Research Article

Social ties that bind: Investigating the mediating role of trust in linking community engagement to brand loyalty with WOM as a moderator

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ABSTRACT

This deductive study aimed to examine the impact of social media brand community engagement and brand awareness on brand loyalty, with the mediating role of brand trust and the moderating role of word of mouth (WOM). In this quantitative cross-sectional study, data were collected at the primary level through a fully structured questionnaire distributed via an online survey link to social media users of fashion brands in China. The data were analyzed using SmartPLS and SPSS. The findings indicate that incorporating WOM effects enhances the influence of brand knowledge on brand trust in fashion brands. However, WOM is only effective when consumers' awareness significantly shapes their confidence in a brand; otherwise, its value is limited. This study highlights that brand knowledge, trust, and WOM are interconnected factors, and neglecting any one of them can negatively affect the market reach of fashion businesses.

Keywords: social media; facebook; brand trust; brand loyalty; brand awareness

1. Introduction

The Chinese fashion industry has transformed from a focus on traditional clothing to a global fashion hub, driven by a burgeoning middle class, increased disposable income, changing consumer preferences, and digital technology. The market is projected to account for over 50% of global fashion consumption by 2025, with online retail and social commerce platforms like Alibaba's Tmall and JD.com leading the way. Traditional Chinese elements are often fused with modern trends, appealing to both local and international consumers. Significant fashion weeks in Shanghai and Beijing showcase local talent, while there is a growing emphasis on sustainability and innovative designs. However, challenges persist, including counterfeiting and difficulties in enforcing intellectual property rights. The industry faces intense competition and market saturation, compounded by the influence of fast fashion on production cycles. Additionally, evolving consumer preferences require brands to remain agile. The Chinese fashion industry is notable within Asia for its unique blend of traditional craftsmanship and modern design. As social media increasingly influences consumer behaviour, understanding its impact on brand loyalty is crucial for businesses seeking to engage effectively with Chinese consumers. The Chinese fashion industry has grown

globally, with its online presence supported by social media marketing tools and community engagement.

Mobile technology and digital media have transformed consumer decision-making, prompting marketers to leverage social networks and mobile apps for engagement[1-3]. This two-way communication benefits customer retention and acquisition, especially in the fashion industry[4]. Fashion brands utilize platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WeChat to connect with consumers[5,6]. Facebook is effective for direct interaction and word-of-mouth marketing, while Instagram's visual nature is ideal for aesthetic content[7-9]. Social media's transparency impacts brand trust, enabling consumers to access brand practices and values, which can foster loyalty[10]. However, negative feedback and misinformation can damage brand reputation, highlighting the need for authenticity and effective engagement.

Social media has become a vital platform for connection and information, significantly altering how individuals interact with friends, family, and brands[11,12]. Marketers increasingly utilize social media ads as part of their strategies, recognizing its cost-effectiveness[13-15]. Users engage with friends and follow brands on social media, empowering customers to shape brand narratives[16]. This shift complicates brand management as consumers discuss products among themselves[17]. Brand communities on social media enable users to connect over shared interests, fostering trust and loyalty[18,19]. Marketing managers now focus on creating engaging customer experiences through experiential marketing[20]. However, further research is needed on how these communities affect brand value and consumer loyalty[21,22]. Understanding the dynamics of brand communities is crucial for enhancing engagement and loyalty[23]. Like other industries, social media marketing faces challenges depending on the market. Social media facilitates global consumerism by highlighting quality and status[24], while engagement and community building are emphasized[25]. Despite this, limited research explores the link between brand community engagement, brand experience, trust, and loyalty[26]. This study addresses these gaps by examining fashion brands in China, providing insight applicable to diverse brand types. Earlier studies revealed consumer difficulty in brand selection due to overwhelming options[27], with decision-making delays caused by excessive choices[28]. Internet-enabled consumers now compare brands online, expecting value for money[29]. Companies prioritizing profits over quality risk reputational harm[30,31]. Strong brand knowledge is crucial for reputation, as customer understanding fosters emotional attachment [32] and enhances loyalty[33]. Brand awareness and brand image, as key components of brand knowledge[34], drive firms to invest in marketing and promotional strategies to establish a competitive edge[35-37]. A strong brand signifies trust, quality, and security[38], and brand trust underpins long-term relationships and purchase intentions[39]. Conversely, failure to maintain brand trust harms firm success[40]. Consumers often value word-of-mouth (WOM) from friends and family more than company communications[41], with electronic WOM gaining influence in recent decades[42]. Consumers trust friends and family over ads, and WOM significantly shapes brand trust and perception[43].

Therefore, this study investigates the impact of brand community engagement on brand experience, trust, and loyalty, focusing on fashion brands in China. Limited research exists on this topic[26,44]. The research explores how consumers' interactions within social media brand communities influence their opinions and behaviours toward brands, using quantitative data collected via online surveys from young Chinese college students. The study's findings aim to benefit marketing managers by providing a framework, based on brand community engagement, to build brand loyalty through brand experience, image, and trust[45]. Results indicate that word-of-mouth (WOM) is a powerful promotional tool that firms can leverage to build brand trust and expand market share[24,46]. By understanding the influence of WOM, firms and even governments can utilize it to promote a positive brand image and reduce promotional costs.

