



Research Article

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Impact of Social Media Marketing on Brand Loyalty in Chinese Local Cosmetics Industry: The Mediating Role of Customer Engagement

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Abstract

The enduring global popularity of social media and the emergence of the “Guochao” trend in China have compelled businesses to rethink traditional marketing concepts and implement more effective marketing techniques. This study aimed to explore how social media marketing (SMM) affects brand loyalty in the Chinese local cosmetics industry. Data from 468 Chinese local cosmetics customers were analyzed by using structural equation modeling. The findings indicate that social media influencer marketing (SMIM) and content marketing (CM) have direct positive impacts on customer brand loyalty (BL). Customer engagement (CE) mediates the effects of SMIM and CM on BL. The research findings emphasize the importance of the power of social media influencers (SMIs) and content value in driving CE and fostering BL. They should utilize SMIs who align with the brand's characteristics and create content that resonates with consumers, thereby attracting potential consumers and establishing brand loyalty. Chinese consumers are more inclined to be influenced by genuine and charismatic SMIs. While Chinese market prefers practical and persuasive content over entertaining content, Chinese local cosmetics should focus on publishing content with practical value and problem-solving capabilities, such as usage tips, skincare knowledge. Moreover, the importance of CE is emphasized, suggesting that marketers of Chinese local cosmetics brands capitalize on the trend of traditional culture revival when formulating marketing strategies. Integrating information related to traditional Chinese medicine or ethnic craftsmanship may further encourage consumers to engage more deeply and enhance their loyalty.

Keywords: Social media marketing, customer engagement, Chinese local cosmetics, brand loyalty

1. Introduction

The past decade has witnessed the rapid development of new information technologies and social networks thoroughly transformed market dynamics, reshaping how businesses operate, interact with consumers, and compete with each other (Wardati & Mahendrawathi, 2019; Grewal et al., 2020; Labanauskaitė et al., 2020). The emergence of new information technologies facilitates businesses to

gain deeper understanding of consumer needs, optimizing their offerings, and improving operational efficiency. Additionally, Businesses can connect directly with their target audiences, share valuable content, and receive valuable feedback through social media, making it an essential tool. It allows for meaningful interactions with consumers, helps build a strong brand presence, and fosters customer loyalty (Dutot & Bergeron, 2016; Gao et al., 2018; Naylor et al., 2012; Rapp et al., 2013). Online marketplaces have transformed the mode of purchasing and selling, intensifying market competition and prompting businesses to adjust marketing strategies and provide superior digital experiences to attract and retain consumers. These changes have not only altered business marketing models but also profoundly impacted consumer behavior, signaling a deepening influence of social media on future markets and prompting ongoing adaptations in how businesses promote their products and interact with consumers.

With the rapid progress of information technology and extensive utilization of intelligent devices, social media, a platform built upon information technology allowing users to create and exchange information, has become an integral aspect of daily life worldwide (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). According to the official data published by China Internet Network Information Center (2023), China's extensive and active user base makes it an ideal environment for social media research. Internet penetration rate in China stood at 75.6% as of December 2022, with social network users constituting 95.13% of the total internet user population, as per government data. Individuals allocated an average of 26.7 hours per week to engage in online activities, with a significant majority of 99.8% utilizing mobile devices for internet access.

The social media platforms, by migrating social interactions to the online realm, offer a low-cost solution, breaking down the barriers of traditional offline markets and alleviating the time and distance constraints of offline communication (Zhang et al., 2021). This enables consumers to shop around easily, while also providing businesses with new marketing channels. Consequently, many businesses increasingly realize the power of social media and strive to seize the opportunities brought by the new era in order to enhance their market share and profitability. Meanwhile, some researchers stated that increases in brand loyalty led to market share and profit growth (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Ekinci et al., 2011; Adeniji et al., 2015). Indeed, it can elucidate the reasons behind the enduring focus of marketers on building and maintaining customer loyalty to a brand and Laroche et al. (2013) stated that social media served as a platform for brands to gain more loyal customers.

When it comes to China's cosmetics market, the dominant position of foreign cosmetics brands in the Chinese cosmetics market has begun to be challenged by the impressive sales growth of Chinese local cosmetics brands in recent years. Data has verified that China has been one of the world's largest cosmetic markets (Ma, 2022), offering significant growth potential, with increasing investment in local Chinese cosmetics brands (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

The reciprocal nature of market transactions involves firms offering goods or services, while customers engage in the act of purchasing them. This statement underscores the significance of transactions as interactive and mutually impacting processes. So, focusing on enhancing customer engagement (CE) remains the paramount objective of enterprises' efforts on social media (Schaefer et al., 2021). That is, in efforts to enhance business competitiveness, focusing solely on the role of businesses in this process is insufficient; attention must also be given to the significant role customers play.

Despite being in a market of huge potential, Chinese local cosmetics enterprises still mainly exhibit homogeneous marketing strategies. They have not effectively utilized social media, a burgeoning tool, in their marketing efforts. Therefore, as market competition intensifies, exploring the role and value of social media marketing (SMM) is essential in the cosmetics market where customer loyalty is relatively low. However, limited number of research has touched upon the field of Chinese local cosmetic industry. Besides, although previous researchers have mentioned SMM or similar terms (Kim & Ko, 2012; Effing & Spil 2016; Zhang et al., 2017; Felix et al. 2017), they either failed to recognize the distinct characteristics of social media or overlooked the core issues of marketing strategy, resulting in a lack of a clear definition for SMM, which hindered both theory advancement

and practical development. The research questions could be generated as follows: 1) how to use social media influencer marketing and content marketing to improve engagement of the Chinese customers on the local Chinese cosmetics? and 2) how important of customer engagement for increasing brand loyalty of local Chinese cosmetics?

