A STUDY ON THE IMPACT MECHANISM OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING ON BRAND LOYALTY: DUAL MEDIATING EFFECTS BASED ON BRAND TRUST AND EMOTIONAL CONNECTION—EVIDENCE FROM MIXUE*

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Abstract

This research article aims to: 1) examine the direct effect of social media marketing on brand loyalty among consumers of affordable mass-market tea beverage brands; 2) investigate the mediating roles of brand trust and emotional connection in the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty; and 3) compare the relative contributions of brand trust and emotional connection as dual psychological pathways through which social media marketing fosters brand loyalty. This study conducted a quantitative research study collecting data from 466 people using multistage stratified sampling from MIXUE consumers across lower-tier, first- and second-tier cities in China; analyzed the data using descriptive statistics, reliability and validity tests, correlation analysis, hierarchical regression, and Bootstrap mediation tests (5,000 samples, 95% CI) via SPSS.

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The research results found that: 1) Social media marketing has a significant positive direct effect on brand loyalty (β = 0.648, $p < 0.001$), confirming that MIXUE's three-dimensional social media approach synergistically drives both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty; 2) both brand trust and emotional connection serve as significant partial mediators, with brand trust accounting for 31.37% and emotional connection for 28.54% of the total effect, yielding a combined dual mediating effect of 59.94%; and 3) brand trust operates as a rational cognitive-affective pathway while emotional connection operates as an affective-identity pathway, and the two mechanisms function synergistically rather than exclusively, together dominating the social media marketing–brand loyalty relationship.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Brand Loyalty, Brand Trust, Emotional Connection, Dual Mediation, MIXUE

Introduction

As consumption upgrading and the digital economy increasingly integrate, social media has become a critical channel for global Internet users. By early 2025, approximately 5.24 billion social media users worldwide accounted for 63.9% of the global population (EqualOcean Think Tank, 2025). Social media marketing has evolved from simple brand exposure to a comprehensive tool for product sales, user retention, and digital business transformation. However, despite their recognized value, the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) and new tea beverage industries face a persistent problem: excessive focus on traffic acquisition at the expense of cultivating user loyalty (JS Technology, 2025). Only 6.2% of sample companies classify private-domain transactions under specialized user departments, and only 5.2% prioritize user activities and retention.

In the new-style tea beverage industry, this structural imbalance is particularly evident. Brands like Ningji have achieved rapid expansion through

social media marketing but remain constrained by low repurchase rates, reflecting a bottleneck in the "acquisition—conversion—retention" chain (China Daily, 2024). Currently, most research focuses on mid- to high-end brands (e.g., Nayuki Tea, Sexy Tea), with fewer studies on affordable brands operating in lower-tier markets. These segments differ fundamentally in consumer characteristics and marketing resource constraints.

MIXUE, founded in 1997, presents a compelling case for examining this gap. Despite spending only 0.9% of total revenue on branding—far below industry average—MIXUE achieved over 50 billion topic views on TikTok, 315 million registered online members, and a repurchase rate of approximately 60% (Sina Finance, 2025a). The brand's "Snow King" IP has established deep emotional connections with consumers, creating a rare phenomenon where fans actively defend the brand during crises. This success demonstrates that lower marketing investment can yield substantial traffic conversion and user retention through strengthened emotional mechanisms.

Objectives

1. To examine the direct effect of social media marketing (content marketing, interactive marketing, and IP personification marketing) on brand loyalty among consumers of affordable mass-market tea beverage brands, using MIXUE as a representative case.

2. To investigate the mediating roles of brand trust and emotional connection in the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty, by constructing and empirically testing a dual-mediation model grounded in the S-O-R framework, Brand Trust Theory, and Emotional Transfer Theory.

3. To compare the relative contributions and distinct mechanisms of brand trust and emotional connection as dual psychological pathways, in order to provide evidence-based strategic recommendations for affordable brands

seeking to optimize their social media marketing efforts in lower-tier consumer markets.

Theoretical Framework

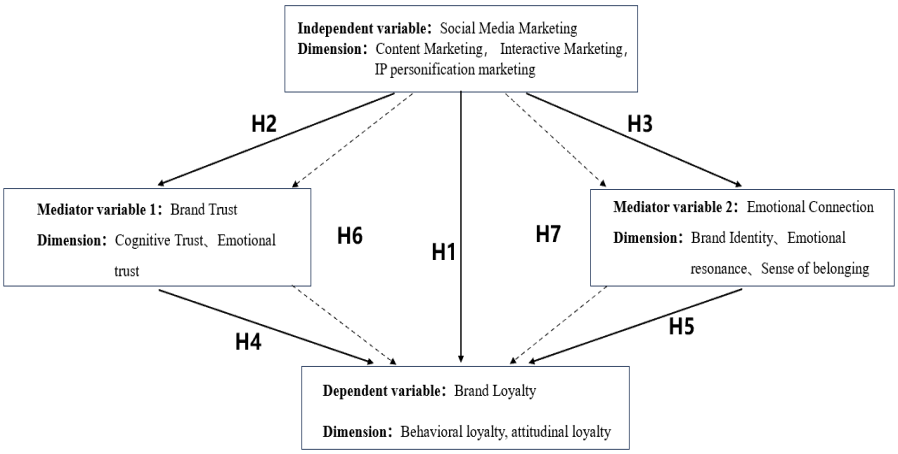


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework. Author's compilation.

