

Exploring the Impact of Content Marketing and Customer Engagement on Brand Loyalty in Chinese Pu'er Tea Brands: The Moderating Role of Chatbots

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Abstract

In the era of digital communication, user-generated media platforms have reshaped the way brands interact with consumers, especially in niche sectors like the Chinese Pu'er tea industry. The rise of short video apps such as Douyin and the widespread use of livestreaming have not only created alternative sales channels but also established more direct and interactive communication pathways between brands and customers. While these changes bring new opportunities, they also pose challenges—particularly as artificial intelligence technologies, including chatbots, increasingly mediate brand-consumer communication. This research aims to fill the knowledge gap regarding the effects of content marketing and customer engagement on brand loyalty within the Chinese Pu'er tea industry. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory from communication studies, the study proposes a conceptual model to examine the drivers of consumer interaction with brand content, especially on We Media platforms. It further incorporates the role of AI-driven chatbots as a moderating factor in these interactions. By integrating international perspectives and adapting them to the Chinese market environment, this paper seeks to clarify the mechanisms through which digital engagement and AI applications contribute to consumer loyalty in traditional cultural industries.

Keywords: Brand Loyalty, Content Marketing, Customer Engagement, Chatbots, AI

Introduction

Tea holds a longstanding cultural and commercial significance in China and remains one of the world's most consumed beverages. As the leading producer globally, China's tea industry plays a vital role in both agriculture and regional economic development. However, the increasing presence of substitute products—such as coffee, bottled water, and juice drinks—has gradually eroded traditional tea's market dominance. In today's consumer-driven landscape, tea enterprises are under increasing pressure to differentiate themselves and expand their market influence amid shifting preferences and intensifying competition.

Amid these dynamics, tea consumption remains frequent and habitual, making brand loyalty a critical driver of sustained business success. With the influx of new tea brands and innovative product formats, consumer choices are more diverse than ever. Consequently, brand identity and emotional resonance are becoming key factors that shape purchasing behavior. As product offerings across companies grow more standardized, firms are shifting focus from product-centric strategies to relationship-based brand building. Strengthening brand loyalty not only enhances customer retention but also serves as a competitive buffer against foreign brands entering the Chinese market. For Pu'er tea brands in particular, cultivating loyal consumer communities has become an essential strategy in maintaining long-term viability.

At present, limited research has explored the relationship between consumer engagement and brand loyalty within the development of tea brands. Building a base of highly loyal consumers can offer tea companies stable income and sustained profitability, while also helping to cut down on marketing expenses and long-term customer retention costs. Importantly, in markets with largely homogeneous products, loyal customers can serve as a competitive advantage by helping brands resist rival encroachment, thereby strengthening their market share and positioning.

The emergence of social media has brought both strategic advantages and practical difficulties for tea businesses. Although an increasing number of tea brands have established a presence on digital platforms, many face challenges in maintaining consistent and impactful brand messaging. In the current fragmented We-Media environment, content is generated and disseminated at an unparalleled pace and scale. At the same time, innovations in artificial intelligence—such as machine learning and natural language processing—are transforming how companies interpret consumer data and engage with audiences. As these AI-powered technologies advance, they are playing a growing role in addressing complex issues in marketing and communication.

Although the market potential for Chinese tea brands remains considerable, the current branding environment reflects several pressing concerns. There is an evident gap between practical branding activities and the availability of relevant theoretical models suited to China's unique market structure. To address this, researchers must move beyond conventional approaches and develop a context-sensitive marketing communication framework that reflects local business realities. A multidisciplinary model—blending insights from communication theory and marketing strategy—can offer both conceptual innovation and empirical value for understanding how tea brands engage modern consumers.

