.042$). Thus, INC and IDE are proven to be the most critical dimensions in triggering brand love, while DIR and LIM have limited roles, especially in the emotional aspect.

The limitation of this study lies in the sample, which is dominated by the younger generation in West Java, so generalizations need to be made with caution. Further research can test this model by comparing it on two different platforms (e.g., social media with online games) or using a qualitative approach to understand the deep motivations for giving virtual gifts. In addition, exploring the moderation of cultural factors or types of live-streaming content can enrich the understanding of brand love dynamics in the digital era. These findings contribute to the digital marketing literature by mapping the multidimensional relationship between virtual gifts and brand love, while also offering strategic guidance for industry players.

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