A Study on the Formation Mechanism of Fragrance Brand Customer Loyalty from a Multidimensional Perspective: The Mediating Role of Brand Trust

Tang Yuqiang[1] Shi Guicheng[2]

Abstract

Against the backdrop of the emotional economy and consumption upgrading, the fragrance industry is shifting from a scent accessory to a lifestyle expression. Cultivating customer loyalty has become a core strategic issue for brand competition. However, existing general loyalty models struggle to explain the trust and loyalty formation mechanism specific to fragrance, a high-emotional-involvement product category. Integrating Social Exchange Theory, Signal Theory, and Customer Loyalty Theory, this study constructs a multidimensional integrated model to investigate how Social Bonding and Brand Reputation jointly influence customer loyalty through the mediating role of Brand Trust. This study introduces extraversion as a moderating variable to reveal the boundary conditions of Brand Trust formation. As a theory-building study, this paper develops propositions rather than empirically testable hypotheses. The expected outcomes will advance customer loyalty theory towards greater refinement and contextualization, and provide theoretical support for fragrance brand management and precise customer relationship maintenance.

Keywords: Social Bonding, Brand Reputation, Brand Trust, Customer Loyalty, Extraversion Personality Traits

1. Introduction

As consumption upgrades and the emotional economy grows, the fragrance industry has evolved from a luxury sector into a rapidly growing global market. Fragrance products are increasingly important vehicles for consumers to express personality, manage emotions, and create lifestyle aesthetics (Tian et al., 2023). The Chinese fragrance market is expected to exceed 53.9 billion RMB by 2028 (An et al., 2024). In this context, cultivating and maintaining deep customer loyalty has become a core strategic priority for fragrance brands.

Academic research on customer loyalty has largely followed classic chains such as “value–trust–loyalty” (Giovanis & Athanasopoulou, 2017; Liu & Liu, 2015). However, applying these general models directly to fragrance reveals three limitations. First, these models do not integrate the driving factors. Existing studies tend to focus either on relationship marketing (Chih et al., 2009), brand equity (Odoom et al., 2025; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2024), or product utility (Giovanis & Athanasopoulou, 2017). Few integrate emotional relationships and cognitive cues into one comprehensive model. Second, the boundary

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conditions of brand trust remain underexplored. Existing research rarely incorporates personal traits such as extraversion as moderating variables. Third, fragrance, as a typical hedonic product, has unique consumption motivations and relationship-building processes that require deeper contextualized theoretical research.

To address these gaps, this study integrates Social Exchange Theory, Signal Theory, and Customer Loyalty Theory to construct a multidimensional integrated model. It examines how Social Bonding and Brand Reputation influence customer loyalty through Brand Trust and introduces extraversion as a moderator of the Social Bonding → Brand Trust path. As a theory-building study, this paper develops propositions rather than hypotheses.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Basis

2.1 Review of Research on Fragrance Brands

Fragrance refers to a pleasant smell, whose basic components are essential oils primarily extracted from flowers, fruits, or other scented plants (Han, 2012). The Chinese fragrance market has gone through three stages (Zhang & Zhong, 2021): perfume culture input, fragrance industry segmentation, and lifestyle integration. In recent years, with the rise of Generation Z and the "olfactory economy," local brands such as To Summer, DOCUMENTS, and BOITOWN have grown rapidly (An et al., 2024). Generation Z consumers emphasize healing and self-pleasure, paying increasing attention to emotional healing while satisfying material needs (Tian et al., 2023).

Existing research on fragrance mainly focuses on market trends and consumer behavior descriptions, with insufficient discussion of the mechanism by which customers develop loyalty to fragrance brands. As a typical hedonic and highly symbolic product, fragrance requires deeper theoretical research on its consumption motivations, value perceptions, and relationship-building processes.

2.2 Review of Research on Brand Trust

Trust originated in psychology, with Rotter (1967) treating it as an individual attribute. Since the mid-1980s, management research has paid increasing attention to trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Lau & Lee (1999) defined Brand Trust as the consumer's confident attitude, after rational evaluation, in the brand's ability to fulfill its stated functions. Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001) argued that Brand Trust refers to the consumer's willingness to rely on the brand based on the belief that the brand can perform its intended functions. Mazodier & Merunka (2012) emphasized that Brand Trust is the consumer's tendency to rely on the brand based on judgments of its reliability in risky purchase situations. This paper defines Brand Trust as the customer's willingness to rely on the brand's ability to fulfill its stated functions.