Motivation. Despite Pu'er tea's cultural heritage and commercial potential, many brands still struggle to convert short-term traffic from Douyin/livestreams into lasting loyalty. As product parity rises and media noise intensifies, what "sticks" is no longer the SKU itself but the quality of content, the depth of consumer interaction, and the immediacy of service touchpoints. Understanding how specific content gratifications (functional vs. entertainment), which interaction paths (social vs. brand), and whether AI chatbots can strengthen these effects is therefore not merely of theoretical interest—it is a practical need for sustaining loyal communities and premium pricing in a niche, heritage-rich category like Pu'er tea.

Literature Review

Content Marketing

Despite varying definitions of content marketing across diverse publications, this study intends to use the definition established by the Content Marketing Society, based on a consensus from numerous sources and the trajectory of research development. Content marketing emphasizes the creation and distribution of quality, relevant, and consistent material. An effective marketing instrument designed to captivate and maintain a certain target while eventually generating profit. This concept underscores that the material must be interesting, instructive, or inspirational, while also being relevant to the brand and maintaining consistency.

Functional Information

Many individuals turn to social media platforms to meet their needs for timely and useful information. Unlike traditional media, which primarily focuses on reporting current events, offering expert advice, or alerting audiences to potential risks, social media enables users to actively seek out and share knowledge in a more dynamic and responsive environment. This dynamic model enables users to acquire useful knowledge and remain updated more quickly and in a manner that often aligns closely with their personal interests. In social media studies, such motivation is typically identified as an informational need (Sangwan, 2005).

Entertainment Information

Beyond the amusement and escapism provided by mass media, social media users are also motivated by the desire for fashion and prestige. In studies pertaining to social media, this category of demands is referred to as amusement (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

Social Interaction & Brand Interaction

Social media users often turn to these platforms to maintain visibility within their social networks, relieve emotional stress, and reduce feelings of isolation—needs that were traditionally addressed through mass media as well. However, the interactive nature of social media allows users not only to consume content, but also to actively participate in conversations and exchanges. These behaviors are broadly classified under the umbrella of socialization and interpersonal interaction in digital communication studies.

Within this environment, user engagement typically occurs through two primary channels: communication between brands and their audiences, and exchanges among consumers themselves. These two interaction types are interrelated and collectively strengthen a brand's overall communication effectiveness on social platforms. Given the increasing emphasis companies place on digital engagement, it becomes crucial to distinguish more clearly

between peer-to-peer interactions (social interaction) and brand-related engagement (brand interaction), as each plays a unique role in shaping consumer perception and loyalty.

Self-Concept

Self-concept is characterized as an individual's reasonably consistent perception of themselves across many contexts (Nurmi, 2004). Through social media use, individuals may get gratification from self-concept expression, namely the fulfillment derived from articulating their opinions and values. In studies pertaining to social media, this particular requirement is referred to as self-concept.

Customer Engagement

Consumer involvement originates in service marketing and denotes consumer activity associated with service creation and delivery. During that period, consumer involvement was often used to denote this behavioral idea.

Brand Knowledge

Brand knowledge refers to the understanding gained through familiarity with brand awareness and perception of brand image (Yu Wei & Wang Xingyuan, 2008).

Brand Trust

Emotional trust arises from the confidence built through consumers' interactions with brand service representatives (Johnson & Grayson, 2005).

Online Engagement

Online engagement encompasses actions by consumers like viewing, liking, and sharing content on brand-related social media pages or public profiles (Gummerus et al., 2012).

Chatbots

Chatbots are software applications designed to mimic human conversation and communicate with users through text-based chat interfaces (Zumstein & Hundertmark, 2017). Their capacity to simulate human-like dialogue allows them to engage with customers in a social manner, distinguishing them from traditional self-service technologies (Pizzi et al., 2021; van Doorn et al., 2017).

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty has traditionally been examined through one-dimensional lenses, primarily focusing on either consumer behavior or attitudes. From a behavioral standpoint, loyalty is defined by customers repeatedly choosing the same brand over alternatives, reflecting a pattern of consistent purchasing. However, more recent academic perspectives suggest that this understanding has broadened. Rather than viewing loyalty solely as repetitive buying behavior, scholars now increasingly emphasize the importance of consumers' underlying preferences and emotional inclinations toward a brand, highlighting both attitudinal and behavioral dimensions in loyalty formation.