Even though marketers widely recognize the significance of interacting with customers via social media platforms, only a small number of businesses develop effective strategies for social media engagement (Choi & Thoeni, 2016; Griffiths & Mclean, 2015). It indicates that integrating social media into marketing strategies is a common challenge for businesses. The goal is to actively attract and build valuable, long-term relationships with customers (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Therefore, this study aims to examine the efficacy of SMM in enhancing brand loyalty among Chinese local cosmetics enterprises, alongside analyze the importance of engaging customer through SMM endeavors targeting brand loyalty enhancement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Chinese Local Cosmetic

Notwithstanding the COVID-19 epidemic, the year-on-year growth rate of cosmetics retail sales in China had a superior performance compared to the overall retail sales of other commodities over the corresponding time frame (iResearch Inc, 2021). It has just come to light that China is the second-largest market for cosmetics in the world (Xu, 2023), with its cosmetics industry deeply rooted in rich historical background and traditional craftsmanship, reflecting specific qualities inherent in Chinese traditional culture (Li et al., 2023).

However, consumer criticism of “Made in China” and the perception of international brands as superior persisted. With Generation Z consumers showing increased confidence in their national identity and cultural belonging, the revival and popularity of traditional Chinese culture, known as “Guochao” (a trend that integrates traditional Chinese culture with modern fashion), was rising. Chinese consumers have strengthened their identification with domestic cosmetics, embracing Eastern aesthetics. The localization trend in Chinese cosmetic products was significant, as evidenced by the 11.3% market share collectively held by the top ten domestic brands in 2022, indicating positive growth (Hao et al., 2023). By integrating oriental cultural elements into product design and marketing strategies, some local cosmetic brands have outperformed renowned international brands in sales (Xu, 2023).

2.2 Social Media Marketing

The subject of SMM has garnered significant attention in the marketing field, with some related studies reaching a consensus on its converged media characteristics (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Jaokar et al., 2009). Building upon this consensus, SMM refers to the strategic utilization of platforms like online communities, social networks, blogs, and forums by businesses to execute their marketing activities. The progression of social media in China has undergone five distinct phases, specifically: the initial stage of the social networking Bulletin Board System (BBS) forum, followed by the leisure and entertainment stage, the information stage, the mobile stage, and finally, the live streaming social media stage. The current stage of live streaming social media rapidly emerged between 2015 and 2016 and remains popular to this day (Chen & Yang 2023). Concurrently, social media influencers (SMIs) have become the most eye-catching term along with the development of live streaming social media.

SMM distinguishes itself from traditional marketing by facilitating interactive marketing value through dual-channel contact between firms and customers, as well as among customers themselves (Ji et al., 2021). Whether in the era of traditional marketing or SMM, the dissemination of content remains fundamental. Specifically, traditional marketing is predicated on the production and

dissemination of content by firms to customers using conventional media platforms, including newspapers, radio, and television, while in SMM, both businesses and consumers generate and disseminate content (Naylor et al., 2012; Wawrowski & Otolá, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021).

Based on the above information, SMM does not act as a single marketing strategy; instead, it includes multidimensional specific elements, one is social media influencer (SMI) and the other is content.

2.2.1 Social Media Influencer Marketing

SMIs have excelled in digital marketing and have become pivotal figures in social media (Khamis et al., 2017). The fundamental logic of monetizing the capabilities of SMIs is to convert followers into customers. Based on this logic, companies incorporate the powerful influence of SMIs into their marketing strategies to adapt to the characteristics of the social media era. Several academics define SMIM as using influential people on social media to promote company products and services, aiming to enhance consumer awareness and purchase intention (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Ki & Kim, 2019; Martínez-López et al., 2020).

2.2.2 Content Marketing

In the contemporary age of social media, enterprises are progressively adopting content marketing (CM) tactics as a means to enhance product sales and allure customers (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Lee et al., 2014). Interaction, loyalty, trust, brand awareness, and CM are closely related (Du Plessis, 2017). CM, through various forms of information dissemination such as news, photo posts, videos, and email communications (Floreddu & Cabiddu, 2016), aims to enhance consumer brand loyalty by conveying brand knowledge and culture and fostering interaction with consumers (Kilgour et al., 2015). The meaning of CM is a topic that is constantly being debated and discussed. In general, however, it refers to enterprises that produce and share information that is meaningful, relevant, and consistent in order to attract and maintain certain audiences, with the intention of driving profitable customer behavior.

2.3 Customer Engagement

Recent research suggested that CE represented a customer's behavioral response to a company, while acknowledging from a psychological perspective that customers choose to allocate resources towards specific brand interactions, emphasizing its interactive nature (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Hollebeek et al., 2016; Brodie et al., 2011). Therefore, CE and behavioral loyalty are clearly differentiated, with the former referring to behaviors beyond primary transactional activities and the latter involving repeated purchase behavior. Some researchers constructed CE into personal and social-interactive engagement based on the purpose and motivation of customer involvement (Calder et al., 2009; Pagani & Mirabello, 2011). Additionally, CE was divided into multiple dimensions, including cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social from a psychological perspective, (Brodie et al., 2013; Islam & Rahman, 2016; Pentina et al., 2018; Cao et al., 2021). As mentioned by Schivinski et al. (2016), interactions between consumer and brand on social media can be classified into three distinct stages, which are determined by the degree of CE.

Considering above, this study constructed three dimensions of CE based on the level of involvement: (1) consumption (low engagement), characterized by passive interaction where consumers primarily receive and read brand content; (2) contribution (moderate engagement), where Consumers actively interact with brand content by liking, commenting, and sharing; (3) creation (high engagement), where consumers become active content creators, generating tweets, comments, and other content related to the brand.