2. Research question

RQ1: Does social media brand community engagement (SMBCE) influence brand trust (BT) among Chinese fashion consumers?

RQ2: Does SMBCE directly affect brand loyalty (BL)?

RQ3: Does brand awareness (BA) influence brand trust (BT)?

RQ4: Does BA directly affect brand loyalty (BL)?

RQ5: Does brand trust (BT) directly influence brand loyalty (BL)?

RQ6: Does brand trust mediate the relationship between SMBCE and brand loyalty?

RQ7: Does brand trust mediate the relationship between brand awareness and brand loyalty?

RQ8: Does word of mouth (WOM) moderate the relationship between brand trust and brand loyalty?

3. Literature review

Business literature explores the evolution of marketing towards prioritizing customer experience, emphasizing the role of social media in connecting brands and consumers[1]. It highlights that consumers are now active participants in marketing, contributing from product design to promotion[2]. Brand community engagement on social media is largely driven by intrinsic motivations[3]. The focus has shifted from functional features to consumer experiences[4], which are now considered crucial for success[5,6]. Social media facilitates strong connections between brands and consumers, with brands increasingly investing in these communities[7,8]. Marketers can leverage these platforms to strengthen consumer interactions[1,9], and active involvement in such communities significantly influences brand experience, image, trust, and loyalty.

Brand trust plays a vital role in these relationships, reinforced by information sharing and sustained interaction[10]. Social media communities provide diverse platforms for engagement, which enhance trust and ultimately boost loyalty[11,12]. However, research gaps remain in understanding how loyalty develops within such communities and how product type may moderate the relationship between brand experience and engagement[13]. Social media has further transformed marketing by shifting control of communication away from firms and toward consumers. In this environment, transparency is essential to building trust[14-16]. User-generated content, facilitated by Web 2.0 platforms, empowers consumers to shape brand meaning and strengthens brand–consumer connections[17-19].

This study highlights the critical role of brand awareness in shaping consumer recognition and recall[20,21]. Brand awareness, defined as the extent to which customers can identify a brand, directly influences brand attitudes by affecting perceptions of credibility, trust, and affinity[22]. Consumers frequently prefer well-known brands, such as Nike over BATA, because established names provide a sense of security and reliability[23,24]. For marketers, building brand awareness is essential, as it facilitates the communication of brand attributes, enhances recall, and strengthens consumer trust[25]. Familiarity with a brand allows consumers to evaluate options with greater confidence and often leads them to base purchase decisions on trust in the brand rather than on product-specific attributes[26,27]. Word-of-mouth (WOM) further reinforces brand knowledge, expands demand, and cultivates stronger emotional bonds with consumers, thereby increasing loyalty[22,28,29]. Similarly, brand image—the way customers perceive and engage with a brand[30] encapsulates both symbolic and functional associations that are distinctive to product categories. A strong brand image positively shapes repurchase intentions[31,32], while also enhancing brand trust and customer satisfaction[33]. When a brand projects a positive image, it strengthens perceptions of reliability, which in turn

fosters consumer trust and loyalty[25,34]. Furthermore, the reputation of the parent brand significantly influences the success of brand extensions, shaping consumer perceptions and purchase behaviours[23,35,36].

According to Deutsch[37], confidence that one will find what is desired (from another) rather than what is feared is essential. Trust acts as a social lubricant that stimulates cooperation among community members, sustains social order, and allows valuable long-term exchanges that are impossible without mutual trust[38]. Brand trust is characterized as a unique individual relationship between consumers and brands, often attributed to the willingness of a consumer to depend on a brand's capability to fulfil its functions[6]. It is trusted from both rational and emotional perspectives, reflected in components such as brand reliability and brand intentions[39]. Brand intentions describe the extent to which customers believe a specific brand will act in good faith by prioritizing their interests during unforeseen issues, while brand reliability reflects the perceived ability of a brand to fulfil its promises[39]. Consumer willingness to believe that a brand can carry out its intended purpose is the essence of brand trust[13,40,41]. A scale was developed to assess brand experience and its influence on immediate outcomes such as consumer happiness and brand loyalty[42,43]. This study therefore investigates the relationship between brand community involvement on social media and consumer brand experience, which in turn affects consumer brand trust. Keller[21] noted that consumers' perceptions of a brand's credibility are influenced by their level of brand knowledge, as it connects to how effectively memory node's function. High brand awareness is correlated with strong, distinct memories in the minds of consumers. Thus, strong brand recognition benefits a company's longevity while also assisting consumers in purchase decisions.

Word-of-mouth (WOM) refers to the process where people share positive recommendations about a brand, supporting its reputation and trustworthiness. Brand loyalty is the commitment a customer has towards a specific brand, reflected in both behaviour and attitude. Attitudinal loyalty indicates willingness to recommend or pay more for a brand, while behavioural loyalty reflects repeat purchases. Customer satisfaction is crucial in fostering brand loyalty, as it bridges expectations and actual experiences. WOM plays a significant role in enhancing brand credibility, as customers often trust WOM more than traditional advertising due to its source being friends or family. Positive WOM reduces perceived risks during purchasing decisions[44-46]. WOM not only boosts consumer trust but also shapes purchase intentions. Research shows that effective WOM significantly improves brand perceptions and buying behaviour[47]. It is especially influential among younger consumers, highlighting the importance of social media platforms in marketing. In addition to peers, family members, academic advisors, and opinion leaders play crucial roles in WOM by offering recommendations that influence students' brand choices. Websites further amplify this by serving as accessible platforms for brand information[48-52]. Above discussion lead to the postulation of the below hypotheses.

