Research on the Impact of Brand Narrative Strategy on Consumer Brand Loyalty in the Digital Media Era

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Abstract

We examine how brand narrative strategy affects consumer brand loyalty in the digital media environment. The sequential mediating roles of narrative transportation and consumer brand identification are identified, along with the moderating role of perceived brand authenticity. By collecting survey data from 876 valid respondents who actively follow brand accounts on digital media platforms in China's mainland, we test the proposed model. Brand narrative strategy is conceptualised as a second-order construct that encompasses narrative authenticity, coherence, relatability and interactivity. Consumer brand loyalty is measured as a composite of attitudinal commitment and behavioural repurchase intention. Using multiple linear regression analysis with bias-corrected bootstrap mediation testing, a significant positive direct effect of brand narrative strategy on consumer brand loyalty is found. Narrative transportation and consumer brand identification jointly and sequentially mediate this relationship, and the total indirect effect accounts for roughly half of the total effect. The sequential path from brand narrative strategy through narrative transportation to consumer brand identification and then to loyalty is statistically significant. This result supports the stimulus-organism-response logic that an experiential state must first be converted into a durable relational state before it can sustain loyalty over time. Perceived brand authenticity significantly amplifies the conversion of narrative strategy into loyalty, as moderation analysis demonstrates. Consumers who judge the brand narrative as authentic exhibit a markedly steeper loyalty response, a pattern that is found to be robust when considering simple slope analysis. A larger direct effect of narrative strategy and a greater contribution of narrative transportation emerge from short video platforms and from younger consumers, whereas consumer brand identification carries a greater share of the loyalty effect on content community platforms and among older consumers. The stability of the core findings is found to be robust when considering a behavioural-only loyalty measure and a subsample restricted to established brand relationships.

Keywords

Brand narrative strategy, consumer brand loyalty, narrative transportation, consumer brand identification, perceived brand authenticity, digital media, chain mediation.

1. Introduction

We systematically examine the direct effect and the internal transmission mechanism through which brand narrative strategy shapes consumer brand loyalty in the digital media environment.

The overall effect of brand narrative strategy on consumer brand loyalty is examined first. How the composite level of narrative practice deployed by a brand across digital media channels

affects the attitudinal and behavioural attachment that consumers hold toward that brand is clarified, and empirical evidence for the core research question is provided. Narrative transportation and consumer brand identification are then introduced as mediating variables in order to explore whether they carry the transmission path along which brand narrative strategy raises brand loyalty. Given the diversity of platform architectures and consumer cohorts in digital media, whether differences in platform type and age group lead to significant differentiation in the intensity of the effect is further examined. By constructing and validating a theoretical analytical model that incorporates chain mediation and a moderating condition, we aim to address the shortcomings of existing literature. Previous work is generally limited to a single narrative stimulus and only discusses simple linear associations.

With the continuous penetration of algorithmic distribution and participatory media into everyday consumption, brand narrative has become a key non price dimension for assessing the long term resilience of a brand. The relationship between narrative practice and consumer loyalty is gradually becoming a core issue of common concern in both academic research and marketing practice. Content characteristics rather than exposure volume are found to drive downstream consumer behaviour on algorithmically curated feeds, as evidence from short form video advertising demonstrates [1]. In emerging economies, social media marketing activity raises brand awareness and brand engagement before it reaches purchase outcomes [2]. Social media has shifted the locus of brand value creation from firm controlled messaging toward reciprocal consumer participation, as a synthesis of two decades of engagement research further establishes [3].

The attitudinal influence of story based communication has been widely documented in narrative persuasion research conducted in mature consumer markets. Immersion in a narrative world reduces counterarguing and gives rise to story consistent belief change, as Green and Brock [4] established. This finding provides the theoretical anchor for subsequent brand narrative work. A recent theoretical consolidation extends this account and specifies how narratives reshape self perception and world perception across repeated exposure [5]. By synthesising the antecedents, outcomes and moderators of narrative transportation across ninety five peer reviewed articles, a systematic review demonstrates that transportation reliably improves attitudes, word of mouth intention and purchase intention [6].