2.4 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty was defined as multidimensional in existing literature. One dimensional construct focuses on consumer behavior (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000) or attitude (Bennett & Rundle-Thiele, 2004), while the other takes both into account (Oliver, 1999; Jones & Taylor, 2007; Russell-Bennet et al., 2009). The behavioral viewpoint stressed customers repurchase habits, stating that loyal customers buy a brand again. Brand loyalty occurs when customers favor a brand and buy it again whenever possible (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000). Tabaku and Zerellari (2015) defined “loyal customer” as recurring buyers of the same brand. Besides, some researchers believed that consumer attitude explained why customers buy the same products and services and how brand loyalty grew. Love and positive purchase behavior characterize devoted customers.

Since research has deepened, a consensus which is that brand loyalty included both attitudinal and behavioral dimensions has become popular in academia, emphasizing the essential of attitudinal loyalty. Therefore, this study adopts a dual-dimensional perspective to define brand loyalty as consumers’ willingness to spread word-of-mouth recommendations such as recommending the brand’s products or services to friends, sharing on social media, along with the behavior of repeat purchasing and paying for products or services.

3. Hypotheses Development

3.1 Social Media Marketing and Brand Loyalty

By comparing the power of SMIs with traditional influencers, Jin et al. (2019) stated that customers perceived the information as more credible, were more likely to positively recommend the brand, felt a stronger social presence, and were more prone to experiencing jealousy when they received brand posts by SMIs. The credibility of SMIs significantly impacts purchasing decisions (Lê Giang Nam, 2018). Additionally, Masuda et al. (2022) validated that consumers’ trust in SMIs, perceived expertise, and virtual social relationships positively influence customer purchase intentions. Nevertheless, within the realm of healthy food, Coates et al. (2019) put forth the argument that SMIM had no impact on children’s consumption of nutritious foods. The way consumers perceive SMIs is shaped by their unique qualities, which in turn impacts their purchase intentions (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002; Wang & Scheinbaum, 2018; Lim et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2021). Thus, the following hypothesis was posited:

H1: Social media influencer marketing positively affects brand loyalty.

Research indicates that attractive and persuasive content positively influences consumer purchasing behavior and encourages their participation in online interactions in the era of social media (Ansari et al., 2019; Weerasinghe, 2019). Furthermore, empirical evidence demonstrated the efficacy of CM as a strategic approach to increase customer willingness towards the acquisition of environmentally friendly products (Al-Gasawneh & Al-Adamat, 2020). Moreover, Müller and Christandl (2019) agreed that CM increased customers’ trust and positive attitudes toward a brand. Thus, the following hypothesis was posited:

H2: Content marketing positively affects brand loyalty.

3.2 Social Media Marketing and Customer Engagement

Social media’s emergence and rapid development, leveraging its interactive features, have transformed user groups from passive receivers of information to active creators of abundant content on social media platforms, engaging in interactions and discussions with other online users. The effectiveness of a business in guiding CE and harnessing dispersed knowledge and resources from customers fundamentally depends on the business’s utilization and management of social media (Nguyen, Melewar, & Chen, 2015). Bowden (2009) confirmed that the level of customer interaction on

social media was positively influenced by both the strength of interpersonal ties and the perception of trust. Malthouse et al. (2013) explained the engagement behavior of social media platform users through psychological states such as emotional and cognitive presence. Moreover, as an integral part of social media, SMIs possess the ability to alter user attitudes and steer user behavior. Based on above, the following hypothesis was posited:

H3: Social media influencer marketing positively affects customer engagement.

Posts on social media platforms with rich multimedia content are more likely to attract attention and comments from users compared to plain text content. Businesses invite consumers to participate in specific themed marketing campaigns through social media, and consumers would respond positively to brand invitations due to their curiosity about the event or the social and even economic value it brings (Lim et al., 2017). When content disseminated through social media captures consumer attention, consumers engage with the content by commenting, liking, or sharing it. Additionally, Sweeney et al. (2014) noted that increased CE occurred not only when customers were satisfied with the content but also when they expressed dissatisfaction, such as leaving negative reviews. Accordingly, the following hypothesis was posited:

H4: Content marketing positively affects customer engagement.

3.3 Customer Engagement and Brand Loyalty

CE is considered as a psychological process that leads to the formation of loyalty, characterized by elements like vigor, dedication, absorption, and interaction, while transcending mere purchasing in behavioral manifestations (Greve, 2014). CE was found that significantly influenced customer satisfaction (Tuti & Sulistia, 2022), stickiness to the brand (Zhang et al., 2017) and firm performance (Moliner et al., 2018). Agra & Prakoso (2022) agreed that greater consumer involvement with content led to increased trust in the brand and heightened purchasing interest. Goldsmith (2016) stated that CE, which sought to understand customers' devotion to the brand, occurred when consumers acquired strong emotions towards a specific brand, felt a connection to it, and trusted it. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were posited:

H5: Customer engagement positively affects brand loyalty.

3.4 Mediating Role of Customer Engagement

In the domain of social media, it was found that customer engagement (CE) played a crucial role in linking brand participation, self-brand affinity, and intention to use the brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014), while the mediating role of CE was also verified in connecting service to loyalty behaviors (Fernandes & Esteves, 2016). Islam & Rahman (2017) investigated how the quality and interactive features of online brand communities positively influence CE, leading to increased consumer loyalty within the online brand community. Moreover, Abou-Shouk & Soliman (2021) suggested that the adoption of gamification had a substantial impact on brand awareness, with CE acting as a crucial mediator in this relationship. Leckie et al. (2018) suggested that loyalty could be indirectly strengthened by their involvement in brand engagement activities, particularly when they perceive value. Thus, the following hypotheses were posited:

H6a: Social media influencer marketing affects brand loyalty through customer engagement.

