



Customer Brand Attachment and Engagement Among Online Retail Customers in Beijing, China

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Abstract: This study examines customer brand attachment and engagement among online retail customers in Beijing, China, using a quantitative comparative correlational design with 380 respondents. Findings reveal moderate brand attachment across emotional bonding, cognitive connection, and trust, with male and younger customers (25-45 years) showing stronger connections. Engagement levels were highest in social interaction but lowest in behavioral activation, indicating customers enjoy community participation but are less inclined toward frequent purchases or advocacy. Trust emerged as a key driver of cognitive, emotional, and social engagement, though it did not significantly influence purchasing behavior. Demographic variations highlight the need for tailored strategies: younger "Explorer" customers exhibited higher behavioral engagement, while Loyalists demonstrated deeper. The study recommends personalized experiences to strengthen emotional attachment, transparent communication to build trust, and incentive-based loyalty programs to boost active purchasing. By leveraging social interaction strengths and addressing demographic-specific engagement gaps, brands can enhance customer relationships in competitive e-commerce markets. These insights provide actionable recommendations for optimizing engagement strategies and fostering sustainable brand loyalty.

Keywords: Consumer Loyalty, customer attachment, brand attachment

Introduction

The study of customer brand attachment and engagement among online retail customers is pivotal in understanding how emotional and cognitive bonds influence consumer behavior in the digital marketplace. Brand attachment represents the deep-seated emotional connections that consumers form with brands, characterized by affection, love, or passion, alongside cognitive connections that align the brand with the consumer's values, beliefs, and identity. These elements contribute to the formation of brand-self congruence and trust, which are fundamental to developing a reliable customer base and fostering brand loyalty (Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2010).

Brand engagement extends this concept into more dynamic interactions between the brand and its consumers. It encompasses cognitive processing where consumers invest mental effort in integrating and reacting to brand information, and emotional connections that are stirred during brand interactions. Furthermore, behavioral activation and social interactions within brand engagement depict the consumers' actions and social dynamics triggered by their interactions with the brand (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014).

This study aims to explore how these elements of brand attachment and engagement influence consumer behaviors, preferences, and loyalty in an online retail context. By examining these components, the research seeks to provide insights that can help online retailers design better engagement strategies and foster stronger emotional bonds with their customers, enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty in the highly competitive online retail sector.

Methodologically, the research utilizes quantitative analysis to assess demographic differences and correlations between brand attachment and engagement dimensions, providing insights into how age, gender, and customer type affect loyalty behaviors. Statistical tests reveal significant variations across demographic groups, with findings indicating that younger customers and "Explorer" types exhibit notably higher behavioral activation and social engagement compared to other segments. The research further highlights trust as a key driver of engagement, with positive correlations across cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions.

Results of this study offer strategic insights into the development of loyalty programs that address customer-specific attachment factors and engagement needs. By tailoring program features to demographic and psychographic profiles, brands can optimize loyalty initiatives to foster deeper customer relationships and increase brand loyalty. This research contributes to the literature on consumer loyalty by providing a framework for loyalty program implementation that incorporates customer diversity in attachment and engagement, offering actionable recommendations for brands seeking sustainable growth through loyalty enhancement.

Literature Review

Brand engagement, a multifaceted concept in marketing, describes the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral interaction consumers have with a brand. This interaction is not only complex but also dynamic, influencing both consumer behavior and brand perception significantly. The essence of brand engagement lies in the depth of the relationship that is developed



over various interactions, whether they occur online or offline, directly influencing consumer loyalty and advocacy behaviors.

In the context of luxury hotel management, brand engagement is enhanced through the perception of a brand's 'coolness,' which encompasses the brand's ability to stay current and desirable. This coolness contributes to consumer satisfaction and love, which in turn fosters deeper brand engagement. Notably, individual characteristics such as materialism can enhance the impact of brand coolness on satisfaction and love, thereby enriching the overall engagement with the brand (Nguyễn et al., 2022).

