

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The interplay of cultural environment and individual psychology: How festival branding fosters loyalty through social word-of-mouth

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the cultural environment of the Jinan Spring Water Festival shapes individuals' psychological responses and social behaviors, with particular attention to the mechanisms through which festival experiences foster long-term loyalty. Situated within a broader sociocultural context, the festival functions not only as a cultural event but also as a shared social space that facilitates emotional connection, social interaction, and collective meaning-making among participants. Drawing on a quantitative research design, data were collected from 200 participants to examine how perceptions of the festival environment influence audience engagement, communicative intentions, and subsequent loyalty behaviors. The findings indicate that positive perceptions of the festival's cultural atmosphere and experiential qualities significantly enhance participants' willingness to engage in word-of-mouth communication, which in turn strengthens their loyalty to the event. These results highlight the pivotal mediating role of word-of-mouth intention in linking individual psychological responses to sustained engagement. By framing festival participation as a socially embedded experience, this study contributes to the social psychology of cultural consumption and offers practical insights for festival organizers seeking to cultivate enduring audience relationships through meaningful cultural and social interaction.

Keywords: brand image; brand engagement; word-of-mouth intention; brand loyalty; Jinan Spring Water Festival

1. Introduction

The Jinan Spring Water Festival is a prominent annual cultural event held in Jinan, the capital city of Shandong Province, China. First organized in 1982, the festival was initiated to celebrate the city's rich natural spring resources and its long-standing water culture. Jinan, known as the "City of Springs," is home to more than 700 natural artesian springs, among which Baotu Spring, Black Tiger Spring, Pearl Spring, and Five Dragon Pool are the most famous^[1]. The festival, typically held from late August to early September, coincides with the period when the springs reach their optimal flow, symbolizing vitality, prosperity, and harmony between humans and nature. Over the past four decades, the event has evolved into a major public event that reflects shared values, regional identity, and collective emotional attachment to place^[2].

Beyond its role as a cultural celebration, the Jinan Spring Water Festival functions as a socially

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 19 December 2025 | Accepted: 28 January 2026 | Available online: 25 February 2026

CITATION

Hu BY, Abdullah QDL. The interplay of cultural environment and individual psychology: How festival branding fosters loyalty through social word-of-mouth. *Environment and Social Psychology* 2026; 11(2): 4503 doi:10.59429/esp.v11i2.4503.

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embedded environment that facilitates interpersonal interaction, emotional engagement, and community participation^[3]. Through a wide range of activities, including cultural performances, folk exhibitions, art displays, water-themed events, and public participation programs, the festival provides opportunities for residents and visitors to construct shared meanings and social connections. These experiences not only reinforce cultural continuity but also contribute to the formation of collective perceptions and emotional bonds associated with the festival. In this sense, the festival operates as a social space where individual psychological responses intersect with broader cultural narratives and communal identities.

Supported by local government and cultural institutions, the festival has gradually developed into a symbol of Jinan's urban image and cultural vitality. Rather than functioning solely as a tourism promotion tool, it represents a form of cultural communication through which values, identities, and social meanings are expressed and negotiated. This sociocultural dimension makes the festival an appropriate context for examining how individuals' perceptions, emotional engagement, and social interactions shape their long-term attachment to a collective cultural event.

Within this context, audience loyalty can be understood not merely as repeated participation, but as a psychologically grounded outcome rooted in identification, emotional resonance, and social endorsement^[4]. Brand image and brand engagement, when viewed through a social-psychological lens, reflect individuals' cognitive and affective evaluations of the festival as a cultural symbol, as well as their depth of involvement in the shared experience^[5,6]. Word-of-mouth (WOM) intention, in turn, represents a form of social expression through which individuals communicate meanings, values, and evaluations to others, reinforcing collective perceptions and social bonds^[7,8].

While empirical studies have examined festival loyalty and related mechanisms in Western or broadly international contexts, such as how festival attributes influence satisfaction and loyalty in the Weekend Beach Festival in Spain ^[9]and how involvement shapes satisfaction and loyalty relationships in Korean local food festivals ^[10], these studies primarily focus on general festivalscape or involvement factors and their effects on loyalty. Recent work has also explored how knowledge and perceived authenticity relate to loyalty at cultural festivals in Italy ^[11], and how experience quality and existential authenticity shape loyalty outcomes in a music festival context using S-O-R theory. However, few studies have explicitly investigated how culturally embedded festival environments shape psychological and social mechanisms, such as word-of-mouth intentions, and how these jointly foster long-term loyalty within regional cultural festivals in China. This gap is particularly notable given the unique sociocultural and historical characteristics of events such as the Jinan Spring Water Festival, which may operate differently from many Western festival settings examined to date.