Drawing on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, IP Personification Marketing Theory, Brand Trust Theory, and Emotional Transfer Theory, this study proposes seven hypotheses:

H1: Social media marketing has a significant positive impact on brand loyalty.

H2: Social media marketing has a significant positive impact on brand trust.

H3: Social media marketing has a significant positive impact on emotional connection.

H4: Brand trust has a significant positive effect on brand loyalty.

H5: Emotional connection has a significant positive effect on brand loyalty.

H6: Brand trust mediates the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty.

H7: Emotional connection mediates the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty.

The conceptual framework positions social media marketing (content marketing, interactive marketing, IP personification marketing) as the external stimulus (S), brand trust (cognitive trust, emotional trust), and emotional connection (brand identification, emotional resonance, sense of belonging) as the organismic states (O), and brand loyalty (attitudinal loyalty, behavioral loyalty) as the response (R).

Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

S-O-R Model. Originally proposed by Woodworth (1929) and formalized by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), the S-O-R model explains behavior as "external stimuli ⟶ internal organismic states ⟶ overt responses." In social media contexts, external stimuli include platform content formats, interactive features, KOL recommendations, and UGC; the organism comprises psychological mediators such as brand trust and emotional connection; responses manifest as brand loyalty behaviors (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

IP Personification Marketing Theory. Building on Aaker's (1997) brand personality framework and subsequent localization by Huang and Lu (2003), IP personification marketing treats brands as human-like entities with communicable roles and emotional symbols. Xia and Li (2025) conceptualize IP as a "vehicle for translating emotional symbols," emphasizing its potential for user co-creation. Sharma and Rahman (2022) confirmed that personified brand IPs significantly influence brand loyalty.

Brand Trust Theory. Johnson and Grayson (2005) conceptualize brand trust as comprising cognitive trust (rational evaluations of competence and reliability) and affective trust (emotional attachment and identification). Morgan and Hunt (1994) posit trust as a core component of brand equity and a prerequisite for long-term consumer-brand relationships.

Emotional Transfer Theory. Originating from psychoanalytic transference concepts (Freud & Breuer, 1895) and refined in marketing contexts by Bhat and Reddy (2001), this theory explains how consumers transfer emotions from marketing stimuli to brand attitudes, depending on perceived similarity and fit.

2.2 Related Research and Identified Gaps

The existing literature confirms that social media marketing positively affects brand loyalty (Bashar et al., 2024; Wantah & Mandagi, 2024; Manyanga et al., 2024). However, three critical gaps persist:

Gap 1: Category and market bias. Prior studies predominantly examine mid- to high-end brands or B2B contexts, neglecting affordable mass-market brands in lower-tier markets where consumer characteristics and marketing constraints differ substantially.

Gap 2: Insufficient systematic exploration of mediating mechanisms. While direct effects are well-documented, the complete influence chain "marketing stimulus ⟶ psychological mechanisms ⟶ loyalty response" remains underexplored. The dual mediating roles of brand trust and emotional connection have rarely been integrated into unified analytical frameworks.

Gap 3: Limited attention to IP personification. Most research defines social media marketing through content quality, interaction strength, and reputation management, while IP personification as an emerging strategy—exemplified by MIXUE's "Snow King"—receives limited academic attention.

Methodology

1. Research Design and Sampling

This study employs a quantitative research design using questionnaire surveys. Multistage stratified sampling combines four stratification dimensions: geography (East/Central/West), city tier (Tier 1-2/lower-tier markets, with ≥60% from lower-tier), age (with 15-35 age group ≥60%), and consumption frequency (high/medium/low). The target population comprises consumers who were exposed to MIXUE's social media marketing and purchased products within the past year.

Based on structural equation modeling requirements (Kline, 2005; Comrey & Lee, 1992), with 44 observed variables across four constructs, the required sample size is 440 (10×44). Accounting for invalid responses, 500 questionnaires were distributed, yielding 466 valid responses (93.2% valid response rate).