Social media platforms significantly amplify this engagement, offering a venue for consumers to express and engage with brand-related content actively. The psychological ownership over a brand, especially in local contexts like tourism destinations, mediates how social media engagement translates into proactive consumer behaviors such as advocacy or feedback, which are crucial for brand development (Amani, 2022). Similarly, engagement through digital platforms like social media can significantly impact brand loyalty, particularly through cognitive engagement, which involves thoughtful interaction with the brand's content (Aljuhmani et al., 2022).

Moreover, the burgeoning digital landscape, including technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality, has begun reshaping brand engagement. For instance, in the Metaverse, brands using gamified marketing can create immersive experiences that deepen consumer engagement by leveraging elements like novelty and interactivity, leading to increased satisfaction and advocacy (Bousba & Arya, 2022).

Consumer perceptions of brand ethicality also play a critical role, particularly in online communities. Positive perceptions can lead to higher engagement levels, contributing to a sustainable relationship between consumers and brands. This is particularly relevant in environments where ethical considerations are becoming more pronounced (Kumar & Kaushal, 2023).

Each of these elements—coolness, psychological ownership, ethicality, and digital interactivity—contribute to a more holistic understanding of brand engagement. They underline the necessity for brands to adapt and innovate continuously to maintain consumer interest and loyalty in an increasingly competitive and digitally-oriented marketplace.

Brand engagement is a complex construct that captures the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects of consumer interactions with a brand. This engagement extends beyond mere interest, embodying a deeper, more involved interaction that can significantly influence a brand's perception and consumer loyalty. Defined as a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions, brand engagement includes cognitive processing where the consumer's focused attention and mental engagement reflect their understanding and interest in the brand (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Emotional connection is crucial, as it involves the consumer's affection for or emotional attachment to a brand, which influences their interaction intensity and frequency. Behavioral activation, the actions taken by consumers as a result of their cognitive and emotional engagement, can include activities such as purchasing, advocating for the brand, or participating in brand-related online communities (Lee, Ho, & Xie, 2023).

The dynamics of brand engagement are illustrated through various marketing strategies and digital innovations. Influencer marketing and digital platforms have transformed brand engagement by enhancing brand visibility and interaction, which subsequently increases brand equity and purchase intentions (Ali & Alquda, 2022). Similarly, emerging digital landscapes like the Metaverse offer novel platforms for engagement through gamification and interactive experiences, significantly impacting consumer satisfaction and brand advocacy (Bousba & Arya, 2022). Ethical considerations and consumer perceptions of brand ethicality in online communities also play a significant role in fostering engagement, leading to deeper community involvement and enhanced loyalty (Kumar & Kaushal, 2023). Furthermore, AI-powered technologies such as voice assistants have reshaped consumer interactions with brands, emphasizing the importance of technology attributes in influencing engagement levels and subsequent consumer behaviors (McLean & Osei-Frimpong, 2021).

These elements underscore the layered nature of brand engagement, highlighting its critical role across various consumer touchpoints and technological advancements. As brands navigate through a rapidly evolving digital and physical landscape, understanding and leveraging the nuances of brand engagement becomes crucial for maintaining relevance and fostering consumer loyalty.

Brand engagement embodies a strategic dimension in modern marketing where consumer involvement and participation drive the emotional and psychological attachment to brands, culminating in higher loyalty and advocacy.

The nature of brand engagement varies across different contexts, with factors like gamification, social media marketing, and consumer-brand interaction playing crucial roles. Gamification, for example, enhances engagement through achievement and social interactions within online communities, positively influencing brand equity (Xi & Hamari, 2020). Similarly, social media platforms facilitate a robust engagement by leveraging features like interactivity, relevance, and entertainment, which not only engage consumers but also significantly impact their purchase intentions (Hanaysha, 2021). In the context of a global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, the dynamics of brand engagement can shift dramatically. Studies have shown that global crises can affect consumer brand engagement negatively, particularly when the brand's country of origin is severely affected by the crisis. This change is partly due to increased consumer animosity and a decrease in engagement on digital platforms like social media (Wang et al., 2021).