H6b: Content marketing affects brand loyalty through customer engagement.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Framework

Three main objectives were outlined in this study. The first objective was to examine the impact of social media influencer marketing and content marketing on brand loyalty. The second objective was

to evaluate how customer engagement affects brand loyalty. Lastly, the study aimed to analyze the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty mediated by customer engagement. Given that social platforms offer an equal two-way interactive platform for both enterprises and customers (Dijkmans et al., 2015), this study proposed a research framework from both enterprise and customer perspectives, grounded in the Use and Gratifications (U&G) theory which underscores the active role of users in selecting and utilizing media to satisfy their specific needs and desires, rather than merely being passive recipients of information (Ko et al., 2005; Haferkamp et al., 2012). The research framework illustrating the variables, their interrelationships, and hypotheses was shown in Figure 1. To accomplish these objectives, a quantitative approach was employed to test the correlations among the variables.

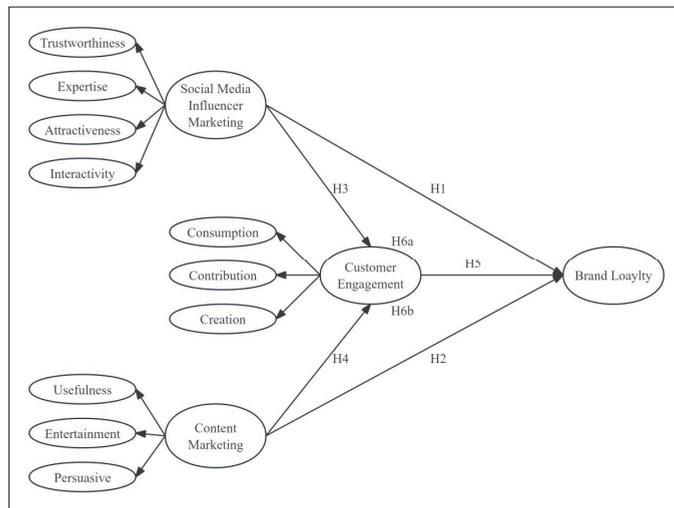


Figure 1: Proposed Research Framework

4.2 Population and Sampling

The population targeted to individuals aged 18 and above who have purchased Chinese cosmetic products on social media platforms and received online information. As it was an infinite population, this study conducted quota sampling method then followed with convenience sampling method. In factor analysis, Comrey and Lee (2013) proposed a grading scale for sample sizes, wherein a rating of 100 represents poor, 200 represents acceptable, 300 represents good, 500 represents very good, and 1000 or above represents exceptional. Besides, Hair et al. (2009) stated that an ideal sample size for multivariate analysis should be 15-20 times the number of observed variables. Some recommended that 500 samples were suitable for using structural equation modelling (Nevitt & Hancock, 2001; Creedon & Hayes, 2015). Based on the above information, this study estimated the minimum sample size at 400.

4.3 Measurement

The questionnaire of this study was designed according to hypotheses, derived from literature research and utilize scales and items established by scholars in relevant fields. It consisted of five parts:

The first part of the questionnaire was general information, aiming to collect general data about

gender, age, educational background, job, salary, time length of social media usage and frequency of online shopping.

The remaining four parts contained a total of 44 specific measurement items, focusing on different constructs underlying four variables as shown in Table 1 to Table 4. The part of questionnaire about social media influencer marketing included four constructs (trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness and interactivity), of which the items were developed from the survey of Masuda et al. (2022) and Wang et al. (2021) as illustrate in Table 1.

Table 1. Measurement Items of Social Media Influencer Marketing

Construct	Items
Trustworthiness	Trus1: The information conveyed, or activities held by social media influencers are authentic.
	Trus2: The social media influencer recommending Chinese cosmetics possess strong professional ethics.
	Trus3: The social media influencer can maintain neutrality and avoid emotional bias while marketing Chinese cosmetics.
	Trus4: The social media influencer is genuine.
Expertise	Exp1: The social media influencer focuses on product details during the process of recommending products.
	Exp2: The social media influencer is an opinion leader in the field of Chinese cosmetics.
	Exp3: The social media influencer often uses professional terminology when recommending Chinese cosmetics.
	Exp4: The social media influencer can show the product appearance, performance or usage methods in a standardized way.
Attractiveness	Att1: The social media influencer's appearance charm enhances my likability towards him/her.
	Att2: The voice charm of the social media influencer enhances the effectiveness of delivering brand information.
	Att3: The social media influencer's charisma makes me feel his/her unique style.
	Att4: I feel a sense of liking or even obsession with this social media influencer.
Interactivity	Int1: The social media influencer effectively answers my questions during our interactions.
	Int2: The social media influencer provides different communication channels to interact with me.
	Int3: I can engage in real-time interaction with the social media influencer.
	Int4: The social media influencer can ensure timely responses to me.

Part of questionnaire focused on content marketing, including informational, entertainment, and emotional levels. The measurement scales were adapted from research of Wiertz and Ruyter (2007) and Liu and Arnett's (2000), with adjustments made to align with the social media context as display in Table 2.

Table 2. Measurement Items of Content Marketing

Construct	Items
Usefulness	Use1: Content provides valuable information.
	Use2: Content that provides a variety of information.
	Use3: Content that provides practical information.
	Use4: Content about the cosmetics.
Entertainment	Ent1: Fun and entertaining content.
	Ent2: Content that sparks imagination and curiosity.
	Ent3: Content that creates a sense of fascination.
	Ent4: Exhilarating and exciting content.
Persuasive	Per1: Content that cannot skip.

Construct	Items
	Per2: Content that read/watch until end.
	Per3: Content that related to customer.
	Per4: Content that makes first impression.