2. Literature review

This section focuses on the conceptual relationship between brand image, brand engagement, and brand loyalty, with particular attention to the mediating role of word-of-mouth intention. Rather than treating these constructs solely as marketing outcomes, the discussion emphasizes their psychological and social dimensions, highlighting how individuals form meanings, emotional attachments, and behavioral intentions within a shared cultural context.

2.1. The relationship between brand image and brand loyalty

Brand image refers to individuals' overall cognitive and emotional perceptions of a brand, shaped through accumulated experiences, social interactions, and symbolic interpretations^[12,13]. It reflects not only functional evaluations but also affective and cultural associations that individuals attach to a brand. From a

social-psychological perspective, brand image represents a shared mental representation that influences how individuals interpret, evaluate, and relate to a brand within a social environment^[14].

Numerous studies have established a strong and positive relationship between brand image and brand loyalty. When consumers perceive a brand positively due to consistent quality, favorable experiences, and strong brand identity, they are more likely to repurchase, recommend the brand to others, and resist switching to competitors^[15-17]. A favorable brand image enhances customer satisfaction and perceived value, both of which are key drivers of brand loyalty.

In the context of cultural festivals, brand image extends beyond functional attributes to encompass symbolic meanings, cultural authenticity, and collective identity. A well-established festival image can shape participants' emotional responses, foster a sense of belonging, and strengthen identification with the event. For festivals such as the Jinan Spring Water Festival, whose identity is closely tied to local culture and environmental heritage, a coherent and positive brand image can enhance perceived authenticity and deepen participants' emotional attachment, thereby encouraging sustained engagement and loyalty^[18].

However, the existing literature presents inconsistent findings regarding the direct influence of brand image on brand loyalty. For instance, Azzahra and Fachira (2022)^[19], in their investigation of a beauty brand, concluded that brand image does not exert a direct positive effect on brand loyalty. Similarly, Çelik (2022)^[20], using data from 318 respondents, found no significant direct relationship between brand image and brand loyalty. Furthermore, Fitriani and Achmad (2021)^[21] reported that while brand image appears to have a positive influence on brand loyalty, the effect was not statistically significant.

These inconsistencies suggest that the effect of brand image may not be purely direct but may operate through psychological or social mechanisms such as emotional engagement or interpersonal communication. Given these mixed findings, further investigation is needed to clarify how brand image influences brand loyalty within specific sociocultural contexts. Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Brand image has a positive effect on brand loyalty.

2.2. The relationship between brand engagement and brand loyalty

Brand engagement is defined as the extent to which consumers invest cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally in a brand through ongoing interactions and experiential encounters^[22]. From a social-psychological perspective, brand engagement reflects a dynamic process in which individuals actively construct meaning, develop emotional bonds, and integrate the brand into their sense of self and social identity^[23]. Rather than being a passive response, engagement represents a form of psychological involvement that emerges through repeated interaction, shared experiences, and perceived relevance.

Extant research consistently identifies brand engagement as a key antecedent of brand loyalty. When individuals feel emotionally connected to a brand and perceive their interactions as meaningful, they are more likely to develop enduring attachment and commitment. High levels of engagement have been shown to enhance perceived value, satisfaction, and emotional resonance, which in turn foster repeat participation, positive word-of-mouth, and long-term loyalty^[23-25]. From this perspective, brand loyalty is not merely a behavioral outcome but a reflection of sustained psychological attachment formed through continued engagement.

In the context of cultural and festival settings, brand engagement is often cultivated through immersive and participatory experiences that encourage emotional involvement and social interaction^[26]. Festivals such as the Jinan Spring Water Festival provide opportunities for attendees to co-create experiences, share collective memories, and express cultural identity, all of which strengthen emotional bonds with the event.

These shared experiences contribute to a sense of belonging and identification, reinforcing participants' willingness to maintain a long-term relationship with the festival.