H1: Social Media Brand Community Engagement (SMBCE) has significant positive impact on Brand Trust (BT) among Chinese customers of fashion brands.

H2: Social Media Brand Community Engagement (SMBCE) has significant positive impact on Brand Loyalty (BL) among Chinese customers of fashion brands.

H3: Brand Awareness (BA) has significant positive impact on Brand Trust (BT) among Chinese customers of fashion brands.

H4: Brand Awareness (BA) has significant positive impact on Brand Loyalty (BL) among Chinese customers of fashion brands.

H5: Brand Trust (BT) has significant positive impact on Brand Loyalty (BL) among Chinese customers of fashion brands.

H6: Brand Trust (BT) mediates the relationship between Social Media Brand Community Engagement (SMBCE) and Brand Loyalty (BL) among Chinese customers of fashion brands.

H7: Brand Trust (BT) mediates the relationship between Brand Awareness (BA) and Brand Loyalty (BL) among Chinese customers of fashion brands.

H8: Word of Mouth (WOM) moderates the relationship between Brand Trust (BT) and Brand Loyalty (BL) among Chinese customers of fashion brands.

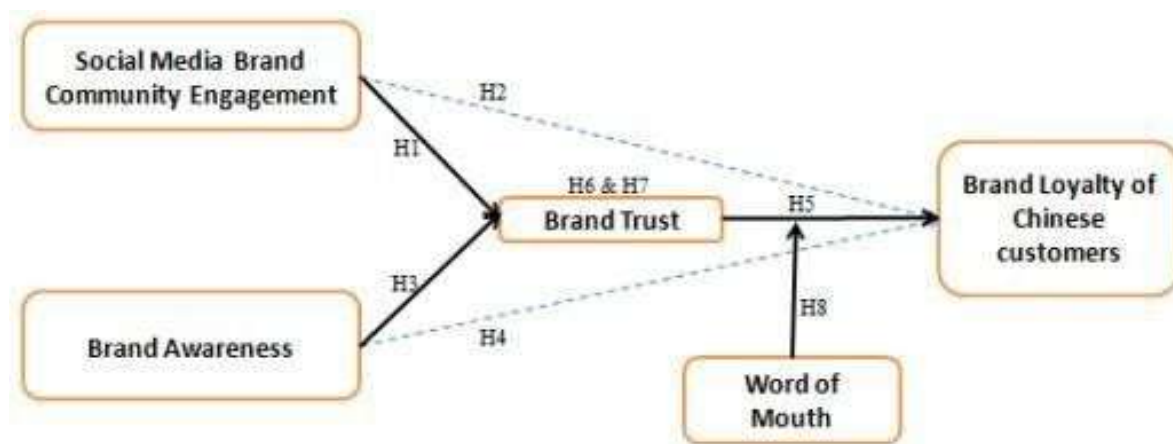All research hypotheses have been developed through the framework illustrated in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1. Proposed research framework.

4. Methodology

Research design: In this deductive study quantitative approach has been adopted where data has been collected by implying the online survey through full structured questionnaire having Demographic aspects of respondent sin first part while study variables in second. Demographics of the respondents, descriptive data, an evaluation of the correlations between consumer brand awareness (BA), Social Media Brand Community Engagement (SMBCE), Brand loyalty (BL), Brand Trust (BT), comprise this descriptive and explanatory research study. Additionally, it clarifies the connections between consumer involvement in SMBCE, BA, and BT in BL when the brand is present along with BT and WOM as mediator and moderator, respectively. This research follows a post positive approach. There are two stages to study. A literature survey is employed in the first step of the study to comprehend the context and evolution of the conceptual framework. Experiential data is gathered using a form survey in the second phase. The questionnaire measures each of the study's constructs and was created by utilizing already produced scales from literature. Quantitative research is done in this study because it examines the connections between customers' interactions with the brand community on social media platforms (SMBCE), brand awareness, brand trust, and brand loyalty. A strategy was put forward. The development of hypotheses based on the literature study, the creation of questionnaires to gather data for analysis, and the application of statistical methods to data analysis are all included in the research design.

Population and sample size: The researcher has restricted the target population to China, as it is not feasible to gather data from many nations. According to the Statista (October 2023) overall 5.3 trillion users of internet are there in the world which becomes almost 66% of the world's population. Out of these internet users 4.95 billion are social media users which is approximately 62% of internet users worldwide. Further to

this, out of 4.95 billion social media users; social media users in Asia remained at 1.2 billion in Eastern Asia while 196 million in southern Asia. Finally, in China, in 2022 there are approximately 1 billion social media users which is the target market of this study. This is the world's biggest social media market covering Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok, YouTube, WeChat and Weibo. The present study employed a judgmental sampling approach to choose a sample of customers for quantitative analysis. For this study Krejci and Morgan (1978) sample size table has been applied. According to this table, sample size for this study remained as 384 respondents.