Theoretical Perspective

According to Mandan (2021), the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, rooted in communication studies, provides a valuable framework for interpreting how individuals

engage with media to satisfy personal needs and derive enjoyment. While this theory aligns well with the context of social media, it has not been widely explored in marketing-related research, particularly in digital consumer behavior. In this study, U&G theory is employed to examine how content marketing strategies and user interactions—especially those mediated by chatbots—shape consumer engagement with brands and products on digital platforms.

Hypothesis Development & Research Model

user-generated brand content with the functional benefits of a YouTube channel collectively shapes consumers' experience evaluations, thereby boosting brand loyalty. Their findings also suggest that effective task coordination plays a crucial role in enhancing the accuracy and dependability of peripheral communication channels (Juhee Kang, Liang Tang, and Ju Yup Lee, 2013). According to Fariba Esmaeilpour (2015), perceived quality—especially in terms of utility—has a positive impact on brand loyalty. Research by Zainuddin et al. (2007) identified various correlations between functionality and the three segments of brand loyalty. Additionally, a study conducted by S.R. Nikashemi and Naser Valaei (2018) demonstrates that brand personality indirectly influences consumers' intended loyalty through functional consistency. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed: H1a: Functional information positively affects brand loyalty.

Hyejeong Kim and Linda S. Niehm (2009) explored how entertainment influences loyalty intentions in the context of online apparel shopping. Kondo, Fumiyo N., Hirata, Jiro, and Akter, Shahriar (2010) categorized seven types of entertainment factors, including email, SMS, MMS, music, ringtones, video streaming, and games, each having distinct effects on the relationship between behavior, satisfaction, and loyalty. Their findings also highlight that entertainment-related information significantly impacts brand loyalty. Chen Lou and Quan Xie (2020) examined the relationships between both functional and entertainment information with brand loyalty. In 2023, Florence Yohandra Suthianto identified connections between online entertainment features and e-satisfaction elements, which subsequently influence brand loyalty outcomes. Additionally, Masayuki Yoshida et al. (2018) found that the entertainment value provided by social media platforms positively enhances users' sense of belonging to online brand communities, which in turn drives brand-related social media engagement and boosts brand loyalty. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H1b: Entertainment information has a positive relationship with brand loyalty.

The study conducted by Bashokouh, Naser Seifollahi, and Allahyar Beigi Firoozi (2020) found that aspects of parasocial interaction play a moderating role in the relationship between consumers' connections to companies and their loyalty toward those companies. Similarly, research by Meysam Shir-Khodaei et al. (2017) demonstrated that social identity is a key factor in the development of brand communities on social media platforms, which in turn directly strengthens brand loyalty. Additionally, the work of Masayuki Yoshida et al. (2018) highlights the importance of engaging with brand-related content on social media as a driver of behavioral brand loyalty. Their findings provide new insights into the factors that affect consumer participation in brand-focused social media activities. Based on these observations, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1c: Social interaction is positively associated with brand loyalty.

The study by Hongwei He, Yan Li, and Lloyd Harri (2012) highlights the crucial role of brand identity in fostering brand loyalty. Research conducted by Liezl-Marié van der Westhuizen (2018) emphasizes that brand experience plays a key role in strengthening an individual's bond with a brand and boosting loyalty. Gen LI, Juan LI, and Xixiang SUN (2019) demonstrated that interaction-based green brand equity has a significant impact on brand loyalty. Additionally, Jane Hemsley-Brown and Ibrahim Alnawas (2016) found that both brand passion and the connection consumers feel toward a brand affect their loyalty. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1d: Brand interaction is positively associated with brand loyalty.