Customer loyalty research dates back to the 1990s and includes attitudinal, behavioral, and integrated perspectives (Oliver, 1999). Oliver (1999) noted that loyalty is a deep psychological commitment that progresses through cognitive, affective, conative, and action loyalty. This study defines customer loyalty as the customer's attitudinal trust and dependence on the brand, as well as behavioral repeat purchasing and voluntary positive word-of-mouth.

The antecedents of Brand Trust relevant to this study can be summarized into two categories. First, Social Bonding. Wilson (1995) defined social bonding as the degree of mutual friendship and liking. Social bonds develop within customer – service provider roles and include emotional and affective ties established through interpersonal communication (Rodríguez & Wilson, 2002). Research shows that social bonds lead to important relationship outcomes such as trust (Rodríguez & Wilson, 2002), satisfaction (Bolton et al., 2003), and loyalty (Guenzi & Pelloni, 2004). Second, Brand Reputation. Fombrun (1996) described reputation as the perceptual representation of a company's past actions and prospects. Schwaiger (2004) and Raithel et al. (2010) considered reputation to be attitudinal. Numerous studies indicate that Brand Reputation has a significant positive impact on Brand Trust (Aljarah & Ibrahim, 2020; Ahn et al., 2021; Odoom et al., 2025).

2.3 Theoretical Basis

2.3.1 Social Exchange Theory

Homans first proposed Social Exchange Theory in 1958, viewing interpersonal interaction as rational acts of calculating gains and losses (Liu, 1998). Blau (1964) further studied social exchange from a social structure perspective, arguing that social exchange is a voluntary activity in which individuals receive rewards. In this study, consumers view Social Bonding and Brand Reputation as "returns" provided by the brand. When these returns are perceived as high, consumers develop Brand Trust, which in turn leads to loyalty.

2.3.2 Signal Theory

Signal Theory assumes that information is asymmetric and not received simultaneously by all stakeholders (Mak, 2005). A good reputation signals to stakeholders, reducing risk and attracting them to use related products (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2008). Brand Reputation is a reliable long-term signal. After receiving such signals, consumers interpret them as "this is a high-quality, trustworthy brand," thereby reducing perceived risk and establishing Brand Trust.

2.3.3 Customer Loyalty Theory

Oliver's (1999) four-stage loyalty model posits that loyalty formation progresses through cognitive loyalty, affective loyalty, conative loyalty, and action loyalty. In this study, Social Bonding and Brand Reputation drive cognitive and affective loyalty, while Brand Trust serves as the key link connecting cognition/affect to conation/action.

3. Model Construction

This study integrates Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), Signal Theory (Spence, 2002), and Customer Loyalty Theory (Oliver, 1999) to construct a theoretical framework explaining the mechanism of "Social Bonding/Brand Reputation → Brand Trust → Customer Loyalty" in the fragrance industry. Social Bonding and Brand Reputation are independent variables, Brand Trust is the mediating variable,

and Customer Loyalty is the dependent variable. Extraversion personality traits are introduced as a moderating variable on the Social Bonding → Brand Trust path.

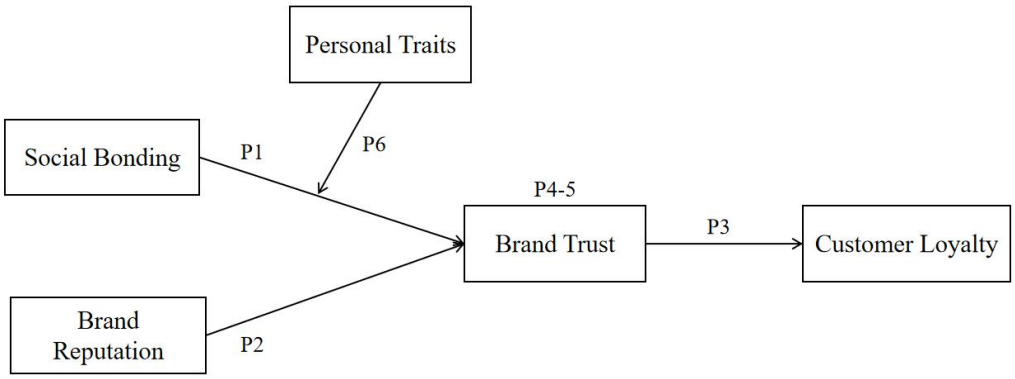


Figure 1: Study model diagram

4. Research Propositions

4.1 Social Bonding and Brand Trust

Research in various fields shows that social bonding positively affects trust. In banking, relationship bonds significantly affect trust (Nguyen et al., 2021; Wang, 2008). In B2B contexts, social ties between boundary personnel enhance trust in manufacturers (Paulssen & Roulet, 2017). Sarwari et al. (2015) found that social bonding is an important antecedent for enhancing relationship quality in five-star hotels. Chih et al. (2009) found that social bonds have the strongest positive effect on trust and customer loyalty in online shopping. Social bonds build emotional connections through personalized service, employee politeness, shared experiences, and advice. Therefore:

Proposition 1: Social Bonding positively influences Brand Trust.