Research on narrative form has moved beyond text centred conceptions of the story. Based on a review of sixty four articles, Nikulina et al. [7] suggested that an image must narrate, act and resonate before it can stimulate narrative processing. This finding extends transportation theory into the visual domain in which digital media operates. Depicted movement and humanisation within a single picture based advertisement generate transportation and more favourable advertisement attitudes even in the absence of temporal sequence, as Grigsby et al. [8] demonstrated experimentally.

Narrative exposure has been repeatedly linked to brand level attitudinal outcomes in empirical work. Narrative transportation and retrospective reflexivity mediate the effect of storytelling advertisements on brand attitude, while self construal moderates the strength of that effect, as Deb et al. [9] demonstrated using three experiments, one survey based study and one field study with a representative sample of participants in the United States. Narrative perspective shapes brand attitude through social presence and self brand connection, and product involvement acts as a boundary condition, as Chen et al. [10] found across three experiments with 526 participants. Transportation into film narratives raises positive word of mouth through emotional response, as Wang and Tang [11] demonstrated. Irimiás et al. [12] identified escapism and immersion as the mediating states through which travel narratives operate. Taken together, these studies indicate that narrative influence is transmitted through experiential states rather than through direct message acceptance.

The digital media era has also changed who tells the brand story and how that story is produced. Systematic differences in perceived experiential richness emerge when experiential narratives generated by large language models are compared with human authored content, as Wen and Laporte [13] reported. Perceived empowerment carries the advertising outcome when brands invite consumers to co create narrative content with generative tools, as Feng and Sun [14] found. Awareness of falsity in artificially generated responsibility advertisements suppresses online brand engagement, as Aljarah et al. [15] demonstrated. This indicates that perceived narrative sincerity operates as a boundary condition for narrative effectiveness. The conceptual boundaries of computer generated brand personas were delineated by Audrezet et al. [16], and consumer engagement was identified as the dominant outcome variable in this research stream. Perceived shared reality translates anthropomorphic perception into positive affect, as Thompson et al. [17] demonstrated by studying 573 posts and 57,086 comments together with a follower survey. Visual and mental human likeness strengthen the consumer brand relationship through social presence, as Zhang et al. [18] found in a survey of 1,041 users of Chinese content and commerce platforms. By using social influence theory with 601 survey responses, Davlembayeva et al. [19] traced how identification and internalisation convert influence acceptance into behavioural response.

There is evidence that narrative practice does not affect loyalty directly but rather operates through relational states. Brand identification partially mediates the path from perceived authenticity to willingness to pay a premium price, as Fatma and Khan [20] found in a survey of 395 hotel guests. Perceived brand authenticity mediates the association between brand experience and brand love, a finding that is found to be robust when considering cross cultural data from Japan, India and Portugal [21]. Consumer brand identification and brand community participation jointly predict brand loyalty, as Coelho et al. [22] established. Consumer engagement and consumer brand identification both raise brand trust and brand loyalty in fast moving consumer goods brands, while identification attenuates the marginal contribution of engagement [23].

The behavioural counterpart to this relational account is provided by engagement centred studies. Brand interactivity and brand involvement raise consumer brand engagement, and this engagement reaches loyalty through brand trust, as Samarah et al. [24] found in a survey of 353 followers of an airline social media page. Social media based customer engagement is linked to downstream marketing outcomes across several brand categories [25]. Affective attachment was identified as the mechanism connecting engagement with purchase intention [26]. Content characteristics reach purchase intention through brand attitude and brand loyalty, as Liu [27] demonstrated using a dual mediation model validated with 1,400 Chinese consumers who had purchased sports products on a short video platform.

Three questions remain open in the literature reviewed above. Brand narrative strategy is usually operationalised as a single experimental stimulus rather than as a multidimensional managerial construct that brands deploy continuously across platforms. The transmission chain is rarely modelled as a sequential process in which an experiential state precedes a relational state. Boundary conditions arising from platform architecture and from consumer cohort remain underexamined within a unified analytical framework.

We focus on the effect of brand narrative strategy on consumer brand loyalty in the digital media environment, as well as on the chain mediating role of narrative transportation and consumer brand identification and the moderating role of perceived brand authenticity. An introduction that sets out the research background, significance, methods and current status opens the discussion. Conceptual definitions and theoretical foundations follow. Research hypotheses, research design and variable definition are presented next. Empirical testing and core result analysis are then reported, together with heterogeneity analysis and robustness testing. Research conclusions and recommendations close the paper.

2. Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Definition of Core Concepts

2.1.1. Brand Narrative Strategy

By brand narrative strategy we refer to the systematic and sustained arrangement through which a brand organises its meaning into story form and distributes that story across digital media touchpoints. This concept is not a simple superposition of isolated advertising executions but a comprehensive practice result. Plot, character, value proposition and audience participation are integrated over the long term. Following the visual and multimodal extension of narrative research [7], we treat brand narrative strategy as a second order construct with four dimensions. Narrative authenticity estimates the degree to which the story is perceived as grounded in the real history and real commitments of the brand. Narrative coherence detects the internal consistency and cross platform continuity of the story line. Narrative relatability estimates the correspondence between the protagonist experience depicted in the story and the lived experience of the audience. Narrative interactivity detects the extent to which the audience can enter, extend or co author the story through platform affordances.

2.1.2. Consumer Brand Loyalty

Consumer brand loyalty is the overall evaluation of the willingness of a consumer to maintain a preferential relationship with a brand across time, resisting competitive inducement and situational disturbance. There are two main approaches to loyalty measurement: the attitudinal approach and the behavioural approach. The attitudinal approach records commitment, preference strength and advocacy intention, while the behavioural approach records repurchase frequency and share of category spending. We adopt a composite measure that combines the two terms, which is denoted by BL in the empirical models that follow. A composite measure is not affected by short term promotional fluctuation and can compare loyalty levels across product categories in an intuitive manner.

2.1.3. Narrative Transportation and Consumer Brand Identification

Narrative transportation, denoted by NT, is the convergent mental state in which attention, imagery and affect become focused on the events of a story, so that the audience temporarily detaches from the immediate physical environment [4]. It is an experiential and transient response to a specific narrative encounter. Consumer brand identification, denoted by CBI, is the perceived overlap between the self concept of the consumer and the symbolic meaning of the brand [22]. It is a relational and comparatively durable state. This distinction matters because an experiential state can be generated within a single exposure, whereas a relational state accumulates through repeated exposure and therefore stands closer to loyalty in the causal ordering.

2.1.4. Perceived Brand Authenticity

Perceived brand authenticity, denoted by PBA, is the judgement of a consumer that a brand remains true to its stated origin, values and commitments rather than performing them instrumentally. In prior work, authenticity has been treated both as an antecedent of identification [20] and as a mediator between experience and affective bonding [21]. Since digital audiences now routinely encounter machine assisted and commercially sponsored narratives, awareness of narrative falsity has been shown to suppress engagement [15]. We therefore treat perceived brand authenticity as a moderating condition governing how much of the narrative effect is allowed to reach loyalty.

2.2. Basic Theoretical Support

2.2.1. Narrative Transportation Theory

Green and Brock [4] formally established narrative transportation theory, and recent theoretical and review work has consolidated it [5][6]. According to this theory, a receiver transported into a story world allocates cognitive resources to the imagined scene and consequently gives rise to fewer counterarguments against the embedded claim. Persuasion under this route depends on the vividness and structural quality of the narrative rather than on argument strength. Brand narrative strategy is the managerial input supplying such vividness and structure, and transportation is therefore the natural proximal outcome of narrative practice.

2.2.2. Social Identity Theory

According to social identity theory, individuals classify themselves into social categories and derive self esteem from membership in categories in which favourable meaning is carried. A brand functions as a symbolic category in consumption settings. When the protagonist and the value stance of a brand story correspond to the self concept of the audience, brand meaning is internalised and higher identification is reported [22][23]. Identification generated in this way is a durable relational resource that sustains preference even when functional parity exists across competing offers.

2.2.3. Stimulus Organism Response Framework

According to the stimulus organism response framework, an environmental stimulus generates internal organism states, and these in turn drive approach or avoidance responses. In the present model, brand narrative strategy is the stimulus, narrative transportation and consumer brand identification are the organism states arranged in experiential and relational order, and brand loyalty is the response. This framework justifies specifying the two mediators sequentially rather than in parallel.