The part of questionnaire focused on customer engagement, encompassing consumption, contribution, and creation, with four items in each construct, developed from Schivinski et al. (2016) as show in Table 3.

Table 3. Measurement Items of Customer Engagement

Construct	Items
Consumption	Cons1: I read posts related to Chinese local cosmetic brands on social media.
	Cons2: I watch pictures, videos or live broadcasts related to Chinese local cosmetic brands.
	Cons3: I follow influencers related to Chinese local cosmetic brands.
	Cons4: I follow the official account of Chinese local cosmetic brands on social media.
Contribution	Cont1: I comment on videos related to Chinese local cosmetic brands.
	Cont2: I comment on posts related to Chinese local cosmetic brands.
	Cont3: I share Chinese cosmetic brands related posts.
	Cont4: I “like” posts related to Chinese local cosmetic brands.
Creation	Crea1: I initiate posts related to Chinese local cosmetic brands on social media.
	Crea2: I write reviews related to Chinese local cosmetic brands on social media.
	Crea3: I post pictures related to Chinese local cosmetic brands.
	Crea4: I post videos related to Chinese local cosmetic brands.

The part of the questionnaire focused on brand loyalty questionnaire, comprising four items derived from previous research (Keller, 2001; Chiou & Droge, 2006; Kuenzel & Vaux Halliday, 2008) as present in Table 4.

Table 4. Measurement Items of Brand Loyalty

Variable	Items
Brand Loyalty	BL1: When think about cosmetics, I will think of Chinese local cosmetic brands.
	BL2: Comparing with other cosmetic brands, I am more interested in Chinese local cosmetic brands.
	BL3: I will not choose other brands if Chinese local cosmetic products are available in the marketplace.
	BL4: Even if competing brands have price advantages, I will still buy Chinese local cosmetic products in the future.

Questions were rated using the five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 which represents ‘strongly disagree’ to 5 which represents ‘strongly agree’, with the exception of general information questions. Three experts’ opinions sought on all items embedded in this questionnaire to ensure congruence, resulting in corrections to form a finalized questionnaire.

4.4 Data collection

A pilot test was conducted with 60 participants before distributing the formal questionnaires to ensure the clarity, robustness, and comprehensiveness of the questionnaire content. Reliability analysis was conducted in this phase. Afterwards, respondents’ data were collected by using the formal questionnaire between September 2023 and December 2023 in four regions of China,

encompassing the eastern, central, western, and northeastern regions. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed online by using Sojump. After removing invalid questionnaires with missing data or response times of less than 1 minute, the total number of valid questionnaires that were collected was 468.

5. Results

5.1 Sample characteristics.

The initial step involved an examination of the demographic features of the respondents. Over half of the respondents were female. The majority of respondents fell between the age range of 30-39 years old, with the next largest group being between 20-29 years old. Freelance accounted for the highest proportion, reaching 53.42%. It was followed by the self-employed and private sector employees, accounting for 19.87 and 16.45%, respectively. 77.14% of the respondents used social media for a duration above 30 minutes per day, confirming the popularity of social media. 50.85% of respondents replied they would buy Chinese local cosmetics online daily, while 41.45% of respondents spent \$100 to \$200 per month on purchasing Chinese cosmetics online. The top three brands that respondents buy most were Maogeping, Unny and Floarsis while TikTok emerged as the predominant social media platform for Chinese consumers to make cosmetic purchases, representing a significant 28.85% share. Veteran e-commerce platforms Alibaba, Taobao and JD followed behind.

5.2 Measurement Model

To address potential differences in factor structure between the original and translated versions of the questionnaire, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed, followed by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test and explain the overall information. KMO and Bartlett's test were employed to confirm the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Table 5 demonstrated that all of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values surpassed the threshold of 0.8. Additionally, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity yielded chi-square values with a p-value less than 0.001, confirming the data's suitability for factor analysis.

Table 5. Result of KMO and Bartlett's Test

Variable	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity		
		Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.
SMIM	.928	9900.846	120	.000
CM	.927	9923.458	66	.000
CE	.934	7220.855	66	.000
BL	.783	1504.862	6	.000

Afterwards, common factor analysis using principal component extraction was conducted to identify and analyze the underlying factors that contribute to the observed correlations among variables. The analysis results indicated that: four factors were extracted from SMIM, explaining 87.918% of the total variance; three factors were extracted from CM with a cumulative variance explanation rate of 93.978%; CE was categorized into three factors with a cumulative variance explanation rate of 88.843%; and BL was categorized into one factor explaining 78.032% of the total variance. The results of CFA deemed the measurement model suitable as the total variance explained surpassed the acceptable threshold of 70% (Peterson, 2000) as present in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Variable	Item	Mean	SD	Factor Loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
SMIM							
Trustworthiness	Trus4	3.26	1.219	.946	.779	.949	.953
	Trus3	3.22	1.147	.821			
	Trus2	3.30	1.180	.876			
	Trus1	3.42	1.229	.980			
Expertise	Exp4	3.36	1.133	.940	.804	.957	.955
	Exp3	3.24	1.132	.852			
	Exp2	3.27	1.109	.895			
	Exp1	3.35	1.145	.991			
Attractiveness	Att4	3.34	1.139	.930	.785	.946	.939
	Att3	3.35	1.168	.863			
	Att2	3.44	1.188	.864			
	Att1	3.42	1.174	.949			
Interactivity	Int4	3.42	1.192	.943	.890	.937	.964
	Int3	3.36	1.245	.920			
	Int2	3.47	1.233	.967			
	Int1	3.50	1.216	.966			
CM							
Usefulness	Use4	3.58	1.154	.954	.852	.965	.967
	Use3	3.56	1.133	.921			
	Use2	3.63	1.135	.894			
	Use1	3.62	1.104	.965			
Entertainment	Ent4	3.33	1.083	.962	.918	.984	.983
	Ent3	3.32	1.086	.953			
	Ent2	3.29	1.052	.960			
	Ent1	3.34	1.078	.999			
Persuasive	Per4	3.42	1.178	.988	.938	.984	.984
	Per3	3.39	1.148	.964			
	Per2	3.43	1.170	.953			
	Per1	3.43	1.157	.972			
CE							
Consumption	Cons4	3.34	1.329	.939	.848	.967	.964
	Cons3	3.19	1.287	.899			
	Cons2	3.19	1.208	.924			
	Cons1	3.26	1.263	.974			
Contribution	Cont4	3.15	1.125	.917	.815	.949	.949
	Cont3	3.13	1.122	.900			
	Cont2	3.12	1.112	.891			
	Cont1	3.17	1.129	.923			
Creation	Crea4	3.22	1.153	.973	.863	.960	.960
	Crea3	3.15	1.113	.937			
	Crea2	3.25	1.142	.875			
	Crea1	3.37	1.110	.918			
BL	BL1	3.03	1.271	.691	.706	.903	.904
	BL2	3.12	1.149	.711			
	BL3	3.13	1.218	.960			
	BL4	3.14	1.204	.959			