Moreover, the effectiveness of social media marketing in enhancing brand engagement is underscored by its ability to customize experiences and foster interactive and entertaining content, which are pivotal in driving brand loyalty (Cheung et al., 2020). These digital interactions are essential not only for maintaining consumer interest and engagement during normal times but also as crucial touchpoints during market disruptions or crises.

Engagement is not just about the immediate interaction but also involves long-term implications such as brand loyalty and the potential for co-creation, where consumers actively participate in the creation of brand value, enhancing their connection and loyalty to the brand. This active participation is increasingly facilitated by technological advancements that enhance interaction capabilities, such as chatbots and AI-driven customer service platforms (Kaur et al., 2020).

Methodology:

The study was conducted using a quantitative comparative correlational design to systematically examine the relationship between brand attachment and brand engagement among online retail customers in Beijing, China. This design allowed the researchers to measure the degree of correlation between the different dimensions of brand attachment (emotional bonding, cognitive connection, and trust) and various aspects of brand engagement (cognitive processing, emotional connection, behavioral activation, and social interaction).

The quantitative approach facilitated the collection of numerical data from a large sample, which was essential for ensuring the statistical validity and generalizability of the study findings. Quantitative methods were particularly effective in drawing comparisons and establishing relationships between variables, which was the core objective of this research.

The study compared different dimensions of brand attachment and engagement to identify which aspects were most strongly correlated. This helped in understanding how different elements of attachment influenced engagement behaviors among consumers in an online retail setting.

The correlation design was vital for examining the extent to which variations in brand attachment could explain changes in brand engagement. It enabled the researchers to analyze whether higher levels of emotional bonding, cognitive connection, or trust with a brand were associated with greater cognitive processing, deeper emotional connections, more active behavioral engagement, or enhanced social interactions.

Employing this design contributed to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between brand attachment and engagement, providing valuable insights for marketers who aimed to enhance customer relationships and loyalty in online environments. This research helped in formulating strategies that could be applied to foster stronger consumer-brand relationships, thus driving better business outcomes in the competitive online retail market in Beijing.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Indicators	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	224	58.9%
	Female	156	41.1%
Age	25-35	50	13.2%
	36-45	161	42.4%
	46-55	89	23.4%
	55 above	80	21.1%
Type of customer	Loyalist	175	46.1%
	Satisfied	90	23.7%
	Habitual	58	15.3%
	Explorer	57	15.0%

Table 2. Assessment of the Customer-Respondents on their Brand Attachment in Terms of Emotional Bonding

Indicator	Weighted Mean	Standard Deviation	Qualitative Description/ Verbal Interpretation
1. I feel a personal connection to this brand.	2.8	0.93	Agree- Attached
2. I experience positive emotions when I use products from this brand.	2.8	0.93	Agree- Attached
3. This brand evokes a sense of nostalgia for me.	3.2	0.67	Agree- Attached
4. I am passionate about this brand and what it stands for.	2.7	0.85	Agree- Attached
5. I feel like this brand is a part of my daily life.	3.1	0.76	Agree- Attached
6. I would feel a sense of loss if this brand no longer existed.	2.6	0.82	Agree- Attached
Overall Mean	2.9	0.46	Agree- Attached

Legend: 3.51 – 4.00 (Strongly Agree-Highly Attached); 2.51 – 3.50 (Agree- Attached); 1.51 – 2.50 (Disagree-Slightly Attached); 1.0-1.50 (Strongly Disagree-Not Attached)

Table 3. Assessment of the Customer-Respondents on their Brand Attachment in Terms of Cognitive Connection

Indicator	Weighted Mean	Standard Deviation	Qualitative Description/ Verbal Interpretation