Nevertheless, existing empirical findings suggest that the relationship between brand engagement and brand loyalty may not always be direct or uniform. Some studies have reported that engagement does not necessarily translate into loyalty without the presence of additional psychological mechanisms. For instance, Li et al. (2020)^[27] found that customer involvement did not exert a direct effect on brand loyalty. Similarly, Aljuhmani et al. (2022)^[28] reported that emotional components of consumer brand engagement did not mediate the engagement-loyalty relationship. Chou et al. (2023)^[29] further suggested that the impact of brand engagement on brand loyalty may be mediated by other intervening variables, indicating that the relationship is not always straightforward.

These findings suggest that the engagement–loyalty relationship is complex and context-dependent. Given these mixed results, further investigation is warranted to clarify how brand engagement contributes to brand loyalty within specific sociocultural contexts. Accordingly, this study examines the relationship between brand engagement and brand loyalty in the setting of the Jinan Spring Water Festival and proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Brand engagement has a positive effect on brand loyalty.

2.3. The mediating role of word-of-mouth (WOM) intention

Word-of-mouth intention refers to an individual's willingness to share their experiences, opinions, or recommendations about a brand or event with others, either through interpersonal communication or via digital platforms^[4]. From a social-psychological perspective, WOM represents a form of social expression through which individuals communicate meanings, affirm social identities, and influence collective perceptions^[30]. In experiential contexts such as festivals, WOM functions not only as an information-sharing mechanism but also as a socially embedded behavior that reflects emotional involvement and value alignment.

Prior research has consistently demonstrated the positive influence of WOM intention on brand loyalty^[31]. Beyond being a consequence of positive experiences, WOM often serves as a mediating mechanism through which perceptions and emotions are transformed into enduring behavioral intentions. When individuals share favorable opinions about a brand or event, they reinforce their own attitudes while simultaneously influencing others' perceptions, thereby strengthening their psychological attachment and commitment. Empirical studies have shown that WOM mediates the relationships between brand image and consumer behavior, as well as between experiential factors and loyalty outcomes. For instance, Wiratama et al. (2022)^[32] revealed that WOM mediates the effect of brand image and store atmosphere on purchase decisions. Similarly, Rahi, Ammara, and Qazi (2021)^[33] found that positive WOM significantly mediates the relationship between advertising and customer loyalty.

Despite growing attention to the role of WOM, its mediating function within the context of cultural and experiential events remains underexplored. In festival settings such as the Jinan Spring Water Festival, participants' perceptions of brand image and their level of engagement are likely to shape their willingness to share experiences through interpersonal communication and digital media. Such communicative behaviors not only influence potential visitors but also reinforce participants' own sense of belonging and emotional attachment to the event. Through this process, WOM becomes a critical psychological and social pathway linking individual experiences with sustained loyalty. In light of these considerations, this study proposes that word-of-mouth intention serves as a key mediating mechanism between brand-related perceptions and brand loyalty within the context of a cultural festival. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: Word-of-mouth intention mediates the relationship between brand image and brand loyalty.

H3b: Word-of-mouth intention mediates the relationship between brand engagement and brand loyalty.

2.4. Theoretical foundation

This study is grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974)^[34], which has been widely applied in social psychology and consumer behavior research to explain how environmental stimuli influence individuals’ internal psychological processes and subsequent behavioral responses. Rather than viewing behavior as a direct reaction to external inputs, the S–O–R model emphasizes the mediating role of internal cognitive and emotional states in shaping human responses.

Within the context of this study, brand image and brand engagement are conceptualized as external stimuli (S) that emerge from individuals’ interactions with the festival environment. These stimuli encompass not only promotional cues and symbolic representations but also experiential and social elements embedded in the cultural setting of the Jinan Spring Water Festival. Such stimuli shape how individuals interpret, evaluate, and emotionally respond to the festival experience.

The organism (O) component is represented by word-of-mouth intention, which reflects individuals’ internal psychological reactions to the perceived brand environment. From a social-psychological perspective, word-of-mouth intention embodies both cognitive evaluations and affective responses, capturing the extent to which individuals internalize their experiences and feel motivated to communicate them to others. It functions as an expressive and relational process through which participants make sense of their experiences, affirm social identity, and reinforce emotional connections with the festival.