CFA was conducted by using the structural equation modeling (SEM) methodology. It was observed in Table 6 that factor loadings ranged from 0.691 to 0.999, all exceeded the threshold of 0.70 (DeVellis, 1991). Thus, the measurement model has a quite high level of reliability. The values of

composite reliability (CR) ranged from 0.903 to 0.984, and the average variance extracted (AVE) was greater than 0.50, with a range of 0.706 to 0.938 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore, all latent variables had satisfactory convergent validity. Additionally, it was observed in Table 7 that the correlation values of variables ranged from 0.169 to 0.810, all of which were less than 0.85. The square root of AVE exceeded the correlation coefficient, indicating the constructs are distinct and discriminate well from each other.

Table 7. Discriminate Validity among Variables of CFA (N = 468)

	BL	Crea	Cont	Cons	Per	Ent	Use	Int	Att	Exp	Trus
BL	0.84										
Crea	0.51	0.93									
Cont	0.48	0.666	0.9								
Cons	0.48	0.74	0.726	0.92							
Per	0.4	0.302	0.314	0.325	0.97						
Ent	0.46	0.269	0.297	0.286	0.568	0.96					
Use	0.39	0.169	0.279	0.209	0.731	0.677	0.92				
Int	0.32	0.265	0.356	0.274	0.192	0.266	0.255	0.94			
Att	0.39	0.283	0.348	0.313	0.173	0.26	0.197	0.651	0.89		
Exp	0.38	0.333	0.4	0.3	0.219	0.194	0.198	0.687	0.598	0.9	
Trus	0.42	0.29	0.339	0.344	0.184	0.236	0.248	0.653	0.81	0.66	0.88

Note: Square root of AVE in bold on diagonals.

6. Structural Model

The proposed structural model was modified by adding covariance between residual errors according to the modification indices. The result of model fit test ($\chi^2/df = 2.131$, $p < 0.001$, $GFI = 0.848$, $AGFI = 0.816$, $RMSEA = 0.049$, $NFI = 0.938$, $CFI = 0.966$, $TLI = 0.964$, $IFI = 0.966$, $PNFI = 0.876$) revealed that the overall model was a good fit.

Research hypotheses were tested after confirming the model fit. Figure 2 shows standardized regression coefficients between variables. The data analysis revealed that all pairs of variable relationships had a statistical significance of less than 0.001.

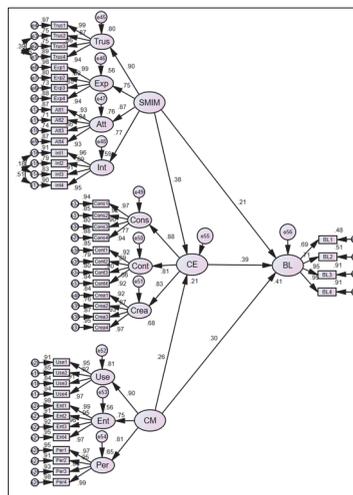


Figure 2: Modified Structural Model

The results of the path analysis are shown in Table 8. There is a statistically significant relationship between SMIM and CE ($\beta = 0.380$, $CR = 7.549$, $p < 0.001$) and BL ($\beta = 0.213$, $CR = 4.615$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, CM significantly affects CE ($\beta = 0.265$, $CR = 5.293$, $p < 0.001$) and BL ($\beta = 0.297$, $CR = 6.412$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H1, H2, H3 and H4 were supported. CE has a significant impact on BL at a higher level ($\beta = 0.392$, $CR = 7.437$, $p < 0.001$), providing support for H5.

Table 8: Results of Path Analysis

Path Relationship			Unstandardized Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Standardized Estimate
CE	<---	SMIM	0.375	0.05	7.549	***	0.38
CE	<---	CM	0.282	0.053	5.293	***	0.265
BL	<---	SMIM	0.178	0.039	4.615	***	0.213
BL	<---	CM	0.268	0.042	6.412	***	0.297
BL	<---	CE	0.333	0.045	7.437	***	0.392

Note: *** $p < 0.001$

To explore the mediating effect of CE, bootstrap test was used to test H6a and H6b. A 95% confidence interval (CI) was calculated using the bias-corrected percentile bootstrapping approach using 5000 samples, as suggested by Shrout and Bolger (2002). H6a was supported by the results which indicated a positive and significant mediating effect of CE between SMIM and BL (standardized $\beta = 0.149$, $p < 0.000$, 95% CI = [0.089-0.229]). Meanwhile, there is a positive and significant mediating effect for CE between CM and BL, with a standardized indirect effect of 0.104, and $p < 0.01$ (95% CI = [0.051-0.176]), providing support for H6b. Overall, the result of hypothesis testing is summarized in Table 9.