Instrumentation: Measures of Social Media Brand Community Engagement (SMBCE) was compiled from the earlier work of Baldus et al. (2014) covering a dimension, as; Brand Influence (BI), Brand Passion (BP), Connecting (R), Helping (H), Like-minded discussion (LMD), Rewards Hedonic (RH), Rewards Utilitarian (RU), Seeking Assistance (SA), Self-Expression (SE) and Up-To Date Information (UTDI). Brand awareness was measured by using twelve items from the earlier work of Koniewki (2012) covering two dimensions called Brand Recall (BRL) and Brand Recognition (BR). Brand trust is measured by eight inquiries adopted from earlier work of Delgado-Ballester and colleagues (2003) covering two distinct dimensions brand intentions and brand trustworthiness. Word of mouth is to be measured by implying twenty (20) items adopted form the earlier work of covering three dimensions, relative influence, perceived credibility and technological components. There were twelve brand loyalty-related questions covering attitudinal loyalty items derived from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) while be behavioural component of loyalty were adopted from the work of Zhang and Bloemer (2008).

5. Results

Response Rate and Data Collection Process: For this study, the unit of analysis was social media users in China. A link of online survey was shared through an online link to fill it up to 538 prospects in June 2024. "Direct phone calls to remind the respondents of their delayed response was made to increase the response rate, as recommended" Sekaran (2006). Furthermore, reminders were carried out on July 15, 2024, onward. Also, another reminder by direct calls was placed on July 30, 2024, and by the start of August, desired number of responses was gathered. The actions taken yielded a total of 435 valid responses therefore response rate of 80%. Out of these responses, 19 questionnaires were found disqualified due to inappropriate filing and incorrectly entered information. Therefore only 416 questionnaires were found correctly filled and completed in all aspects. It yielded 77% qualified response rate. After going through data input accuracy check, missing data handling, assessment of outlier check, several techniques were used to ensure that normality, multicollinearity has been checked. Common method variance test has been implied along with test of non-response biases control. Demographic results of the study are grouped in **Table 1**. Out of all the 384 valid respondents, valid responses used in this study, 265 (69%) of them were males while the remaining 119 (31%) were females. The number of respondents by gender reflects the total number of male and female respondents from China participated in this study. Table 1 also presented the details about marital status of the respondents; as, 179 (46 %) of respondents were single while 205 (53%) of total respondents were married. Further to this, the descriptive analysis also revealed that 6 (2%) of the respondents were having age group less than 25 years. 170 (44%) were between the ages of 26 and 35 years; 111 (29%) were between 36 and 45 years of age, 78 of the respondents representing (20%) were in the age brackets 46-55 years; 19 (5%) were within the age bracket 56 and above years.

Table 1. Demographical results.

Description	No	Percentage (%)
Gender Male	265	69.01
Female	119	30.99
TOTAL	384	100
Marital status Single	179	46.61
Married	205	53.39
TOTAL	384	100
less than 25	6	1.56
26-35	170	44.27
Age 36-45	111	28.91
46-55	78	20.31
55 and above	19	4.95
TOTAL	384	100
Bachelor	231	34.11
Master	102	26.56
Academic Background PhD	11	2.86
Post doc	2	0.52
Others	38	9.9
TOTAL	384	73.96
Work Experiences less than 10	123	32.03
10--20	95	24.74
21-30	73	19.01
31-40	69	17.97
41-50	24	6.25
Above 50	0	0
TOTAL	384	100

The descriptive analysis also revealed that Out of total 384 responses, 231 (60%) of respondents are having largest academic group which is Bachelors. Further to this, 102 (27%) of respondents were having master's degree qualifications. It is noted that 11 (3%) of the respondents were having PhD degree while only 2 (1%) respondents mentioned that they are having post-doc qualification. There are 38 respondents (10%) which marked their education as 'others'. Additionally, descriptive analysis revealed that Out of total 384 responses, 123 (32%) of respondents are having largest working experience group which is less than 10 years. Further to this, 95 (25%) of respondents were having 10-20 years of working experience. It is noted that 73 (19%) of the respondents were having 21-30 years of experience while only 24 (6%) respondents mentioned that they are having 41-50 years of experience. There was not even a single respondent who showed working experience great than 50 years.

Assessment of the Measurement Model: The PLS-SEM is used to estimate the theoretical model for the research using SmartPLS 3.0 application software"[68]. This study follows the PLS-SEM approach as a variance-based approach, which is the major analysis technique for research studies instead of Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM)[70]. Two main approaches, namely reflective and formative measurements, have been acknowledged for evaluating the validity and reliability of any measurement model. First, the reflective measures, which are represented by arrows pointing from the construct to the indicators, are calculated in SmartPLS by the outer loadings. Meanwhile, the formative measures, which are represented by arrows pointing from the indicator to the constructs, are calculated by their outer weights[69]. Therefore, the assessment of reflective models in this study will be examined via indicator reliability, internal consistency

reliability, and construct validity (convergence and discriminant validity). Measurement model is given in **Figure 2**.

Construct Validity: Based on factor analysis, items were correctly assigned to their constructs. "Construct validity is ascertained in two ways. Firstly, the items showed high loadings on their respective constructs when compared with other constructs. Secondly, the item loadings significantly loaded on their respective constructs"[71]. The same approach has been followed in this study. Construct validity has been confirmed as per the results grouped in loadings shown in **Table 2**.