2. Measurement Instruments

All items use a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The questionnaire comprises:

Social Media Marketing (15 items): Content marketing (5 items), interactive marketing (5 items), IP personification marketing (5 items)

Brand Trust (10 items): Cognitive trust (5 items), emotional trust (5 items)

Emotional Connection (9 items): Brand identification (3 items), emotional resonance (3 items), sense of belonging (3 items)

Brand Loyalty (10 items): Attitudinal loyalty (5 items), behavioral loyalty (5 items)

3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred from March to April 2026 via online channels (Questionnaire Star: 20%; WeChat groups: 15%; MIXUE fan communities: 25%) and offline channels (QR codes in physical stores: 40%). Quota sampling ensured representativeness across city tiers and age groups.

Data analysis employed SPSS for descriptive statistics, reliability and validity testing (Cronbach's α, CR, KMO, Bartlett's test, EFA), correlation analysis (Pearson), hierarchical regression, and Bootstrap mediation testing (5,000 samples, 95% CI).

Results

1. Sample Characteristics

The final sample (N = 466) demonstrated balanced gender distribution (50.43% male, 49.57% female). Age concentrated in 18-35 years (62.23%), aligning with MIXUE's core demographic. Educational attainment was predominantly bachelor's degree (48.71%) and high school or below (25.97%). Corporate employees (42.92%) and students (23.61%) constituted the primary occupations. Geographic coverage was balanced across the eastern (37.34%), central (23.82%), and western (38.84%) regions, with lower-tier markets dominating (88.20%). Purchase frequency was predominantly 2-4 times weekly (81.76%), indicating strong consumer loyalty.

2. Descriptive Statistics of Core Variables

Social media marketing dimensions showed mean scores ranging from 3.03 to 4.25. IP personification marketing achieved the highest recognition (M = 4.215 for "Snow King" friendliness), while interactive participation willingness scored the lowest (M = 3.032-3.133). Brand trust demonstrated solid foundations: cognitive trust ranged from 3.52 to 4.19, with reliability and quality stability highest; emotional trust showed the strongest overall trust (M = 4.227) and continued choice willingness (M = 4.223). Emotional connection dimensions scored 3.53-3.64, with sense of belonging and brand identification moderately strong. Brand loyalty revealed high attitudinal loyalty (recommendation willingness, M = 4.208) but lower behavioral loyalty regarding price premiums (M = 2.891).

3. Reliability and Validity

Reliability. All Cronbach's α coefficients exceeded 0.828 at the dimension level and 0.858 at the variable level. Composite reliabilities ranged from 0.829 to 0.859. The 44-item scale achieved an α of 0.953, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Validity. KMO = 0.944 (excellent); Bartlett's sphericity test significant (χ^2 = 10,550.63, $p < 0.001$). Rotated factor loadings ranged 0.648-0.814 (all > 0.6), communalities ranged 0.577-0.816 (all > 0.5), confirming strong construct validity.

4. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlations revealed significant positive relationships (all $p < 0.01$): social media marketing—brand loyalty ($r = 0.687$), social media marketing—brand trust ($r = 0.712$), social media marketing—emotional connection ($r = 0.758$), brand trust—brand loyalty ($r = 0.764$), emotional connection—brand loyalty ($r = 0.731$), and brand trust—emotional connection ($r = 0.693$).

5. Hypothesis Testing

Direct Effects (H1-H5). Linear regression confirmed social media marketing significantly predicts brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.648$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.420$), supporting H1. Path coefficient analysis showed social media marketing significantly affects brand trust ($\beta = 0.680$, $p < 0.001$) and emotional connection ($\beta = 0.741$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2 and H3. Both brand trust ($\beta = 0.299$, $p < 0.001$) and emotional connection ($\beta = 0.250$, $p < 0.001$) significantly predict brand loyalty, supporting H4 and H5.

Mediation Effects (H6-H7). Bootstrap analysis (Table 1) confirmed:

Mediation Path	Effect Value	95% CI	z-value	p-value	Result
SMM ⟶ Brand Trust ⟶ Loyalty (H6)	0.211	[0.126, 0.297]	4.758	0.000	Supported
SMM ⟶ Emotional Connection ⟶ Loyalty (H7)	0.192	[0.102, 0.283]	4.211	0.000	Supported
Total Indirect Effect	0.404	[0.311, 0.500]	8.402	0.000	Significant
Direct Effect (c')	0.270	[0.167, 0.373]	5.162	0.000	Significant

Brand trust mediation accounted for 31.37% of the total effect, and emotional connection accounted for 28.54%. The combined dual mediation effect reached 59.94%, with the remaining direct effect (40.06%) indicating partial mediation. All seven hypotheses were supported.