1. This brand aligns with my personal values.	2.7	0.95	Agree- Attached
2. I find that my identity is reflected in this brand.	2.8	0.97	Agree- Attached
3. I consciously prefer this brand because it matches my lifestyle.	2.9	0.71	Agree- Attached
4. I think about this brand often, even when I am not using its products.	3.1	0.77	Agree- Attached
5. I believe this brand understands people like me.	3.1	0.93	Agree- Attached
6. I find this brand to be intellectually stimulating.	2.9	0.85	Agree- Attached
Overall Mean	2.9	0.43	Agree- Attached

Legend: 3.51 – 4.00 (Strongly Agree-Highly Attached); 2.51 – 3.50 (Agree- Attached); 1.51 – 2.50 (Disagree-Slightly Attached); 1.0-1.50 (Strongly Disagree-Not Attached)

Results and Discussion

1.Profile of Respondents

The demographic profile of respondents shows a majority male representation (58.9%) and an age concentration within the 36-45 year group (42.4%). A significant portion of respondents identified as “Loyalists” (46.1%), followed by “Satisfied” customers (23.7%), suggesting a strong degree of brand loyalty within the sample. These characteristics provide context for interpreting respondents' brand attachment and engagement, reflecting both age-based preferences and loyalty tendencies that may influence their interactions with the brand.

2.Customer Brand Attachment

Customer brand attachment is assessed through three main dimensions: emotional bonding, cognitive connection, and trust. Emotional bonding shows a moderate level of attachment, with respondents agreeing that they feel a personal connection to the brand and experience positive emotions when engaging with it. Cognitive connection reveals that respondents view the brand as somewhat aligned with their values and lifestyle, with a notable number feeling the brand reflects their identity. Trust is also moderately high, with respondents generally believing the brand to be reliable, secure, and customer-centric. This level of attachment indicates that while respondents are connected to the brand across emotional, cognitive, and trust dimensions, there may be areas where attachment could be further strengthened, especially in emotional bonding and trust.

3.Differences in Customer Brand Attachment

Differences in customer brand attachment were observed primarily across demographic factors, including sex, age, and customer type. Male respondents showed higher levels of cognitive and emotional attachment to the brand than female respondents, indicating that male customers may feel a stronger personal and intellectual connection with the brand. Age also played a significant role, with younger respondents (ages 25-35 and 36-45) reporting stronger emotional attachment compared to older respondents. This trend suggests that younger customers may identify more closely with the brand's identity and values, forming a deeper emotional connection. Customer type further influenced attachment, though in a less pronounced way; for example, Loyalists and Satisfied customers displayed relatively high attachment, reflecting their brand loyalty and consistent positive perception. These findings suggest that attachment varies across demographic and loyalty factors, with gender, age, and customer type shaping the degree of connection respondents feel toward the brand.

4.Customer Brand Engagement

Brand engagement was measured in terms of cognitive processing, emotional connection, behavioral activation, and social interaction. Overall, engagement levels were moderate, with the highest scores seen in social interaction, suggesting that respondents enjoy engaging with the brand's community and sharing content on social media. Behavioral activation, however, scored the lowest, indicating that frequent purchasing and advocacy behaviors are not as strongly practiced among respondents. Cognitive processing and emotional connection fall within moderate engagement, highlighting that respondents occasionally think about the brand's benefits and feel positive emotions but do not consistently seek information or actively advocate for it.

5.Differences in Customer Engagement

Differences in customer engagement were also observed across sex, age, and customer type. Male respondents demonstrated higher levels of cognitive and emotional engagement than females, meaning that they are more likely to seek information about the brand and experience positive emotions when interacting with it. Age-based differences in engagement were particularly strong, with younger customers (25-35 and 36-45) showing significantly higher behavioral and emotional engagement compared to older respondents. This indicates that younger customers are not only more inclined to interact with the brand but also more likely to participate actively through behaviors like advocating for the brand and purchasing frequently. In terms of customer type, Explorers showed the highest levels of behavioral activation compared to Loyalists, Satisfied, and Habitual customers. This trend suggests that Explorers are more engaged in brand-related activities, likely due to their openness to new experiences and exploration of the brand's offerings. Overall, these variations highlight how engagement is shaped by demographic factors and customer type, with different patterns of engagement linked to age, gender, and loyalty level.

