

Research on the Formation Mechanism of Brand Loyalty Driven by Consumer Emotions

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Abstract: In the context of intensified market competition and increasingly diverse consumer choices, brand loyalty has become a core variable for enterprises seeking sustainable competitive advantage. Compared with function-oriented rationality, consumer emotions play an increasingly prominent role in the formation of loyalty, serving as a key driving force in the construction of brand relationships. Based on emotional drive theory, this study clarifies the dual-dimensional structure of brand loyalty, defines the types of emotional drives, explores the mediating mechanisms of emotional value perception, emotional consistency, self-extension, and emotional regulation, and constructs a three-stage model of emotional arousal–emotional integration–loyalty internalization. The study reveals the differential effects of emotional drives across various types of loyalty and proposes an emotional network model of brand relationships. The findings enrich the emotional path perspective in understanding brand loyalty and provide a deeper psychological foundation for brand management.

Keywords: emotional drive; brand loyalty; emotional value perception; brand self-extension; relational network model

Introduction

As a key indicator for measuring the strength of the consumer–brand relationship, brand loyalty has long been a central concern in both marketing theory and practice. With the increasing personalization and emotionalization of consumer culture, consumer identification with brands is no longer merely rooted in functional attributes but is increasingly grounded in emotional experiences, psychological belonging, and symbolic meanings. This shift necessitates a departure from the traditional paradigm of rational decision-making and calls for a systematic exploration of emotion-driven pathways in brand loyalty formation. Although existing research has constructed theoretical frameworks for loyalty based on cognitive structures and behavioral preferences, the mediating, moderating, and network-based roles of emotional factors in loyalty formation remain underexplored. Therefore, investigating how emotional drives are embedded in the process of forming brand loyalty, and clarifying their psychological mechanisms and structural logic, can not only expand the theoretical scope of brand loyalty research but also offer strategic guidance for enterprises aiming to build emotionally resonant brand relationships in an emotion-driven consumer ecosystem.

1. Theoretical Reconstruction of Consumer–Brand Relationships from the Perspective of Emotional Drive

1.1 Conceptual Analysis and Evolution Path of Brand Loyalty

As a key indicator for assessing the stability of consumer–brand relationships, brand loyalty has long been a central issue in marketing research and practice. Traditional studies have primarily adopted a behavior-oriented approach, emphasizing the consumer's tendency to repeatedly purchase a particular brand despite the presence of multiple options, thereby equating loyalty with purchase frequency. However, this representation of behavioral loyalty fails to fully capture consumers' psychological attachment and emotional identification with a brand. Particularly in today's consumption environment, consumer behavior is often influenced by external factors such as price fluctuations, promotional strategies, and convenience of channels. Solely relying on behavioral indicators to assess brand loyalty may lead to misjudgments and underestimation of genuine customer relationships.

With the advancement of consumer psychology research, the study of brand loyalty has gradually

shifted toward attitudinal dimensions, highlighting consumers' sustained preferences as reflected in cognitive, emotional, and value-based evaluations. Current mainstream theoretical frameworks tend to divide brand loyalty into two dimensions: behavioral loyalty, which is observable and measurable; and attitudinal loyalty, which reflects the consumer's implicit commitment and cognitive consistency toward the brand. This dual-structure model offers a more comprehensive understanding of the motivational mechanisms underlying loyalty behaviors and provides an analytical framework for examining how non-rational factors—particularly emotional variables—are deeply embedded in the loyalty formation process. In the context of highly contextualized consumption experiences and increasingly emotionalized brand relationships, reconstructing the structure of brand loyalty from the perspective of emotional drive carries significant theoretical and practical value^[1].

1.2 Definition and Typology of Consumer Emotional Drive Mechanisms

Emotional drive refers to the deep influence of consumers' subjective emotional experiences and the activation of emotional memory during brand cognition, preference formation, and decision-making processes. It represents a nonlinear psychological process distinct from traditional rational pathways. In consumption activities, emotion is not a reactive byproduct of decision-making but a persistent regulatory factor involved throughout the entire process—from information intake and attention allocation to the final choice. Emotional drive not only affects consumers' cognitive evaluations and value judgments of brand symbols, but also shapes their overall perception structure by activating existing emotional memories and symbolic identifications, ultimately determining the strength and direction of behavioral intentions. The degree to which a brand is embedded in a consumer's emotional system determines its psychological positioning effectiveness amid intense market competition.