2.2.4. Relationship Marketing Theory

In relationship marketing theory, the exchange between a brand and a consumer is analysed as a continuing relationship rather than a series of discrete transactions. Engagement, trust and attachment accumulate through repeated interaction and are converted into loyalty [24][25][26]. Digital media lower the cost of such interaction and allow narrative to be delivered continuously, and the practical relevance of the relational account for the present research question is thereby strengthened.

3. Research Hypotheses and Research Design

3.1. Research Hypotheses

3.1.1. The Impact of Brand Narrative Strategy on Consumer Brand Loyalty

A brand pursuing durable preference has to supply meaning that survives price comparison, as narrative transportation theory and relationship marketing theory jointly indicate. Empirical evidence from algorithmic feeds shows that the characteristics of the content, and not the sheer volume of exposure, determine downstream consumer response [1][27]. Storytelling advertisements raise brand attitude relative to argument based executions [9], and coherent narrative structure improves brand evaluation through the visual channel in which digital media operates [7][8]. A brand that maintains authentic, coherent, relatable and interactive narrative across touchpoints therefore accumulates the symbolic assets on which loyalty rests.

Hypothesis 1: Brand narrative strategy has a significant positive effect on consumer brand loyalty in the digital media environment.

3.1.2. The Impact of Brand Narrative Strategy on Narrative Transportation

The conditions identified by transportation research as necessary for immersion are supplied by high quality narrative practice. Verisimilitude and plot coherence reduce the cognitive effort required to construct the story world, depicted action invites mental simulation [8], and relatable protagonists shorten the psychological distance between the audience and the narrated experience [10]. Interactive affordances allow the audience to move from reception toward participation and sustain attention across the compressed duration typical of digital formats [14]. The better the narrative strategy of a brand, the more likely the audience is to enter the story world.

Hypothesis 2: Brand narrative strategy has a significant positive effect on narrative transportation.

3.1.3. The Chain Mediating Role of Narrative Transportation and Consumer Brand Identification

Transportation is an experiential state that decays once the narrative episode ends, so it cannot by itself account for loyalty that persists across months. According to the stimulus organism response framework, the experiential state must be converted into a relational state before it can support durable behaviour. A transported audience empathises with the protagonist and imports the value stance of the story into self relevant memory. The perceived overlap between self concept and brand meaning is thereby raised [11][17]. Trust, advocacy and repeat patronage are predicted by identification of this kind [22][23]. Brand narrative strategy is therefore expected to reach loyalty both through transportation and through the sequential path that runs from transportation to identification.

Hypothesis 3: Narrative transportation mediates the effect of brand narrative strategy on consumer brand loyalty.

Hypothesis 4: Narrative transportation and consumer brand identification play a chain mediating role in the effect of brand narrative strategy on consumer brand loyalty.

3.1.4. The Moderating Role of Perceived Brand Authenticity

The credibility of the narrator is a precondition for narrative effectiveness. When a consumer judges that the story is a faithful account of what the brand actually does, transportation is interpreted as evidence about the brand and is allowed to update brand relevant beliefs. When the consumer suspects that the story is manufactured for persuasive convenience, the same immersion is discounted as entertainment and gives rise to reactance instead of preference [15][16]. Identification and affective bonding in service and consumer goods settings are raised by authenticity [20][21]. The association between narrative strategy and loyalty is therefore expected to be strengthened by perceived brand authenticity.

Hypothesis 5: Perceived brand authenticity positively moderates the effect of brand narrative strategy on consumer brand loyalty.

Figure 1 presents the theoretical model. Brand narrative strategy is the antecedent variable, narrative transportation and consumer brand identification form the sequential mediating chain, perceived brand authenticity is the moderating variable and consumer brand loyalty is the outcome variable.