Convergent Validity of the Measurements: Table 2 shows that the composite reliability values ranged from 0.812 to 0.941. These values exceeded the "recommended value of 0.7"[73]. "The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged between 0.731 to 0.873, indicating a good level of construct validity of the measures used"[72]. These results confirm the convergent validity of the outer model.

Discriminant Validity of the Measures: This study also shows how discriminant validity was ascertained by comparing the indicator loadings with cross loadings. Researchers have suggested that "all indicator loadings should be greater than cross loadings"[74]. **Table 3** compares the indicator loadings with other reflective indicators. All the available indicator loadings were greater than the cross loadings, meaning the requirement of discriminant validity has been achieved.
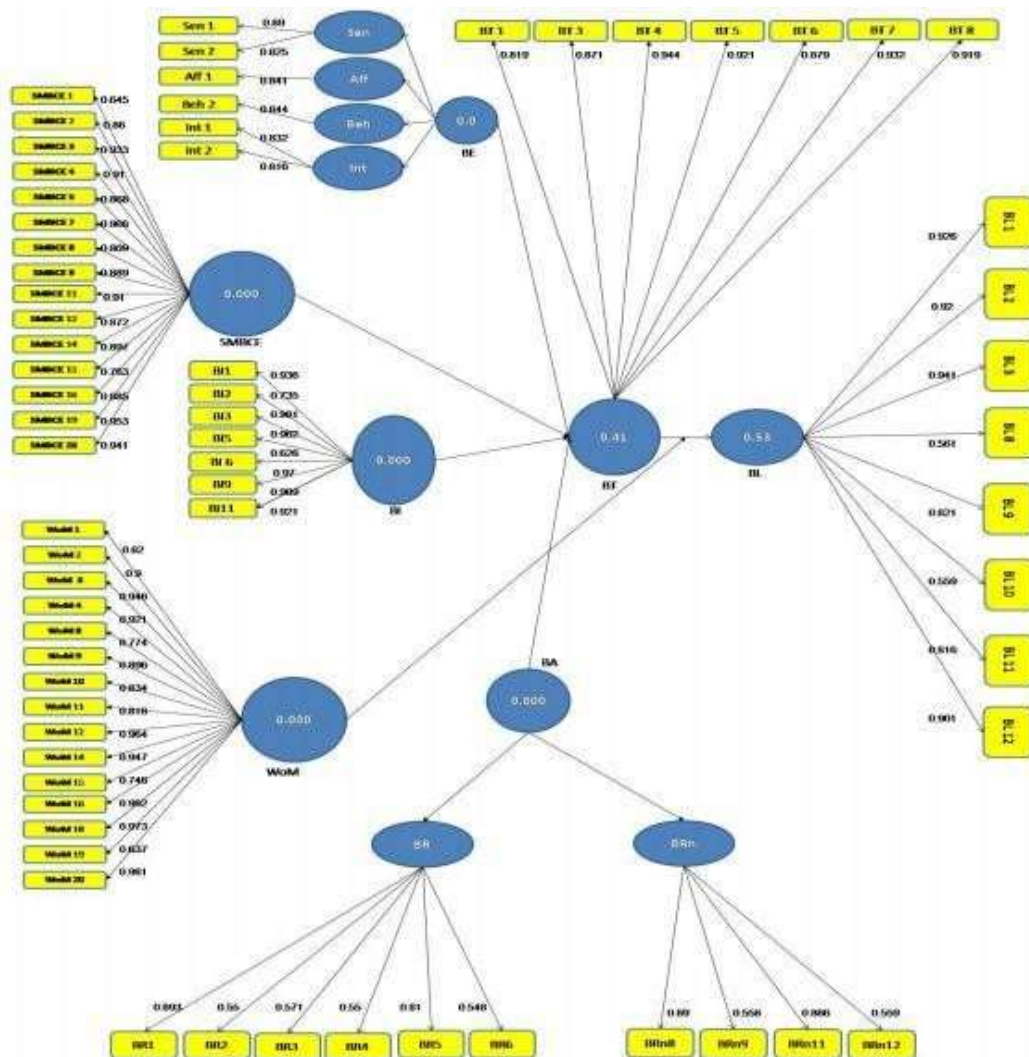

Figure 2. Measurement model.

Internal Consistency Reliability: The general rules-of-thumb for alpha coefficient recommend that an alpha value less than 0.6 is considered poor; values between 0.6 to less than 0.7 are regarded as moderate; 0.7 to less than 0.8 are considered good; 0.8 to less than 0.9 are viewed as very good; and 0.9 and above are considered excellent"[75]. As shown in **Table 2**, the composite reliability coefficient of each latent variable, both in the first and second order, falls between 0.812 and 0.941, which are above "the threshold value of 0.7"[70]. This suggests the adequacy of internal consistency reliability of the measures used in this study.

Table 2. Results for Items loading composite reliability and average variance extracted.