Table 9: Hypothesis Relationship

Hypothesis	Model Relationship	β	Bias-corrected percentile 95% CI			Results
			Lower	Upper	p	
	<i>Main Effect</i>					
H1	SMIM→BL	0.213	0.097	0.335	0.001	Supported
H2	CM→BL	0.297	0.18	0.407	o	Supported
H3	SMIM→CE	0.38	0.257	0.499	o	Supported
H4	CM→CE	0.265	0.122	0.404	0.001	Supported
H5	CE→BL	0.392	0.262	0.517	o	Supported
	<i>Mediating Effect</i>					
H6a	SMIM→CE→BL	0.149	0.089	0.229	o	Supported (Partial Mediation Effect)
H6b	CM→CE→BL	0.104	0.051	0.176	0.001	Supported (Partial Mediation Effect)

7. Conclusion

This study investigates the impact of social media marketing on brand loyalty of Chinese customers towards Chinese local cosmetics. Through analysis results, it is found that SMM plays a crucial role in fostering customer brand loyalty. Specifically, whether through SMIs or CM, both have almost equally contributed to enhancing Chinese customers' loyalty towards local cosmetics brands in China. Trustworthiness of the influencers has the greatest impact, emphasizing the important role of consumer's trust in stimulating participation and enhancing loyalty. Furthermore, the usefulness of information conveyed by companies to consumers through social media has the greatest impact under CM strategies, reflecting the importance of providing valuable and practical content by brands.

Moreover, it is indicated that customer engagement also significantly and positively influences brand loyalty, suggesting that customer engagement not only affects perceived value but also indirectly impacts purchase intention.

Additionally, SMM enhances brand loyalty via customer engagement, with indirect effects of 0.149 and 0.104, respectively. Given that the 95% confidence intervals do not include zero, customer engagement is a partial mediation. SMIM is indicated to be more effective in generating customer engagement according to the findings. That is, on social media platforms like livestreaming or blogs, influencers play a crucial role in fostering connections between customers and brands, as well as among customers themselves. They ignite excitement for creative endeavors, encouraging people to share their experiences with products and engage with innovative content. Although the effect of content marketing is relatively low, it should not be overlooked. Therefore, leveraging social media platforms, utilizing professional, trustworthy, and charismatic SMIs, along with delivering practical and interesting content, to enhance customer engagement is an effective strategy for increasing brand loyalty.

For Chinese local cosmetics companies, it is crucial to acknowledge the unique preferences of the Chinese consumer market. Research findings indicate that consumers in the Chinese market favor content that is both informative and persuasive, rather than purely entertaining. To further enhance the effectiveness of content marketing, Chinese local cosmetics companies should embrace innovation in content formats. This includes experimenting with story-telling videos, live streaming interactions, and user-generated content (UGC), which can help create a more immersive and personalized experience for consumers. By integrating these diverse content types, companies can ensure that their messaging resonates with customers on multiple levels. Through interaction and participation with consumers, companies can better understand their needs and preferences, thereby adjusting and optimizing content marketing strategies then fostering stronger brand loyalty.

8. Discussion

The research findings demonstrate that businesses can attract and enhance customer engagement through various social media marketing strategies. This engagement not only enables customers to better understand brands, enhancing awareness and trust in Chinese local cosmetic brands, but also allows customers to gain more experiences and value during the engagement process, thereby enhancing their loyalty (Liu et al, 2018). Recently, Chinese consumers increasingly rely on social media platforms for product information and shopping experiences. Thus, brand marketing activities conducted through social media platforms can directly reach target consumers and build closer brand relationships. The findings release that SMIM and CM, as two major marketing strategies, directly promote customer loyalty to Chinese local cosmetics brands by enhancing consumer-brand interaction and connections.

In terms of SMIM, businesses can employ influential influencers such as online celebrities and bloggers to promote their products, guiding customers to interact and participate. As brand promoters, SMIs have closer connections with users (Kim & Kim, 2022), enabling them to receive feedback promptly and adjust marketing communication processes accordingly. Their influence primarily includes credibility, professionalism, and personal charm. They can share their usage experiences and feelings, guiding customers to understand the brand and products. Eastin (2001) provided indirect support for this finding, as he found that source expertise was used by people to evaluate the credibility of online health information. Additionally, through interaction and participation, customers can better understand the brand's value and characteristics, thereby enhancing brand awareness and loyalty. This research finds that the credibility and attractiveness of influencers are crucial factors affecting their influence, aligning with the findings of Ebrahim (2020). Given the direct and positive impact of SMIM on brand loyalty, Chinese local cosmetics companies should place greater emphasis on collaborating with social media influencers. This endeavor should extend beyond merely seeking out macro-influencers with a large number of followers to a more

discerning approach that prioritizes small yet targeted key opinion leaders (KOLs) who resonate with the brand's tone and possess influence within specific market segments. In China's social media environment, Chinese consumers are more inclined to trust SMIs with professional knowledge and personal charisma. Therefore, in social media marketing, more attention should be paid to influencer selection and management to ensure effective communication of brand messages and values. By crafting authentic and insightful collaborative content, appropriate influencers can more effectively convey brand values, foster consumer trust and identification, ultimately leading to an enhancement of brand loyalty.