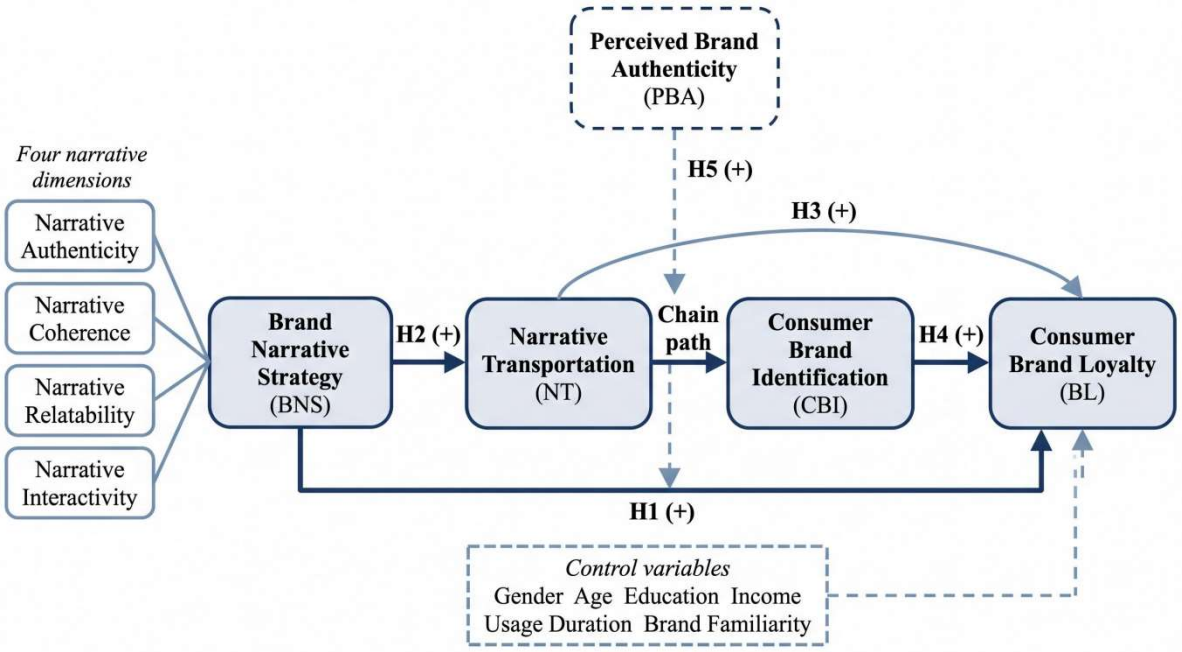


Figure 1. Theoretical Research Model

3.2. Sample Selection and Data Sources

Consumers who actively use digital media platforms in China's mainland constitute the research population. Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered on a professional survey platform between November 2025 and February 2026. The specific screening steps are as follows. (1) Retain respondents who report following at least one brand account on a digital media platform and who report at least one purchase from that brand category during the previous twelve months. (2) Exclude questionnaires that fail either of the two embedded attention check items. (3) Exclude questionnaires completed in less than one hundred and twenty seconds or exhibiting identical responses across an entire construct. (4) Winsorise all continuous variables at the first and ninety ninth percentiles in order to mitigate the distorting impact of outlier observations on regression estimates.

A total of 1,200 questionnaires were distributed and 1,043 were returned. After the screening procedure described above, 876 valid questionnaires were retained, which corresponds to an effective response rate of 84.0 percent. Respondents were asked to nominate one brand that they follow on a digital media platform and to answer all perceptual items with reference to that nominated brand. All perceptual constructs were measured on a seven point Likert scale. Demographic and usage variables were reported directly by the respondents.

3.3. Variable Design

All latent constructs are measured with established scales adapted to the digital media context, and the wording of every item was reviewed by three marketing researchers before the formal survey. The construct definitions, the number of measurement items and the literature sources are shown in Table 1. Control variables cover gender, age, education, monthly disposable income, daily platform usage duration and brand familiarity, since these characteristics have been shown to shape both narrative processing and loyalty formation [6][19].