The response (R) in this framework is reflected in brand loyalty, which encompasses intentions to revisit, recommend, and maintain a long-term psychological attachment to the festival. Brand loyalty thus represents the behavioral and attitudinal outcome of the internal processing of brand-related stimuli. By applying the S–O–R framework, this study views loyalty as the outcome of interactions between environmental cues, psychological states, and social responses. Overall, the S – O – R model provides a clear framework for explaining how brand image and brand engagement influence word-of-mouth intention and brand loyalty in cultural festivals.

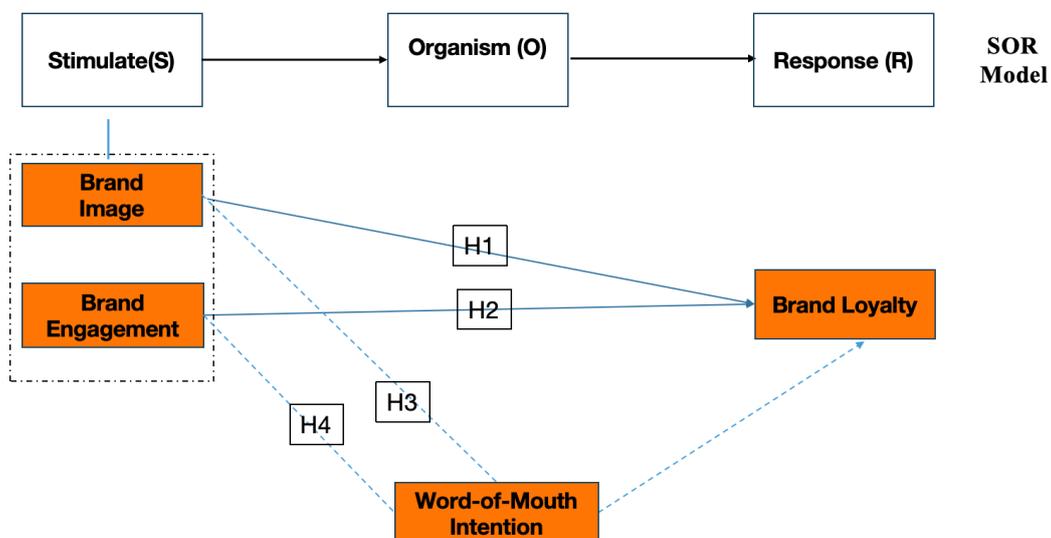


Figure 1. Research framework.

3. Research methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the effects of brand image and brand engagement on brand loyalty, with particular attention to the mediating role of word-of-mouth intention in the context of the Jinan Spring Water Festival. The target population comprised both local residents of Jinan and visitors from other regions who had previously attended the festival. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that all respondents had relevant knowledge and firsthand experience of the festival. To operationalize this criterion, the first screening question in the online questionnaire asked, “Have you ever attended the Jinan Spring Water Festival?” Only participants who responded affirmatively were permitted to complete the survey. This procedure ensured that the collected data were based on informed evaluations of the festival brand rather than on hypothetical or indirect impressions. Data were collected through an online survey, yielding 200 valid responses after data screening. Among the respondents, 79 were local residents of Jinan (39.5%), while 121 were visitors from outside Jinan (60.5%). This composition reflects the dual structure of the festival audience and enhances the representativeness of the sample by incorporating perspectives from both resident and tourist groups. Prior to data collection, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1.9.7 to determine the minimum required sample size for regression analysis. With three predictors (brand image, brand engagement, and word-of-mouth intention), an effect size of $f^2 = 0.15$ (medium), $\alpha = 0.05$, and statistical power of 0.80, the analysis indicated a minimum sample size of 119. Therefore, the final sample of 200 respondents exceeds this requirement, providing sufficient statistical power for hypothesis testing. Although the sample size is modest relative to the large-scale nature of a long-established public festival, the purposive selection of experienced attendees and the balanced inclusion of both local residents and visitors support the adequacy and relevance of the sample for the present research.