Constructs	Items	Loading	CR	AVE
Social Media Brand Community Engagement (SMBCE)	SMBCE1	0.645	0.944	0.753
	SMBCE2	0.86		
	SMBCE3	0.933		
	SMBCE4	0.91		
	SMBCE5	0.868		
	SMBCE7	0.908		
	SMBCE8	0.809		
	SMBCE9	0.889		
	SMBCE11	0.91		
	SMBCE12	0.872		
	SMBCE14	0.897		
	SMBCE15	0.763		
	SMBCE16	0.885		
	SMBCE19	0.953		
	SMBCE20	0.941		
Brand Awareness (BA)	BA1	0.893	0.914	0.873
	BA2	0.55		
	BA3	0.571		
	BA4	0.55		
	BA5	0.81		
	BA6	0.548		
	BA8	0.89		
	BA9	0.558		
	BA11	0.886		
	BA12	0.559		
Brand Trust (BT)	BT1	0.819	0.854	0.791
	BT3	0.871		
	BT4	0.944		
	BT5	0.921		
	BT6	0.879		
	BT7	0.932		
	BT8	0.919		

Constructs	Items	Loading	CR	AVE
Word of Mouth (WOM)	WOM1	0.82	0.906	0.745
	WOM2	0.9		
	WOM3	0.946		
	WOM4	0.921		
	WOM8	0.774		
	WOM9	0.896		
	WOM10	0.834		
	WOM11	0.818		
	WOM12	0.964		
	WOM14	0.947		
	WOM15	0.746		
	WOM16	0.992		
	WOM18	0.973		
	WOM19	0.637		
	WOM20	0.981		
Brand Loyalty (BL)	BL1	0.926	0.941	0.731
	BL2	0.92		
	BL3	0.941		
	BL8	0.561		
	BL9	0.821		
	BL10	0.559		
	BL11	0.816		
	BL12	0.901		

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Table 3. Results of cross loading.

Items	SMBCE	BA	BT	WOM	BL
SMBCE1	**0.689**	0.413	0.419	0.419	0.419
SMBCE2	**0.532**	0.441	0.409	0.409	0.409
SMBCE3	**0.581**	0.351	0.327	0.327	0.327
SMBCE4	**0.656**	0.401	0.426	0.426	0.426
SMBCE5	**0.679**	0.424	0.397	0.397	0.397
SMBCE6	**0.673**	0.425	0.370	0.370	0.370
SMBCE7	**0.573**	0.259	0.234	0.234	0.234
SMBCE8	**0.652**	0.353	0.320	0.320	0.320
SMBCE9	**0.611**	0.297	0.309	0.309	0.309
SMBCE10	**0.583**	0.344	0.365	0.365	0.365
SMBCE11	**0.663**	0.380	0.359	0.359	0.359
SMBCE12	**0.613**	0.313	0.286	0.286	0.286

Items	SMBCE	BA	BT	WOM	BL
SMBCE13	**0.670**	0.379	0.377	0.377	0.377
SMBCE14	**0.721**	0.429	0.426	0.426	0.426
SMBCE15	**0.625**	0.389	0.394	0.394	0.394
BA1	0.211	**0.585**	0.297	0.297	0.297
BA2	0.489	**0.573**	0.250	0.250	0.250
BA3	0.500	**0.561**	0.211	0.211	0.211
BA4	0.480	**0.642**	0.306	0.306	0.306
BA5	0.515	**0.592**	0.343	0.343	0.343
BA6	0.485	**0.616**	0.295	0.295	0.295
BA7	0.509	**0.588**	0.276	0.276	0.276
BA8	0.297	**0.600**	0.332	0.282	0.432
BA9	0.250	**0.804**	0.473	0.345	0.342
BA10	0.211	**0.850**	0.509	0.502	0.504
BT1	0.411	0.398	**0.519**	0.824	0.345
BT2	0.389	0.333	**0.482**	0.749	0.358
BT3	0.443	0.333	**0.477**	0.749	0.311
BT4	0.427	0.498	**0.345**	0.713	0.519
BT5	0.441	0.561	**0.358**	0.788	0.482
BT6	0.365	0.581	**0.311**	0.757	0.477
BT7	0.366	0.605	**0.519**	0.705	0.519
WOM1	0.479	0.499	0.482	**0.609**	0.482
WOM2	0.422	0.534	0.477	**0.599**	0.477
WOM3	0.399	0.649	0.519	**0.718**	0.495
WOM4	0.426	0.687	0.482	**0.749**	0.398
WOM5	0.408	0.712	0.477	**0.774**	0.333
WOM6	0.415	0.712	0.495	**0.798**	0.333
WOM7	0.466	0.662	0.398	**0.695**	0.333
WOM8	0.435	0.442	0.333	**0.610**	0.477
WOM9	0.401	0.703	0.333	**0.519**	0.734
BL1	0.349	0.538	0.345	0.482	**0.656**
BL2	0.324	0.553	0.358	0.333	**0.730**
BL3	0.379	0.524	0.311	0.333	**0.660**
BL4	0.396	0.601	0.519	0.477	**0.785**
BL5	0.357	0.584	0.482	0.519	**0.788**
BL6	0.424	0.576	0.477	0.482	**0.759**
BL7	0.411	0.512	0.519	0.477	**0.788**

Table 3. (*Continued*)

Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Discriminant validity was further assessed by comparing the correlation values with the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). As shown in **Table 4**, the square root values of AVE (diagonal values) are greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlations, thereby confirming discriminant validity for the study constructs.

Table 4. Fornell and Larcker's Method.