From the perspective of psychological motivation and functional mechanism, emotional drive can be categorized into four basic types: pleasure-driven, trust-driven, attachment-driven, and identity-driven. Pleasure-driven emotions arise from immediate emotional satisfaction brought by the brand, such as aesthetic experiences or interactive enjoyment; trust-driven emotions emphasize the sense of consistency and reliability accumulated through long-term brand usage; attachment-driven emotions reflect the perception of the brand as a source of emotional security and psychological comfort, often stemming from prolonged positive emotional interactions; identity-driven emotions involve a high degree of alignment between brand values and the consumer's self-concept, characterized by strong symbolic and affiliative significance. These types are not mutually exclusive, but instead constitute an interwoven emotional network that collectively supports the multidimensional psychological foundation of brand loyalty. Identifying the dominant types of emotional drive enables brands to design more precise emotional strategies and optimize pathways for maintaining consumer relationships^[2].

1.3 Psychological Pathways Linking Emotional Drive and Brand Attachment

Emotional responses experienced by consumers during brand interactions are not transient or isolated psychological events. Instead, they may undergo continuous processing and memory structuring, eventually transforming into deep-seated brand attachment mechanisms. This connection pathway can be analyzed through three progressive psychological stages: emotional arousal, emotional appraisal, and emotional affiliation. During the emotional arousal stage, brands trigger consumers' emotional fluctuations through visual symbols, linguistic expressions, product usage experiences, or interactive designs; this response entails both physiological activation and cognitive salience. The emotional appraisal stage involves the psychological encoding of these emotional experiences, based on personal values, existing brand impressions, and the current context, ultimately leading to the formation of preliminary emotional attitudes toward the brand. The emotional affiliation stage reflects the consumer's incorporation of the brand into their emotional self-network, whereby the brand becomes a component of identity construction and emotional expression, thus enhancing loyalty intention and manifesting in repeated purchase behavior.

This pathway demonstrates the leading and structural role of emotion in consumer brand decision-making. In contrast to the information logic emphasized in traditional cognitive models, the emotional path is characterized by immediacy, irrationality, and durability, allowing brands to gain a significant initial advantage and continuously reinforce brand stickiness throughout long-term relationships. Once a brand becomes embedded in a consumer's emotional structure, it gains strong resistance to interference; even when faced with short-term factors such as price or promotion, the switching cost and willingness to substitute are substantially reduced. Therefore, building emotional

connections has become a crucial psychological foundation for differentiated branding strategies. This process not only involves the dynamic perception of individual consumers but also relates to the symbolic construction and emotional communication power of brands within broader sociocultural contexts.

2. Analysis of the Mediating Mechanisms of Consumer Emotions in the Formation of Brand Loyalty

2.1 The Mediating Role of Emotional Value Perception in Loyalty Construction

Emotional value perception refers to the consumer's comprehensive evaluation of non-functional benefits such as emotional satisfaction, psychological comfort, and a sense of belonging experienced during brand interaction. This perception is typically embedded in specific brand-related contexts and manifested through emotional pleasure, aesthetic enjoyment, and social association, reflecting the extension of perceived brand value beyond product attributes. When brand imagery, service language, and interactive scenarios evoke positive emotional experiences, consumers are more likely to develop emotional identification and trust in the brand, thereby enhancing emotional attachment and brand preference^[3].

Within the mechanism of brand loyalty formation, emotional value perception functions as a mediating variable that bridges the psychological transition between emotional experience and behavioral intention. A positive consumer perception of emotional value strengthens the storage and retrieval frequency of brand impressions in the memory system, thereby increasing brand accessibility and top-of-mind status in decision-making. Emotional value not only enhances consumer satisfaction with the brand but also deepens psychological commitment to the brand relationship, providing emotional support and cognitive justification for loyalty behavior. This mediating pathway indicates that loyalty should not be simplified as repeated purchase behavior, but rather viewed as a behavioral output rooted in a deeper emotional feedback mechanism.