6.Correlations Between Customer Brand Attachment and Engagement

The correlation analysis revealed nuanced relationships between brand attachment dimensions (emotional bonding, cognitive connection, and trust) and engagement dimensions (cognitive processing, emotional connection, behavioral activation, and social interaction). Emotional bonding showed a significant negative correlation with engagement

dimensions, indicating that high emotional attachment may reduce active engagement behaviors such as seeking information or participating in discussions. Cognitive connection had a significant positive correlation only with social interaction, suggesting that alignment with the brand's values strongly influences community involvement. Trust, however, correlated positively with cognitive processing, emotional connection, and social interaction, indicating that customers who trust the brand are more likely to engage in various activities but do not necessarily demonstrate higher behavioral activation. This indicates that trust drives cognitive, emotional, and social engagement more consistently than other attachment dimensions. In conclusion, the study reveals that while brand attachment and engagement are positively experienced by respondents, specific dimensions such as emotional bonding and behavioral activation may benefit from targeted strategies. These findings provide valuable insights for brands aiming to tailor engagement strategies according to demographic profiles and attachment levels, ultimately enhancing customer loyalty through focused emotional, cognitive, and trust-based interactions.

Conclusion

1.The demographic profile, with a majority of male respondents in the 36-45 age range and a significant portion identifying as "Loyalists," provides insights into the brand's core customer base. The strong presence of Loyalists (46.1%) and Satisfied customers (23.7%) indicates an existing level of commitment that the brand can leverage for sustained loyalty initiatives. This profile suggests that current engagement efforts resonate with middle-aged males, potentially offering a foundation for targeted strategies to deepen attachment with specific age and loyalty-based segments. Recognizing the preferences and behaviors of these loyal customer groups could help in refining marketing efforts to further reinforce and personalize customer-brand relationships.

2.Customer brand attachment is moderately high across the dimensions of emotional bonding, cognitive connection, and trust. Respondents report feeling a general emotional bond with the brand and perceive it as aligning with their values and lifestyle to some degree. The brand is generally trusted for reliability and customer focus, indicating a positive foundation for loyalty. However, opportunities exist to strengthen these bonds further, particularly in emotional bonding and trust. By enhancing emotional experiences and trust-focused interactions, the brand could foster deeper, more resilient loyalty. Programs that appeal to customers' emotions and a sense of belonging, coupled with trust-building measures such as transparent communication and customer support, may increase attachment levels across diverse customer segments.

3.Analysis of brand attachment across demographics shows that gender, age, and customer type significantly influence attachment levels. Male respondents exhibit stronger cognitive and emotional attachment compared to females, suggesting a need to explore gender-specific engagement strategies to appeal to female customers. Additionally, younger respondents (ages 25-35 and 36-45) show greater emotional attachment, possibly due to an alignment with the brand's values and identity. Recognizing these trends could help the brand tailor its messaging, emphasizing values and identity alignment for younger customers, while reinforcing cognitive connections and relevance for older customers. This demographic insight enables the brand to craft a more targeted approach, fostering attachment across diverse customer groups.

4.Brand engagement is particularly high in social interaction, with respondents showing an interest in participating in the brand's community through content-sharing and interactions with other users. This highlights a collective brand experience where customers feel a sense of community, suggesting that social elements of engagement are effective. However, lower engagement scores in behavioral activation indicate a more selective approach to frequent purchasing and advocacy behaviors, suggesting customers may be less inclined toward transactional loyalty. To boost behavioral engagement, the brand could explore strategies that reward advocacy and frequent purchasing, such as loyalty programs, exclusive offers, or interactive promotions that tap into the community-driven aspect of brand engagement.