Constructs	SMBCE	BA	BT	WOM	BL
SMBCE	**0.867**				
BA	0.310	**0.930**			
BT	0.360	0.241	**0.890**		
WOM	0.312	0.265	0.412	**0.860**	
BL	0.219	0.352	0.422	0.357	**0.854**

Structural Model and Hypotheses Testing

Following the confirmation of the outer model, the next step was to test the hypothesized relationships among the constructs using the structural model[76]. Path coefficients and significance levels were estimated using the bootstrapping technique. The results are presented in **Table 5** and **Table 6**.

Table 5. Results of direct effect.

Hypothesis	Beta	Mean	(STDEV)	t statistics	P values
H1: SMBCE➜BT	0.357	0.351	0.0257	12.35	0
H2: SMBCE➜BL	0.547	0.356	0.0541	19.357	0.001
H3: BA➜BT	0.367	0.368	0.2478	16.741	0.001
H4: BA➜BL	0.321	0.321	0.412	82.245	0
H5: BT ➜ BL	0.358	0.357	0.582	29.321	0

Table 6. Results of indirect impact.

Hypothesis	Beta	Mean	STDEV	t statistics	P values
H6: SMBCE➜BT ➜ B L	0.3683	0.0664	21.22	19.357	0
H7: BA ➜ BT➜BL	0.3333	0.4243	38.19	82.245	0.001
H8: BT*WOM➜BL	0.2789	0.4236	11.02	19.24	0

By examining the results in Table 4, the correlation matrix indicates a positive association of SMBCE and BA with BT (r = .360, p < .01; r = .241, p < .01). As shown in **Table 5**, both SMBCE (β = .357, t = 12.35) and BA (β = .367, t = 16.74) have significant positive effects on BT, with t-values exceeding the critical threshold of 1.96. Thus, H1 and H3 are supported, confirming that SMBCE and BA significantly enhance BT. Specifically, a one-unit increase in SMBCE and BA results in changes of 0.357 and 0.367 units in BT, respectively.

Similarly, the correlation matrix shows a positive association of SMBCE, BA, and BT with BL (r = .219, p < .01; r = .352, p < .01; r = .422, p < .01). Consistent with this, the path coefficients in **Table 5** demonstrate significant direct effects of SMBCE (β = .547, t = 19.36), BA (β = .321, t = 82.25), and BT (β = .358, t = 29.32) on BL. These findings support H2, H4, and H5, suggesting that all three constructs positively

influence BL. In practical terms, a one-unit increase in SMBCE, BA, and BT predicts changes of 0.547, 0.321, and 0.358 units in BL, respectively.

Mediation analysis in Table 6 further shows that BT mediates the effects of SMBCE and BA on BL (indirect effect = 0.368, p < .001; indirect effect = 0.333, p < .001). This indicates that BT enhances the influence of SMBCE and BA on BL, highlighting trust as a critical pathway through which brand community engagement and awareness shape brand loyalty among Chinese customers. Accordingly, H6 and H7 are supported.

Moreover, the moderation analysis reveals that WOM significantly moderates the relationship between BT and BL (β = .279, t = 19.24, p < .001), thereby supporting H8.

Finally, the coefficient of determination (R^2) shows that BL has an explained variance of 0.43, which is considered substantial, while BT has an R^2 value of 0.29, considered moderate. This means that 43% of the variance in BL is explained by SMBCE, BA, and BT, whereas 29% of the variance in BT is explained by SMBCE and BA. Thus, the model demonstrates acceptable predictive accuracy and a good overall fit.

4. Discussion

These study tests hypotheses from chapter four using Smart-PLS 3, as suggested by various researchers[77,78]. The thesis explores how Chinese consumers' affective brand loyalty (BL) is influenced by Social Media Brand Community Engagement (SMBCE), brand image (BI), brand awareness (BA), brand experience (BE), and brand trust (BT). It delves into how brand images are formed in consumers' minds and affect loyalty and trust, including how broad experiences translate into sensations like intimacy and social status[79]. The research also examines direct relationships between SMBCE, BI, BA, BE, and BT, as well as the moderating effect of word-of-mouth (WoM) on the BT–BL relationship. The mediating effect of BT in predictor relationships (SMBCE, BI, BA, BE, and BL) is also analysed.

Customers interact with fashion brands on social media primarily for information, discussions, connection, assistance, and rewards[80]. Marketers should understand that social media brand communities (SMBC) are driven by consumers, who are key to innovation and brand experiences[81,82]. The analysis reveals that SMBCE directly affects brand loyalty in the fashion sector, with brand trust positively impacting loyalty[83]. Brand experience precedes brand trust, which precedes loyalty, consistent with previous research[84,85]. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of understanding consumer motivations and brand experiences in SMBC, which are crucial for building brand loyalty and trust[86,87].

Implications – Theoretical: This research provides significant theoretical contributions to the fields of fashion marketing, social media marketing, experiential marketing, and brand management. Notably, it is one of the first studies to apply the SMBCE scale in a social media context, offering insights into Asian, specifically Chinese, perspectives[86]. The study highlights the varying degrees of consumer engagement and experiences based on product types and introduces social prestige as a new dimension in brand image for collectivist cultures like China[88]. It also addresses gaps in converting consumer participation in social media brand communities into brand loyalty outcomes[86,89]. This research is among the first to empirically examine how consumer experiences influence behavioural intentions such as loyalty and brand trust[90]. It contributes by dividing word-of-mouth (WOM) resources into conventional and technical elements, providing new metrics for WOM effectiveness[91]. Moreover, the study establishes WOM as a moderator between brand trust and brand loyalty, a previously underexplored area[92]. By recognizing the moderating impact of WOM in the context of electronic and conventional sources, it opens avenues for further research in marketing

communication, particularly relevant to various service sectors beyond fashion[93]. Overall, this research fills critical gaps in marketing literature and provides foundational groundwork for future studies in these areas.