4.2 Brand Reputation and Brand Trust

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Proposition 2: Brand Reputation positively influences Brand Trust.

4.3 Brand Trust and Customer Loyalty

Brand Trust is widely recognized as an important antecedent of brand loyalty (He et al., 2012). Nguyen et al. (2011) showed that Brand Trust positively affects brand loyalty and motivates customers to maintain long-term relationships. Bhatty et al. (2001) argued that relationships built on trust are the primary driver of true loyalty. Brand Trust is crucial for gaining customer brand loyalty (Fandos-Roig et al., 2021). Trust reduces uncertainty in vulnerable situations (Agustin & Singh, 2005). When a brand

consistently meets customer expectations, customers are likely to trust it and remain loyal (Chiou & Droge, 2006). Therefore:

Proposition 3: Brand Trust positively influences Customer Loyalty.

4.4 Mediating Role of Brand Trust

Trust is an important mediating variable in relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Relationship bonds positively influence customer trust (Lin et al., 2003), and trust mediates the relationship between relationship bonds and customer loyalty (Chih et al., 2009). Nguyen et al. (2021) found that relationship bonds affect customer loyalty through trust and satisfaction. Sarwari et al. (2015) found that social bonding enhances relationship quality, which in turn determines customer loyalty. Therefore:

Proposition 4: Brand Trust mediates the relationship between Social Bonding and Customer Loyalty.

Brand Reputation can reduce uncertainty and build customer trust. Studies indicate that Brand Reputation positively affects Brand Trust (Suh & Houston, 2010; Muflih, 2021). Reputation and trust also play key roles in customer loyalty development (Liu et al., 2019; Newell et al., 2016). Muflih (2021) pointed out the positive effects of Brand Reputation and Brand Trust on customer loyalty. Lin et al. (2018) indicated that service reputation drives trust, thereby enhancing e-loyalty. Many studies have confirmed the mediating role of Brand Trust between Brand Reputation and Customer Loyalty in banking, higher education, the oil industry, fashion, insurance, and online retail (Ghorbanzadeh, 2024; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2024; Odoom et al., 2025; Khoa, 2020; Marcos & Coelho, 2018). Therefore:

Proposition 5: Brand Trust mediates the relationship between Brand Reputation and Customer Loyalty.

4.5 Moderating Role of Extraversion Personality Traits

Extraversion measures an individual’s comfort in interpersonal interactions, need for stimulation, and ability to experience pleasure. McCrae & John (1992) suggested that highly extraverted individuals are energetic, emotional, optimistic, and talkative, while low-extraversion individuals are reserved, silent, calm, and less sociable. For extraverted consumers, the brand is a potential “social partner” or “relationship companion.” The brand’s proactive contact, care, and interaction opportunities satisfy their intrinsic need for socializing through consumption. Consequently, Social Bonding behaviors are interpreted positively and translated into Brand Trust. For introverted consumers, the brand is more of a “transaction partner” or “function provider”; they have low demand for social interaction and may perceive proactive brand behaviors as intrusive. According to personality–situation interaction theory, stable traits determine response patterns to situational stimuli. For extraverted consumers, Social Bonding behaviors directly target their psychological needs, strengthening Social Bonding's positive impact on Brand Trust. Therefore:

Proposition 6: Extraversion positively moderates the relationship between Social Bonding and Brand Trust. Specifically, compared to introverted consumers, Social Bonding has a stronger positive effect on Brand Trust for extraverted consumers.

5. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the emotional economy and consumption upgrading, the fragrance industry has become a strategically emerging industry integrating emotional expression, identity construction, and lifestyle aesthetics. Cultivating customer loyalty is a core strategic issue for brand competition. However, existing general loyalty models struggle to explain the synergistic mechanisms among multidimensional drivers in the highly emotional fragrance category. Using Social Exchange Theory, Signal Theory, and Customer Loyalty Theory, this study constructs a multidimensional integrated model to explore how Social Bonding and Brand Reputation jointly influence customer loyalty through Brand Trust. The study introduces extraversion as a moderating variable. As a theory-building study, this paper develops propositions rather than hypotheses, providing a conceptual foundation for future empirical research.

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