2.2 The Coupling Mechanism Between Emotional Consistency and Brand Self-Extension

Emotional consistency refers to the degree of alignment between the emotional responses experienced by consumers during brand interaction and their individual emotional structures. It serves as a key indicator of the resonance between brand tone and consumer self-identity. When a brand's emotional expression aligns with a consumer's personality traits, value preferences, and lifestyle, it more effectively evokes a sense of emotional affiliation. This consistency is not limited to rational evaluation but often unfolds through symbolic cognition and emotional resonance, guiding consumers to perceive the brand as a concrete expression of emotional self-extension.

Brand self-extension, as an outcome of emotional consistency, refers to the integration of the brand into the consumer's self-concept, whereby the brand acquires personality attributes and symbolic meaning. This process is rooted in a bidirectional embedding between brand imagery and identity construction, in which the brand not only meets external usage needs but also reflects and affirms internal self-value. As emotional consistency intensifies, the consumer's emotional investment in the brand becomes more stable, and loyalty behavior exhibits greater initiative and exclusivity. The psychological mechanism of brand-self fusion transforms loyalty from an external choice into an internal extension of identity, constructing a psychologically locked-in structure that is difficult to replace.

2.3 Structural Intervention of Emotional Regulation in the Motivation for Repeat Consumption

Emotional regulation refers to the consumer's psychological activity of subjectively adjusting emotional states during brand interaction, aiming to achieve emotional balance through the enhancement of positive emotions and the mitigation of negative ones. Brands participate in this regulatory mechanism through symbolic design, narrative structure, and service language, thereby reinforcing psychological comfort and experiential consistency. In brand-related contexts, emotional experiences are immediate, malleable, and accumulative; emotional regulation, through continuous positive reinforcement, fosters an emotional inertia in consumption, laying a psychological foundation for repeat purchase behavior.

Throughout the ongoing evolution of consumption behavior, emotional regulation mechanisms

demonstrate structural characteristics. They influence not only immediate responses in single decisions but also shape long-term emotional expectations and cognitive stability toward the brand. When facing brand choices, individuals often develop spontaneous preferences based on prior positive emotional experiences, and their decision-making is shaped by previously formed emotional memory pathways. Emotional regulation enhances the salience of emotional tags associated with the brand within the consumer's psychological network, leading to sustained emotional attachment and behavioral inertia. If a brand continuously provides emotional regulatory value, it can reduce customer attrition risk and deepen emotion-driven loyalty structures even in highly competitive environments^[4].

3. Construction of the Brand Loyalty Formation Path Under the Emotional Drive Model

3.1 A Three-Stage Model for Brand Loyalty Formation Driven by Emotion

The formation of brand loyalty is a dynamic psychological construction process, not achieved overnight, but accumulated progressively through continuous emotional interactions. The emotional arousal, affective cognition, and psychological affiliation experienced by consumers when engaging with a brand together constitute the psychological trajectory of brand loyalty. Emotional drive facilitates this process by guiding emotional responses and constructing psychological meaning, progressively leading consumers from external exposure to internal identification, ultimately resulting in a stable loyalty structure.

This process can be divided into three key stages: the stage of emotional arousal, the stage of emotional integration, and the stage of loyalty internalization. During the emotional arousal stage, the brand activates consumers' emotional perception by eliciting positive emotions (such as pleasure, surprise, and a sense of security), thereby enhancing initial attention and favorable impressions. The emotional integration stage involves the cognitive processing of repeated emotional experiences from brand interactions, during which brand imagery and emotional memory gradually consolidate into stable emotional representations, fostering emotional consistency and a sense of belonging. The loyalty internalization stage is the psychological destination of the entire path, where the brand becomes part of the consumer's self-concept—not merely a functional choice, but a symbol of identity expression and emotional attachment—manifested in loyal behaviors characterized by continuity, exclusivity, and resistance to substitution.

This three-stage model reveals the progressive transformation of emotional drive in loyalty formation, evolving from perception to cognition and finally to value-level psychological internalization. It breaks away from the traditional static notion of loyalty as a purchase outcome, highlighting emotion as the core driver of brand loyalty evolution, with both immediate responsiveness and long-term shaping effects. By utilizing this model, brands can more precisely identify the stage-specific characteristics of consumer loyalty development, optimize emotional design, relationship maintenance, and identity construction strategies, and achieve sustainable deepening of brand loyalty.