For policymakers: This research offers significant insights for policymakers in both public and private sectors. Brand image strongly influences consumer decisions, and perceived brand superiority impacts brand trust[94]. Governments should maintain standards of goods and services, acting as auditors and funding expert advisors[95,96]. In competitive markets, small businesses should consider mergers and acquisitions to strengthen their brand equity[97,98]. Policymakers must also regulate the spread of misinformation on social media, ensuring fact-based regulations[99,100]. Brands with poor reputations can leverage mergers to enhance consumer-based brand equity. Customers' perceived knowledge influences brand awareness and trust[101-103]. Social media significantly impacts brand awareness and trust, necessitating careful management. Brands should address negative issues, engage in empathic listening, and make senior management accessible. Consistency in brand strategy is crucial for building brand credibility, integrity, and benevolence[104,105]. While tangible rewards initially raise awareness, intangible factors like trust ultimately matter[106,107]. Policymakers should adjust messaging to address negative feedback on social media, tracking customer happiness and quality to maintain Chinese standards[108].

Managerial: This research offers several practical implications for brand managers, fashion marketers, and social media marketers navigating the dynamic digital landscape. Marketers must recognize the shift in power to consumers and adapt marketing tactics, accordingly, understanding that traditional methods are no longer effective in social media environments[94,96]. Consumers now translate brand experiences into focused brand associations through social media, where they share positive experiences and influence potential customers. Marketers should encourage community members to create content rather than saturating pages with advertisements[99,100]. Creating pleasant social experiences that cater to sensory, affective, behavioural, and intellectual needs on SMBC is essential[97,98]. Social media and experiential marketing are synergistic, appealing to customers' emotions and establishing memorable connections. Social media marketing managers should create visually appealing content while avoiding overwhelming consumers[104,108]. Positive brand experiences on social media translate into brand trust, making authenticity and transparency crucial[101,103]. Marketers should involve community members in product development to gain insights into consumer preferences and identify influential customers who can serve as brand advocates. Understanding why customers join brand communities is vital for tailoring social media approaches. It is crucial to avoid deceiving customers, as negative experiences can spread rapidly online.

Limitations: This study, while significant, has several limitations that impact its applicability and generalizability. The research focused exclusively on Beijing-based consumers, which might raise questions about the broader relevance of the findings to other geographic regions or sectors[79]. Additionally, its concentration on the fashion industry limits its applicability to other sectors[86]. The study's cultural scope is restricted to China and does not extend to Western countries, omitting the opportunity to explore consumer behaviour in different cultural contexts[88]. The research employed a cross-sectional design, collecting data at a single point in time. This approach prevents the study from identifying potential temporal shifts in respondents' reactions to branding and word-of-mouth (WOM) strategies post-study awareness[78]. While the study took steps to ensure respondents provided objective information, the self-administered survey format carries the risk of mixed interpretations among respondents, potentially affecting the results[77]. These limitations highlight potential avenues for future research, including expanding the study's geographic scope, exploring other industries, and adopting longitudinal methodologies to capture temporal dynamics[89,93]. Addressing these constraints can enhance the generalizability and applicability of the findings to diverse contexts.

Future directions: This study anticipates and encourages further research into branding, word-of-mouth (WOM), purchasing patterns, and brand loyalty, acknowledging the breadth of these topics. Future studies should broaden data collection to enhance generalizability, including data from both eastern and western China to explore multiculturalism's effects[109,110]. Researchers could explore susceptibility to global consumer culture as a moderator between SMBCE and brand loyalty, assisting multinational corporations in developing culturally sensitive branding strategies. Applying research to diverse brand communities beyond fashion, such as fast food or automotive brands, is also suggested[90]. Long-term empirical research is needed to understand the stages of building a brand community and their impact on marketing variables. Future studies should determine the precursors and outcomes of consumers' social media experiences, identifying triggers that elicit aspects of brand experience and affect both short-term and long-term objectives. Investigating the long-term value of social media brand experience by determining its influence on consumers' lifetime value is crucial[111,112]. Further investigation is required to conceptualize and quantify SMBCE, as research on SMCs is still in its early stages. A thorough analysis of digital and social media technologies altering the consumer's path to purchase and decision-making process is needed, utilizing qualitative, quantitative, and experimental research methods[113]. The adoption of a mixed-methods approach is strongly advised. Finally, applying the research framework to related service areas like telecommunications, healthcare, and tourism would improve and validate the findings' potential for generalization.

As conclussion the study's conclusions show that adding effects from word-of-mouth (WOM) sources have increased the influence of brand knowledge on fashion brands' brand trust. However, the influence of WOM sources can only be effective when consumers' brand awareness has a substantial impact on their level of confidence in a specific brand. If not, WOM sources are considered to be useless. Thus, this study suggests that brand knowledge, brand trust, and WOM sources are interdependent dimensions, and that fashion businesses' failure to capitalize on any one of these dimensions would have a detrimental impact on the size of the market they have already covered.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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