This study employed validated measurement instruments adapted to the context of the Jinan Spring Water Festival. Brand image was measured using Cho et al.’s (2015)^[35] framework, which divides brand image into mystery, intimacy, and sensuality dimensions, capturing consumers’ overall perceptions through 30 items. Brand engagement was assessed based on the work of Cheung et al. (2021)^[36], covering cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement; the original scale was adjusted to eight items reflecting participants’ psychological involvement and actual participation in the festival. Word-of-mouth intention was measured using the scale from Tessema et al. (2024)^[37], grounded in the cognitive-affective-behavioral framework, and was adapted to capture attendees’ likelihood to share positive experiences about the festival. Brand loyalty was evaluated using Soedarto et al.’s (2019)^[38] two-dimensional scale, encompassing both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty, ensuring comprehensive assessment of participants’ commitment. All instruments demonstrated strong theoretical foundations and were suitably modified to ensure relevance and reliability within the cultural festival setting.

4. Data analysis results

Prior to the formal survey, a pilot test was conducted with 50 participants to assess the clarity and reliability of the questionnaire items. **Table 1** presents the Cronbach’s Alpha values for the four core variables in this study: brand image ($\alpha = 0.959$), brand engagement ($\alpha = 0.892$), word-of-mouth intention ($\alpha = 0.9$), and brand loyalty ($\alpha = 0.88$). All Cronbach’s Alpha values exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency, with values above 0.90 reflecting excellent reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). In addition, the CR values of all constructs range from 0.909 to 0.963, which are well above the suggested minimum value of 0.70, further confirming the reliability of the measurement

scales. Regarding convergent validity, the AVE values for all constructs exceed the recommended threshold of 0.50, indicating that each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators. The VIF values for the independent variables ranged from 1.392 to 1.952, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern in the model. These results suggest that the measurement items for each construct are consistent and reliable, providing a strong foundation for subsequent validity testing. The high reliability across all variables confirms the robustness of the measurement instruments and supports their applicability in the context of cultural festival branding.

Table 1. Cronbach’s alpha of variables.

Variables	α	CR	AVE	VIF
Brand Image	0.959	0.963	0.564	1.952
Brand Engagement	0.892	0.914	0.574	1.672
Word-of-Mouth Intention	0.900	0.926	0.715	1.392
Brand Loyalty	0.880	0.909	0.626	—

Based on data collected from 200 valid respondents, the correlation analysis results are presented in **Table 2**. All variables are positively and significantly correlated at the 0.01 level. Brand image demonstrates strong positive correlations with brand engagement ($r = 0.731$), word-of-mouth intention ($r = 0.741$), and brand loyalty ($r = 0.832$). Likewise, brand engagement and word-of-mouth intention are significantly correlated with brand loyalty ($r = 0.680$ and $r = 0.665$, respectively). These results provide preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships in the conceptual model at the correlational level.

Table 2. Pearson correlation coefficients Between Variables (N = 200).

Variables	Brand Image	Brand Engagement	Word-of-Mouth Intention	Brand Loyalty
Brand Image	1			
Brand Engagement	0.731**	1		
Word-of-Mouth Intention	0.741**		1	
Brand Loyalty	0.832**			1

** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)

As shown in **Table 3**, the results of the regression analysis confirm that both brand image and brand engagement have significant positive effects on brand loyalty. Specifically, brand image significantly predicts brand loyalty ($t = 21.107$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 69.2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.692$, $F = 445.506$), indicating a strong predictive relationship. Similarly, brand engagement also has a significant positive impact on brand loyalty ($t=13.041$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 46.2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.462$, $F = 170.060$). These results support Hypotheses 1 and 2 and suggest that both a favorable brand image and active consumer engagement play critical roles in enhancing brand loyalty in the context of the Jinan Spring Water Festival.

Table 3. Regression analysis.

	Path	R ²	F	B	Std.Error	t	p	Result
H1	BI→BL	0.692	445.506	0.979	0.046	21.107	<0.001	Supported
H2	BE→BL	0.462	170.06	0.699	0.054	13.041	<0.001	Supported

The mediation analysis (**Table 4**) demonstrates that brand image (BI) exerts a strong, positive direct effect on word-of-mouth ($t = 15.515$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.752, 0.971]) and on brand loyalty (BL) ($t = 12.894$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.749, 1.020]). Although the direct path from WOM to BL was only marginally significant

($t = 1.853$, $p = .065$, 95% CI $[-0.007, 0.226]$), the bootstrap-estimated indirect effect of BI on BL via WOM was significant ($ab = 0.094$, $SE = 0.048$, 95% CI $[0.005, 0.195]$, 5,000 resamples), indicating a partial mediation. These findings suggest that while brand image independently enhances loyalty, positive word-of-mouth serves as a meaningful conduit through which brand image further bolsters consumer loyalty.