Table 1. Construct Measurement and Sources

Variable type	Symbol	Construct	Description	Items
Independent	*BNS*	Brand narrative strategy	Second order construct covering narrative authenticity, coherence, relatability and interactivity [7][9]	15
Mediating	*NT*	Narrative transportation	Attention, imagery and affective absorption in the brand story world [4][6]	6
Mediating	*CBI*	Consumer brand identification	Perceived overlap between self concept and brand meaning [22][23]	5
Moderating	*PBA*	Perceived brand authenticity	Judgement that the brand remains true to origin, values and commitments [20][21]	4
Dependent	*BL*	Consumer brand loyalty	Composite of attitudinal commitment and behavioural repurchase intention [24][25]	6
Control	*Gender*	Gender	Dummy variable coded one for female respondents	1
Control	*Age*	Age	Reported age of the respondent in years	1
Control	*Edu*	Education	Ordinal scale from junior secondary to postgraduate	1
Control	*Inc*	Income	Ordinal scale of monthly disposable income	1
Control	*Use*	Usage duration	Average daily platform usage duration in hours	1
Control	*Fam*	Brand familiarity	Self reported familiarity with the nominated brand	3

3.4. Model Construction

Five multiple linear regression models are constructed for empirical testing, in order to verify the effect of brand narrative strategy on consumer brand loyalty, the chain mediating role of narrative transportation and consumer brand identification and the moderating role of perceived brand authenticity. In all specifications the subscript i indexes the individual respondent, and $Control_{ki}$ denotes the vector of control variables described in Table 1.

Model (1) is used to examine the direct impact of brand narrative strategy on consumer brand loyalty, and therefore verifies research hypothesis H1.

$$BL_i=\beta_0+\beta_1 BNS_i+\Sigma\beta_k Control_{ki}+\varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Model (2) is used to analyse the relationship between brand narrative strategy and narrative transportation, and therefore verifies research hypothesis H2.

$$NT_i=\gamma_0+\gamma_1 BNS_i+\Sigma\gamma_k Control_{ki}+\mu_i \quad (2)$$

Model (3) is used to examine whether narrative transportation transmits the effect of brand narrative strategy onto consumer brand identification, which supplies the intermediate link of the chain specified in research hypothesis H4.

$$CBI_i=\delta_0+\delta_1 BNS_i+\delta_2 NT_i+\Sigma\delta_k Control_{ki}+\nu_i \quad (3)$$

Model (4) is used to test the mediating effects of narrative transportation and consumer brand identification in the process through which brand narrative strategy affects consumer brand loyalty, and therefore verifies research hypotheses H3 and H4.

$$BL_i=\theta_0+\theta_1 BNS_i+\theta_2 NT_i+\theta_3 CBI_i+\Sigma\theta_k Control_{ki}+\omega_i \quad (4)$$

Model (5) introduces the interaction between brand narrative strategy and perceived brand authenticity in order to verify research hypothesis H5. Both terms of the interaction are mean centred before the product is computed, and this reduces the non essential collinearity that a raw product term would otherwise introduce.

$$BL_i=\lambda_0+\lambda_1 BNS_i+\lambda_2 PBA_i+\lambda_3(BNS_i\times PBA_i)+\Sigma\lambda_k Control_{ki}+\tau_i \quad (5)$$

4. Empirical Analysis

4.1. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

The demographic and usage composition of the valid sample is reported in Table 2. The sample is balanced on gender and skewed toward younger and better educated respondents. This is consistent with the population that actively follows brand accounts on digital media platforms.

Table 2. Profile of the Valid Sample

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	462	52.7
	Male	414	47.3
Age	18 to 25 years	316	36.1
	26 to 30 years	226	25.8
	31 to 40 years	224	25.6
	41 years and above	110	12.6
Education	Secondary or below	108	12.3
	Junior college	214	24.4
	Bachelor degree	428	48.9
	Postgraduate degree	126	14.4
Monthly income	Below 3,000 yuan	187	21.3
	3,000 to 6,000 yuan	289	33.0
	6,001 to 10,000 yuan	253	28.9
	Above 10,000 yuan	147	16.8
Primary platform	Short video platform	468	53.4
	Content community platform	408	46.6
Daily usage	Below 2 hours	198	22.6
	2 to 4 hours	391	44.6
	Above 4 hours	287	32.8

Descriptive statistical analysis is performed on the 876 valid observations in order to fully understand the distribution characteristics and variable differences across the sample dataset. The corresponding estimation results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics Results