3.2 Differentiated Mechanisms of Emotional Drive Across Loyalty Types

Brand loyalty does not take a single structural form but varies depending on individual differences, brand attributes, and emotional pathways. Existing research commonly categorizes loyalty into three types: cognitive loyalty, emotional loyalty, and value-based loyalty, each associated with distinct decision-making motivations and psychological features. The operation of emotional drive across these types varies significantly in both pathway and effect intensity, offering a theoretical foundation for refined understanding of loyalty structures^[5].

Cognitive loyalty is dominated by rational thinking, where consumers form loyal behavior based on favorable evaluations of brand performance, cost-effectiveness, or service quality. In this type, emotional drive plays a supplementary role, enhancing emotional connectivity and brand recognition, thus deepening brand preference on a rational basis. Emotional loyalty centers on emotional experience, where consumers develop attachment to a brand due to trust, security, and intimacy. Emotional drive is the primary force in this type, requiring ongoing emotional interactions to maintain emotional stickiness. Value-based loyalty arises when consumers regard the brand as an external expression of their values, identity, and lifestyle. In this case, emotional drive is deeply coupled with identity mechanisms, and loyalty behaviors manifest as expressions of brand self-extension, exhibiting strong stability and symbolic significance.

The formation paths of these different loyalty types reflect the hierarchical functionality of emotional drive within loyalty structures. When formulating emotional marketing strategies, brands must identify the dominant emotional motivators and psychological needs of their target consumer groups based on the characteristics of their loyalty types, and construct differentiated emotional stimuli and connection strategies. Relying solely on single emotional triggers or superficial interactions is insufficient to build robust loyalty structures; systematic integration is required at the levels of emotional resonance, relationship deepening, and value mapping to enable a multidimensional progression from perceptual preference to emotional attachment and ultimately to identity-based loyalty.

3.3 Construction of an Emotion-Driven Brand Relationship Network Model

Traditional consumer–brand relationship models are mostly based on linear interactions and fail to fully reveal the networked formation process of brand loyalty within complex social structures. As emotion becomes the core driving force in brand relationships, the consumer–brand relationship is no longer a static bilateral structure, but rather a multidimensional emotional network composed of multiple nodes, pathways, and layers. Constructing an emotion-driven brand relationship network model contributes to a more comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms of loyalty formation, diffusion, and stabilization^[6].

In this model, consumers are conceptualized as emotional nodes, while brands serve as aggregative carriers of emotional symbols. Through social interaction, emotional resonance, and symbolic recognition, consumers establish multidimensional connections. Brands may also share emotional traits or engage in cross-contextual associations that facilitate emotional transfer. The network structure is defined by emotional density, connection strength, and dissemination paths between nodes, exhibiting features such as hierarchical nesting, emotional coupling, and centrality gradients. The emotional driving mechanism expands the emotional radius of the brand through emotional mimicry, symbolic identification, and symbolic diffusion among individuals, thereby enhancing the brand's presence and psychological occupancy in the consumer relationship network.

The emotional network model underscores the expansive and systematic role of emotion in the formation of brand loyalty, focusing not only on internal psychological mechanisms but also on the external functions of emotion in group-level transmission and cultural construction. By identifying high emotional density nodes, influential consumers, and high-connectivity paths within the network, brands can implement emotional strategies with greater penetration and synergistic effect, thereby increasing relationship adhesion, structural stability, and interaction intensity. This model broadens the scope of brand loyalty research and provides theoretical support and strategic guidance for building high-efficiency loyalty systems within diversified, socialized, and emotionally saturated consumption ecosystems.

Conclusion

This study, from the perspective of emotional drive, reconstructs the relational logic between consumers and brands and reveals the key mechanisms through which emotional experience shapes brand loyalty. The construction of a three-stage model clarifies the psychological evolution path of emotional arousal, emotional integration, and loyalty internalization. The analysis of mediating mechanisms and loyalty types highlights the differentiated contributions of emotional factors across loyalty models. The development of an emotion-driven brand relationship network model expands the structural boundaries and network perspective of brand loyalty research. Findings indicate that brand loyalty is not merely an outcome variable but a dynamic system constructed through emotional dominance, cognitive support, and relational coordination. Future research may further integrate neuroscience, affective computing, and social cognition theory to enhance the interdisciplinary explanatory power of emotional drive mechanisms, while also exploring the impact of emotional communication in emerging media environments on the expansion of brand relationship networks, aiming for a deeper integration between emotional theory and brand management.

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