Discussion

1. Key Findings

This study validates the dual-mediation model "Social Media Marketing ⟶ Brand Trust/Emotional Connection ⟶ Brand Loyalty" in the context of affordable tea beverage brands. Four key findings emerge:

First, social media marketing directly enhances brand loyalty (β = 0.648), confirming its role as a critical antecedent. MIXUE's three-dimensional approach—content marketing for recognition, interactive marketing for

engagement, and IP personification for emotional memory—synergistically drives attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

Second, brand trust serves as the rational pathway, mediating 31.37% of the total effect. Cognitive trust (product quality, reliability) and emotional trust (psychological dependence, willingness to continue choosing) collectively transform marketing stimuli into stable loyalty behaviors.

Third, emotional connection operates as the affective pathway, mediating 28.54% of the total effect. Brand identification, emotional resonance, and a sense of belonging progressively deepen consumer-brand bonds, transcending price-based decision-making.

Fourth, the combined mediation effect (59.94%) dominates the relationship, revealing that social media marketing primarily fosters loyalty indirectly through psychological bridges rather than direct persuasion.

2. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes four contributions: (1) It overcomes the single-mediator limitation in existing research by integrating dual parallel mediators, revealing the complete "stimulus-organism-response" transmission pathway. (2) It empirically validates IP personification marketing as a core dimension of social media marketing, expanding its theoretical applicability to lower-tier markets. (3) It demonstrates that brand trust and emotional connection are synergistic rather than mutually exclusive, correcting research biases toward single psychological mechanisms. (4) It addresses the gap in affordable brand research, providing a transferable framework for mass-market consumer categories.

3. Managerial Implications

For MIXUE and comparable brands, three strategic recommendations emerge:

Optimize social media marketing mix. Enhance content distinctiveness and practical value through quality transparency and scenario-based guides; upgrade interactive mechanisms via routine response systems and low-barrier

UGC campaigns; deepen IP personification through continuous "Snow King" content series and online-offline integration.

Strengthen dual mediators strategically. Maintain consistent quality and transparent pricing to reinforce cognitive trust; build community platforms and emotionally resonant content to deepen belonging; balance value-for-money positioning with emotional value to reduce price sensitivity.

Implement differentiated operations. Tailor strategies by segment: students (engaging IP content, social sharing), young professionals (convenience, consistent quality), lower-tier consumers (trustworthy word-of-mouth, localized communication), and core repeat purchasers (membership benefits, exclusive perks).

4. Limitations and Future Research

This study's limitations include: a sample restricted to MIXUE-exposed consumers; a single-brand, single-country focus; exclusion of potential moderators (e.g., price sensitivity, competitive environment); and a cross-sectional design that precludes dynamic analysis. Future research should incorporate moderating variables, employ longitudinal designs, conduct multi-case comparisons across brand tiers, and utilize mixed-methods approaches for deeper psychological insight.

Recommendations

1. Affordable brands should systematically integrate three dimensions of social media marketing—content marketing, interactive marketing, and IP personification marketing—into a coherent communication strategy. Rather than treating these dimensions as isolated tactics, brands should leverage their synergistic effects: high-quality, value-relevant content builds initial recognition and trust, interactive mechanisms (such as UGC campaigns and community engagement) foster a sense of belonging, and a consistent IP persona translates

emotional symbols into durable brand identification. This integrated approach is particularly critical in lower-tier market segments, where word of mouth and community-driven communication outweigh conventional advertising.

2. Brand managers should deliberately invest in strengthening both cognitive and affective trust as complementary pillars of the brand-consumer relationship. Cognitive trust can be reinforced through consistent product quality, transparent pricing communications, and proactive crisis-response protocols that demonstrate reliability. Affective trust, in turn, can be cultivated by building emotionally resonant online communities, sharing authentic behind-the-scenes content, and sustaining long-term consumer engagement through membership programs and personalized interaction. Since this study found that brand trust accounted for the largest single mediating share (31.37%), allocating dedicated resources to trust-building activities represents the highest-return strategy for converting social media exposure into stable, long-term loyalty.

3. Future research and industry practice should adopt a segmented consumer engagement approach that tailors emotional connection strategies to distinct consumer groups. As this study demonstrates, emotional connection mediates brand loyalty through distinct sub-dimensions—brand identification, emotional resonance, and sense of belonging—which resonate differently across age, geographic, and consumption-frequency segments. Brands should therefore design differentiated content strategies: for younger student consumers, co-creation and IP-driven social sharing content; for working adults, convenience-oriented and quality-assurance messaging; for lower-tier city consumers, localized community storytelling and peer referral incentives; and for high-frequency repeat purchasers, exclusive loyalty program benefits and personalized recognition. This segmentation ensures that emotional connection deepens meaningfully across all consumer touchpoints and reduces long-term price sensitivity.

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