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
BL	876	4.836	1.142	1.167	7.000
BNS	876	4.917	1.058	1.400	7.000
NT	876	4.702	1.187	1.000	7.000
CBI	876	4.583	1.226	1.000	7.000
PBA	876	4.994	1.031	1.500	7.000
Gender	876	0.527	0.499	0.000	1.000
Age	876	28.640	7.213	18.000	56.000
Edu	876	2.653	0.874	1.000	4.000
Inc	876	2.412	1.006	1.000	4.000
Use	876	3.427	1.531	0.500	9.000
Fam	876	4.735	1.194	1.000	7.000

At the core variable level, as Table 3 shows, BL has a mean value of 4.836 and a standard deviation of 1.142. This indicates a moderately high but clearly dispersed level of loyalty across the sample. The core explanatory variable BNS has a mean of 4.917, which suggests that respondents generally recognise the narrative effort of the brands they follow. Among the mediating variables, NT has a mean of 4.702 and CBI has a mean of 4.583. The identification score is the lowest among the perceptual constructs. This is consistent with the view that relational states accumulate more slowly than experiential states. Average daily platform usage reaches 3.427 hours, and the intensity of digital media exposure in the sampled population is thereby confirmed.

4.2. Reliability and Validity Analysis

We assess internal consistency through the Cronbach alpha coefficient, denoted by α, and through composite reliability, denoted by CR. Convergent validity is assessed using the average variance extracted, denoted by AVE. Letting λ_j denote the standardised factor loading of item j within a construct, the two indices are computed as shown in Model (6) and Model (7).

$$CR = \frac{(\Sigma\lambda_j)^2}{(\Sigma\lambda_j)^2 + \Sigma(1 - \lambda_j^2)} \tag{6}$$

$$AVE = \frac{\Sigma\lambda_j^2}{\Sigma\lambda_j^2 + \Sigma(1 - \lambda_j^2)} \tag{7}$$

Table 4 reports the standardised loading range, the Cronbach alpha coefficient, the composite reliability and the average variance extracted for every construct. All loadings exceed the threshold of 0.600, all internal consistency and composite reliability values exceed 0.800 and all average variance extracted values exceed 0.500. Satisfactory reliability and convergent validity of the measurement instrument are therefore indicated.

Table 4. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Items	Loading range	α	*CR*	*AVE*
Narrative authenticity	4	0.712 to 0.856	0.868	0.905	0.704
Narrative coherence	4	0.703 to 0.841	0.849	0.898	0.688
Narrative relatability	4	0.726 to 0.869	0.877	0.911	0.719
Narrative interactivity	3	0.694 to 0.832	0.821	0.893	0.736
Narrative transportation	6	0.688 to 0.847	0.902	0.924	0.670
Consumer brand identification	5	0.735 to 0.881	0.911	0.934	0.739
Perceived brand authenticity	4	0.721 to 0.858	0.873	0.913	0.724
Consumer brand loyalty	6	0.706 to 0.874	0.918	0.937	0.713
Brand familiarity	3	0.752 to 0.869	0.842	0.905	0.761

We examine discriminant validity by comparing the square root of the average variance extracted for each construct with the correlation between that construct and every other construct. Table 5 reports the resulting matrix, in which diagonal entries are the square roots of the average variance extracted and off diagonal entries are the correlation coefficients. Every diagonal entry exceeds all correlations in the corresponding row and column. The criterion of Fornell and Larcker [28] is thereby satisfied, and adequate discriminant validity is confirmed.

Table 5. Discriminant Validity Test

Construct	*BNS*	*NT*	*CBI*	*PBA*	*BL*	*Fam*
BNS	0.840					
NT	0.612	0.819				
CBI	0.548	0.594	0.860			
PBA	0.573	0.521	0.502	0.851		
BL	0.587	0.618	0.641	0.539	0.844	
Fam	0.418	0.386	0.402	0.374	0.447	0.872

Note: diagonal entries are the square roots of the average variance extracted and off diagonal entries are correlation coefficients.

All constructs were reported by the same respondent at the same point in time, so common method bias was examined before hypothesis testing. The unrotated exploratory factor solution gives a leading factor accounting for 32.7 percent of total variance, which remains below the criterion of 40 percent. A marker variable unrelated to the theoretical model was also introduced, and the largest change in any structural path coefficient after partialling out the marker is 0.011. Common method bias is therefore unlikely to distort the empirical conclusions.