In terms of CM, brands can attract customer engagement by publishing valuable content which can include information about product knowledge, usage tips, new product releases, as well as attractive stories and case studies. When it comes to brand promotion activities, it is crucial to meticulously craft promotional content in order to effectively capture the attention of users. Before customers decide to engage in brand activities, they first need to understand the usefulness of the activity. It is therefore essential for brands to create content that not only informs but also inspires and educates. Through these types of content, brands can gain customer attention and engagement, increasing customers' brand awareness and understanding as well as providing high-quality content which can also enhance customer trust and loyalty to the brand.

The findings of this study also highlight customer engagement as a bridge that connects social media marketing and brand loyalty, emphasizing the importance of interaction and experience. Using a variety of approaches like partnering with social media influencers and creating engaging content, Chinese local cosmetic brands can successfully involve their customers and boost their engagement. This confirms that customer engagement, perceived value, and purchase intention exhibit a sequential order within the customer decision-making process model. It indicates that consumer engagement not only influences consumer perceived value but also indirectly affects consumer purchase intention, which aligns with the findings of this study.

9. Contribution

9.1 Theoretical Contribution

This research highlights and defines the role of customer social media engagement as a mediating factor between social media influencer marketing, content marketing and brand loyalty. This study conducted empirical research on the impact mechanisms of social media influencer marketing and content marketing on brand loyalty, thereby elucidating the innovative concept of corporate engagement marketing. It has been demonstrated that enterprise engagement marketing in the social media context, which includes social media influencer marketing (SMIM) and content marketing (CM) as independent variables, enhances the successful establishment and maintenance of customer brand loyalty (BL) by mediating role of customer engagement (CE), laying the subsequent basis for future related research.

It confirms that customer engagement mediates the relationship between social media marketing and brand loyalty, revealing its multi-dimensional nature. In the Chinese market, customers engage with brands not only through visible actions like liking and sharing but also by creating content and participating in brand-initiated events. This multi-dimensional interpretation of customer engagement offers new insights into how brand loyalty is built among Chinese customers in the social media environment. Next, the unique cultural background and consumption habits in Chinese society give distinct characteristics to the mechanisms behind social media marketing and brand loyalty. The trend of integrating traditional Chinese culture with modern concepts leads customers to value the cultural meanings conveyed by brands when choosing them, providing culturally sensitive guidance for developing social media marketing strategies in China. In addition, as China's mobile internet technology advances, social media platforms continue to innovate, providing diverse channels for brand-consumer interactions. This study highlights the significant

potential and influence of these platforms in the Chinese market.

While prior research has investigated the behavioral traits of businesses on social media platforms, agreement around the definition of social media marketing continues to be lacking. This study fills this research gap. SMM is a marketing strategy that organically integrates the power of social media influencers and content marketing to stimulate consumers' active participation in brand building. These have been proven to be conducive to the successful establishment and maintenance of customer brand loyalty, providing a reference basis for subsequent related studies. Meanwhile, there remains a gap between the limited number of related studies and the huge potential of the Chinese local cosmetics industry. Therefore, this study enriches and expands the scope and perspective of related research to some extent.

9.2 Practical Contribution

For Chinese local cosmetics marketers, conducting a brand self-assessment when formulating marketing strategies to clarify brand positioning is beneficial. It is recommended that brands review the style and themes of the influencer's past content to assess its alignment with the brand's tone. Besides, analyzing the influencer's follower base to evaluate the degree of overlap with the brand's target customer demographics is crucial. Based on the brand's tone and target audience characteristics, establish criteria for influencer collaborations, such as follower quality (authenticity and engagement level), content creation capabilities (compatibility with brand tone and creativity), and interaction rates. It ensures that the selected influencers can effectively convey brand messages.

With the improvement of China's economic development level, a renewed sense of national confidence and a growing appreciation for traditional culture have emerged among Chinese consumers. Recognizing this trend, Chinese local cosmetics brands, in addition to enhancing the quality of their products and services, need to capitalize on key elements such as traditional culture and ethnic heritage. This strategic shift is intricately linked to the "Guochao" (blending Chinese traditions with modern design). At the heart of "Guochao" and local products lies a deep connection to the rich and extensive traditions of Chinese culture. They are not merely labels for goods but also the ingenious integration of cultural heritage and modern aesthetics. As such, marketers of Chinese local cosmetics brands should deeply understand and skillfully leverage this cultural bond. Notably, they should assess the level of familiarity that potential influencers possess with traditional Chinese culture, as this not only speaks to their cultural literacy but also ensures that their messaging resonates deeply with the emotional core of the target audience.

Furthermore, the alignment of an influencer's personal image with traditional Chinese aesthetics is important. By harmoniously blending with the cultural tapestry, such influencers can seamlessly integrate into the "Guochao" narrative, amplifying the power of brand stories and fostering a unique and profound brand image that resonates deeply within the hearts of consumers. Moreover, Chinese local cosmetics brands can also integrate elements of Chinese traditional culture, such as traditional aesthetics, festival culture, and historical heritage, into their content marketing efforts. By creating content that resonates with consumers, telling brand cultural connotations, enhancing brand uniqueness, and attracting more consumers' attention and affection.

For policy makers, the findings of this research could be used to suggest specific actions that can be taken to assist and guide Chinese local cosmetic enterprises in improving brand loyalty on social media platforms. It entails establishing an environment conducive to the advancement of social media marketing strategies for Chinese local cosmetic enterprises, while offering policy assistance in the form of training, resources, and direction to aid these organizations in efficiently using social media platforms. Furthermore, considering the inherent distinction between this emerging marketing approach differs from traditional offline marketing, it is essential to establish and enforce relevant regulations and standards to supervise the behavior of SMIs and the content shared by companies on social media platforms. It ensures that the marketing practices of Chinese local cosmetics companies comply with these standards and are legal, ethical, and responsible.

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