Table 4. Mediation analysis of WOM between BI & BL.

Path	Coeff.	SE	t	p	95% CI (LLCI, ULCI)	Result
BI → WOM (a path)	0.862	0.056	15.515	0	[0.7523, 0.971]	H3a Supported
BI → BL (direct)	0.885	0.069	12.894	0	[0.749, 1.02]	
WOM → BL (b path)	0.109	0.059	1.853	0.065	[-0.007, 0.226]	
BI → WOM → BL (Indirect effect)	0.094	0.048	—	—	[0.005, 0.195]*	

*Based on 5000 bootstrap samples. CI excludes zero → significant indirect effect. Brand Image=BI, Brand Loyalty=BL

Table 5. Mediation analysis of WOM between BE & BL.

Path	Coeff.	SE	t	p	95% CI (LLCI, ULCI)	Result
BI → WOM (a path)	0.613	0.058	10.618	0	[0.499, 0.726]	H3b Supported
BI → BL (direct)	0.45	0.061	7.438	0	[0.331, 0.57]	
WOM → BL (b path)	0.406	0.06	6.814	0	[0.288, 0.52]	
BI → WOM → BL (Indirect effect)	0.249	0.041	—	—	[0.17, 0.332]*	

*Based on 5000 bootstrap samples. CI excludes zero → significant indirect effect. Brand Engagement=BE, Brand Loyalty=BL

The mediation analysis presented in **Table 5** indicates that brand experience has a significant positive influence on word-of-mouth ($a = 0.613$, $SE = 0.058$, $t = 10.618$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[0.499, 0.726]$) and directly predicts brand loyalty (BL) ($c' = 0.450$, $SE = 0.061$, $t = 7.438$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[0.331, 0.570]$), thus supporting Hypothesis 4. Additionally, WOM has a significant positive effect on BL ($b = 0.406$, $SE = 0.060$, $t = 6.814$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[0.288, 0.520]$). The indirect effect of BE on BL through WOM is also statistically significant ($ab = 0.249$, $SE = 0.041$, 95% CI $[0.170, 0.332]$, based on 5,000 bootstrap samples), as the confidence interval excludes zero. These results provide strong evidence for a partial mediation effect, indicating that while brand experience has a direct positive effect on brand loyalty, WOM plays a critical mediating role that further strengthens this relationship.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that both brand image and brand engagement exert significant positive effects on brand loyalty, with word-of-mouth intention playing a partial mediating role in these relationships. These results can be effectively interpreted through the S–O–R framework, which emphasizes how external environmental cues shape individuals' internal psychological processes and subsequently influence behavioral outcomes. In the present context, brand image and brand engagement function as salient external stimuli, shaping participants' cognitive evaluations and emotional experiences, while word-of-

mouth intention represents the internal psychological state through which these influences are translated into loyal behavioral responses.

Consistent with the S–O–R logic, the findings suggest that exposure to meaningful brand cues and participatory experiences within the festival environment activates internal processes such as emotional resonance, perceived value, and personal identification. These internal responses, in turn, increase individuals' willingness to express positive evaluations and recommendations. In this sense, brand loyalty emerges not merely as a behavioral outcome, but as the culmination of a psychological process in which perception, emotion, and social expression are closely intertwined. The results align with prior studies emphasizing the mediating role of internal affective and cognitive mechanisms in linking environmental stimuli to behavioral outcomes^[38-41].

Furthermore, the observed partial mediation suggests that brand loyalty is not only shaped by the direct influence of brand image and engagement, but is also reinforced through consumers' willingness to advocate for the brand. This insight corresponds with recent findings by Manzoor et al. (2022)^[42], who highlighted that brand-based WOM is not just a communication outcome but an essential psychological pathway through which brand experiences enhance loyalty. In other words, when consumers internalize brand value and emotionally engage with a brand, they are more likely to express their brand attachment through advocacy behaviors, which further consolidates their loyalty.