5.Customer engagement levels also vary significantly across sex, age, and customer type. Males generally display higher cognitive and emotional engagement than females, while younger respondents (25-35 and 36-45) show notably higher engagement levels in both emotional and behavioral dimensions. Customer type also influences engagement, with Explorers showing higher behavioral activation than Loyalists, Satisfied, and Habitual customers. This differentiation suggests that tailored engagement initiatives could be particularly effective. For instance, targeting younger and more exploratory customers with innovative, experiential campaigns may boost engagement, while loyalty-driven rewards could enhance engagement for Loyalists. This nuanced understanding allows for demographic and type-based engagement tactics that reflect the unique preferences of each segment.

Trust emerges as a key driver of engagement across cognitive processing, emotional connection, and social interaction, as evidenced by significant positive correlations. Customers who trust the brand are more likely to engage in cognitive activities (such as seeking information), feel emotionally connected, and participate in brand-related social interactions. However, trust shows little impact on behavioral activation, indicating that while customers may rely on and interact with the brand, they do not necessarily increase purchasing frequency or advocacy based solely on trust. This suggests that further steps are needed to translate trust into active purchase behavior. By combining trust with emotional and experiential incentives, the brand can potentially foster stronger action-oriented engagement, encouraging customers not only to connect with the brand but also to act as advocates and repeat purchasers.

Recommendations

1.To strengthen emotional bonding, the brand should consider creating personalized experiences that reflect customer values and identity. Offering tailored content, personalized messaging, and exclusive access to brand events can deepen customers' personal connection with the brand. Given younger customers' higher emotional engagement, strategies that

emphasize brand identity and community-building, such as influencer partnerships, behind-the-scenes content, or value-driven campaigns, could resonate strongly with this demographic.

2.As trust emerged as a significant driver of engagement, reinforcing it through transparent communication and customer-focused initiatives can solidify this attachment. Regularly updating customers on product quality improvements, addressing customer feedback openly, and enhancing after-sales service will foster reliability and build trust. Additionally, investing in reliable customer support channels, including live chat and prompt follow-up on issues, can show a commitment to customer interests, which could deepen the bond with Loyalists and Habitual buyers.

3.To encourage higher levels of behavioral activation, such as frequent purchasing and advocacy, implementing incentives and structured loyalty programs is recommended. Loyalty programs that reward frequent purchases, social media advocacy, and product reviews can motivate more consistent purchasing behavior. Creating exclusive benefits for repeat buyers, like early access to new products or member-only promotions, can also enhance the engagement of customers who are already moderately attached, encouraging them to interact with the brand more actively.

4.Given the variation in engagement across customer type and demographics, the brand should design targeted campaigns that appeal to specific groups. For example, campaigns that highlight brand exploration and product variety can engage Explorers, while Loyalists may respond well to rewards that recognize their long-term relationship with the brand. Gender-focused content that appeals to both male and female interests can also help balance engagement levels. By aligning campaigns with the specific interests of these groups, the brand can enhance relevance and increase engagement across segments.

5.With social interaction identified as a high-engagement area, the brand should capitalize on this strength by fostering a sense of community among customers. Social media engagement can be further enhanced by creating spaces where customers can interact, share experiences, and participate in brand discussions. Hosting virtual events, webinars, and interactive social media sessions can strengthen customers' sense of belonging, making them feel valued as part of the brand community. Additionally, encouraging user-generated content can amplify social engagement, with customers sharing their personal experiences with the brand, thereby increasing visibility and organic advocacy.

While trust influences cognitive, emotional, and social engagement, it does not consistently translate into higher purchase frequency or advocacy. To bridge this gap, the brand could create experiential campaigns that transform trust into active engagement. Limited-time events, "try-before-you-buy" opportunities, and loyalty milestones can motivate customers to make repeat purchases. Similarly, campaigns that offer rewards for referrals or testimonials can leverage trust to encourage customer advocacy. By combining trust with incentives that prompt specific actions, the brand can effectively channel customer confidence into active loyalty behaviors.

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