Eun-Ho Kim et al. (2021) found that consumers who have a strong sense of interdependence demonstrate increased parasocial interaction, customer engagement, and brand loyalty, regardless of their perceived interactivity and openness. According to Juhee Kang, Liang Tang, and Ju Yup Lee (2013), brand loyalty is influenced by self-congruity. In their 2016 study, Kem Z.K. Zhang et al. introduced the concept of self-consistency (or the self-factor) and its effect on brand loyalty. Ahmed Rageh Ismail et al. (2020) showed that self-concept and value awareness play a significant role in shaping brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers. More recently, Archana Nayak Kini et al. (2024) explored the relationships between self-brand connections, brand engagement, and brand loyalty. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1e: Self-concept is positively associated with brand loyalty.

Hongwei He's 2011 study demonstrated that both brand recognition and brand knowledge have significant direct and indirect effects on traditional factors influencing brand loyalty, such as perceived value, satisfaction, and trust. The research confirmed the strong influence of brand identification in fostering brand loyalty and highlighted its mediating role in the progression from brand recognition to loyalty. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2a: Brand knowledge is positively associated with brand loyalty.

A study conducted by Reham Shawky Ebrahim in 2019 revealed that social media marketing has a direct impact on brand loyalty and indirectly influences brand equity through the enhancement of brand trust. This research emphasized the crucial role of trust. Similarly, Evi Yusniar's (2022) work is anticipated to offer valuable insights for organizations leveraging social media as a digital marketing tool to deliver authentic, beneficial content to consumers, thereby boosting customer trust and loyalty. According to Geok Theng Lau (1999), trust in a brand is a fundamental factor that greatly contributes to the formation of brand loyalty. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2b: Brand trust is positively associated with brand loyalty.

Katherine Barnett et al. (2016) discovered that consumers who engage with companies on social media platforms like Pinterest tend to have positive brand experiences. This aligns with earlier studies that show a connection between favorable brand experiences and higher levels of brand loyalty. Additionally, the 2016 research by Tahir M. Nisar and Caroline Whitehead provides an in-depth analysis of the motivations behind online brand engagement, focusing on user behavior and its impact on loyalty. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2c: Online engagement is positively associated with brand loyalty.

Yang Cheng and Hua Jiang (2020) found that chatbots provide consumers with useful information, enjoyable entertainment, and technological appeal. Key factors such as social interaction and user satisfaction significantly contribute to a positive experience with chatbot services offered by brands. However, concerns over privacy risks linked to chatbot usage negatively impacted consumer satisfaction. The study further revealed that user satisfaction positively influences the continuous intention to use chatbot services and fosters customer loyalty. Crystal T et al. (2021) suggest that well-designed AI chatbots can assist marketers in creating effective brand strategies. Their research highlights that both the intelligence quotient (IQ) and emotional quotient (EQ) of AI chatbots can be better understood through a multidimensional social support framework, which explains how consumer satisfaction with communication promotes emotional bonds and purchase intentions, ultimately boosting brand loyalty. AI-powered chatbots revolutionize customer service by delivering personalized assistance and actively supporting marketing initiatives. The use of AI enhances the distribution, customization, and evaluation of content in social media and influencer marketing. Integrating AI with predictive analytics enables accurate consumer behavior forecasting, allowing for precise targeting and improved customer experiences that strengthen brand loyalty (Hafize Nurgul Durmus Senyapar, 2024). The author also emphasizes that advancements in AI will refine content marketing's ability to engage consumers and gather their insights more effectively, thereby increasing consumer loyalty and reinforcing brand commitment (Shang-Fang Hsu; Shyhnan Liou, 2019). Based on these findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: The positive effect of functional information on brand loyalty is amplified when chatbot usage is high.

H3b: The positive effect of entertainment information on brand loyalty is amplified when chatbot usage is high.

H3c: The positive effect of social interaction on brand loyalty is amplified when chatbot usage is high.

H3d: The positive effect of brand interaction on brand loyalty is amplified when chatbot usage is high.

H3e: The positive effect of self-concept on brand loyalty is amplified when chatbot usage is high.