Importantly, the partial mediation observed in this study suggests that brand loyalty is shaped by both direct and indirect pathways. While favorable brand image and engaging experiences can directly enhance loyalty, their influence is significantly strengthened when individuals actively articulate and share their positive experiences with others. This highlights the dynamic and socially embedded nature of loyalty formation, in which internal evaluations and external expressions continuously interact.

From a practical perspective, these findings underscore the importance of designing festival experiences that not only deliver high-quality content but also encourage social interaction, emotional expression, and narrative sharing. For events such as the Jinan Spring Water Festival, fostering environments that invite participation, storytelling, and community engagement can amplify word-of-mouth processes and, in turn, strengthen long-term brand loyalty. By viewing brand loyalty as an outcome of both psychological engagement and social communication, festival organizers can more effectively cultivate enduring relationships with their audiences.

Overall, by integrating the S–O–R framework with empirical evidence from a cultural festival context, this study advances understanding of how brand-related stimuli are transformed into sustained loyalty through internal psychological mechanisms and socially embedded behaviors.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how brand image and brand engagement influence brand loyalty, with WOM intention functioning as a key mediating mechanism. The findings demonstrate that both brand image and brand engagement exert significant positive effects on brand loyalty, and that these effects are partially transmitted through individuals' willingness to engage in word-of-mouth communication. From a social-psychological perspective, these results highlight how external brand-related stimuli are internalized, interpreted, and transformed into stable attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

Theoretically, this study extends the S–O–R framework by situating brand-related processes within a broader psychological and social context. Brand image and brand engagement operate as external stimuli that shape individuals' cognitive appraisals and emotional experiences, while word-of-mouth intention reflects an

internal psychological state through which meaning is constructed and communicated. Brand loyalty, in turn, emerges as a socially embedded behavioral outcome, reflecting not only repeated behavioral intention but also emotional attachment and identification. By integrating these components, the study underscores the importance of psychological mediation in explaining how individuals move from perception and experience to enduring loyalty.

From a social-psychological standpoint, the findings emphasize that loyalty is not merely a transactional outcome but a socially constructed process. Word-of-mouth communication functions as a form of social expression through which individuals affirm their attitudes, negotiate shared meanings, and reinforce social bonds. In the context of cultural events such as the Jinan Spring Water Festival, this process is particularly salient, as shared experiences and collective participation intensify emotional resonance and strengthen interpersonal connections. Thus, brand loyalty emerges not only from favorable evaluations but also from socially embedded interactions that validate individual experiences within a broader community.

This study provides practical insights for organizers of the Jinan Spring Water Festival. Results show that positive perceptions of the festival's cultural and experiential environment increase word-of-mouth intentions, which in turn enhance long-term festival loyalty. Organizers should design water-themed, participatory activities to foster emotional and social engagement. For example, guided spring tours, interactive fountain-lighting ceremonies, and water-art workshops can strengthen visitors' connection to the festival. Storytelling sessions on the historical and ecological significance of Jinan's springs, combined with photo-sharing spaces or social media co-creation activities, can activate psychological mechanisms that promote sharing and social identification. By integrating these strategies, the festival can become a culturally rich and socially engaging experience, encouraging positive word-of-mouth and loyalty among participants.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation, and reliance on self-reported data may introduce common method bias. In addition, the sample's contextual specificity limits generalizability to other cultural or institutional settings. Future research could adopt longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to capture dynamic changes in psychological processes over time and explore how individual differences, cultural norms, or digital communication environments moderate the relationships identified in this study.

In conclusion, this research advances understanding of how brand image and brand engagement influence loyalty through socially and psychologically grounded mechanisms. By emphasizing the mediating role of word-of-mouth intention, this study links branding and social psychology and advances understanding of consumer behavior.

Author contributions

Baoyin Hu contributed to the conceptualization of the study, data collection, data analysis, and drafting of the original manuscript. Qistina Donna Lee Abdullah contributed to the development of the research framework, critical revision of the manuscript, and comprehensive language and grammar editing. Both authors contributed to the interpretation of findings and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Qilu Institute of Technology for providing administrative, technical, and facility support, including access to library resources and research equipment that greatly contributed to the completion of this study.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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