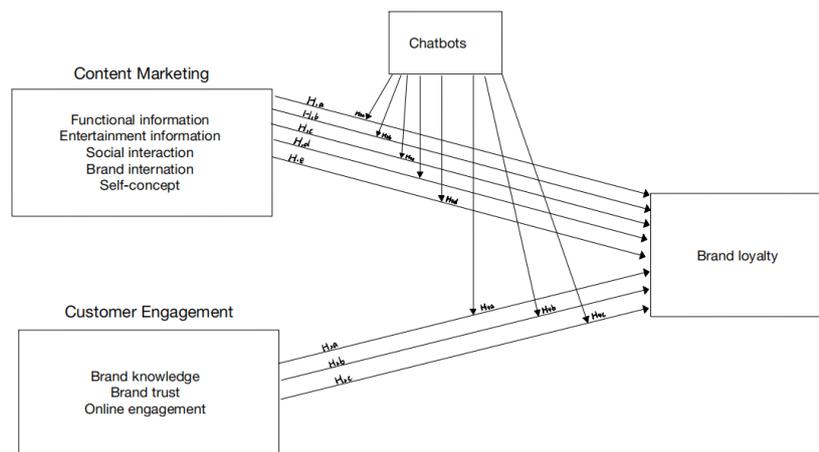
Many companies today are leveraging artificial intelligence chatbots to enhance user engagement, boost conversions, and increase revenue (Abayomi Oluwaseyi Ikumoro, 2019). The 2022 study by Yang Cheng and Hua Jiang explores how AI-driven chatbot marketing helps build stronger relationships between businesses and consumers. Their research also investigates the effect of relationship marketing strategies on online consumer behavior. Findings show that the quality of AI chatbot services plays a significant role in fostering consumer loyalty toward e-brands. Similarly, Farrukh Shahzad et al. (2024) examine how the quality of AI chatbot services impacts customer trust, which is critical in developing loyalty to e-brands. E. Ojapuska (2018) analyzed factors influencing the positive or negative effects of chatbots on customer engagement, comparing chatbots to other communication channels designed to improve engagement. In addition, Khonkanen and Evelina (2023) studied the influence of chatbot marketing on customer-brand relationships and engagement in Finland's

fashion industry, aiming to identify effective ways to boost engagement through chatbot marketing. Based on these insights, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: The positive link between brand knowledge and brand loyalty is stronger when chatbot usage is high.

H4b: The positive link between brand trust and brand loyalty is stronger when chatbot usage is high.

H4c: The positive link between online engagement and brand loyalty is stronger when chatbot usage is high.



Conclusion

This study examines the interaction between corporate brand owners and consumers on social media platforms. How do businesses use social media for content marketing in the context of globalization? What strategies are used to foster brand loyalty? Does an interaction link exist between consumer involvement and brand loyalty? What is the nature of this interaction relationship? Is it possible to merge communication theories and brand theory in marketing to develop a novel analytical framework and construct a theoretical model that elucidates the interaction link among content marketing, customer-brand engagement, and brand loyalty? The proliferation of artificial intelligence technology not only enhances technical assistance but also facilitates engagement between consumers and businesses at the forefront. Its incorporation might enhance brand loyalty. What are the recent attributes of social media content marketing for international brands of Chinese companies? Is this model capable of passing the practical examination of Chinese firm samples? The foundation of this research is established based on the aforementioned considerations.

Contributions. This study contributes in three ways. (1) Theory: It tailors Uses & Gratifications to a traditional cultural industry by distinguishing social interaction from brand interaction and by theorizing chatbot-enabled social presence as a moderator across five antecedents of loyalty. (2) Modeling: It offers an integrative, testable framework linking content gratifications → engagement paths → brand loyalty, with clear hypotheses that can be validated on Chinese Pu'er tea samples. (3) Practice: It provides actionable guidance for Pu'er brands on designing functional/entertaining content, cultivating community and brand touchpoints, and deploying IQ/EQ-aware chatbots to personalize service while managing privacy risk—thereby turning short-term attention into durable loyalty.

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