4.3. Correlation and Multicollinearity Analysis

Figure 2 shows the results of the correlation analysis of all variables in the sample. The correlation coefficient between the explained variable BL and the core explanatory variable BNS is 0.587, which is significantly positive at the 1 percent level and initially supports the expectation of a positive effect of brand narrative strategy on consumer brand loyalty. The correlation coefficient between BL and the mediating variable NT is 0.618, and the correlation

coefficient between BL and the mediating variable CBI is 0.641, and both are also significantly positive at the 1 percent level.

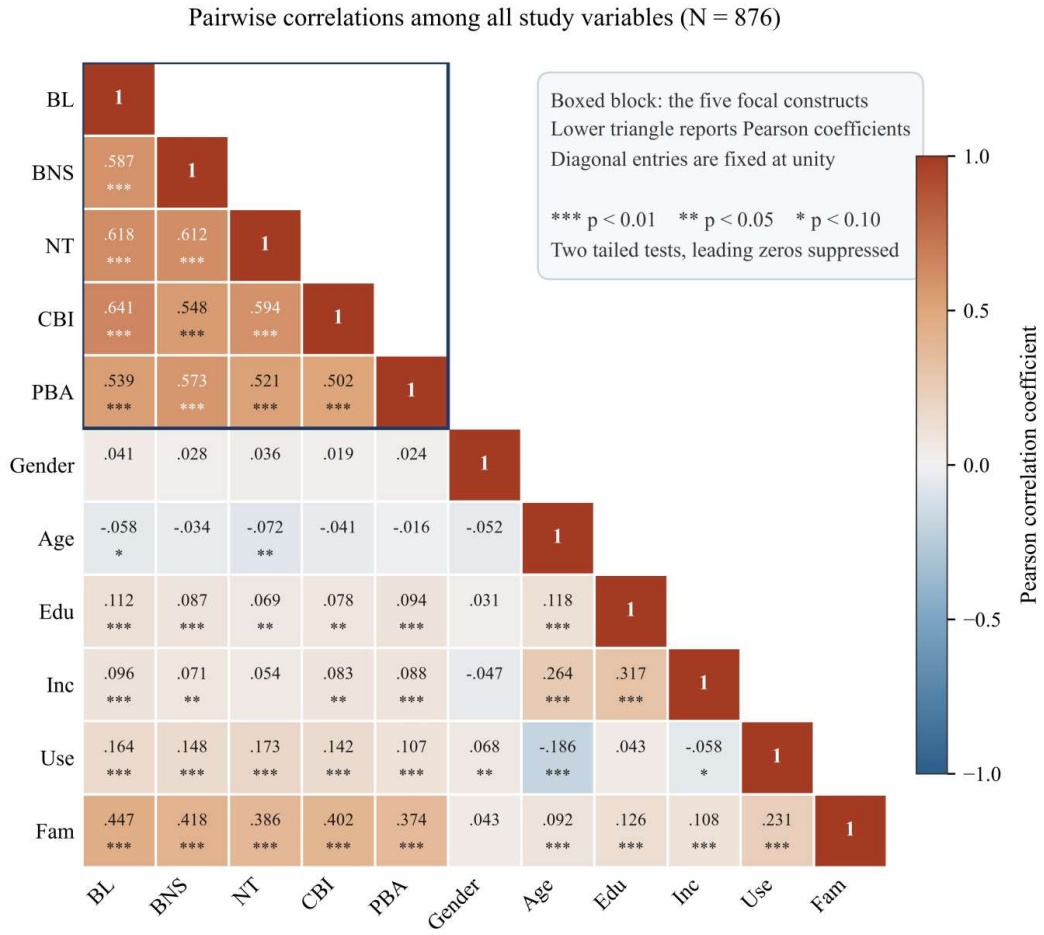


Figure 2. Pairwise Correlation Results

Table 6. Multicollinearity Analysis

Variable	*VIF*	$\frac{1}{VIF}$
BNS	1.94	0.515
NT	1.87	0.535
CBI	1.72	0.581
PBA	1.58	0.633
Fam	1.41	0.709
Use	1.23	0.813
Inc	1.19	0.840
Edu	1.16	0.862
Age	1.12	0.893
Gender	1.04	0.962
Mean value	1.43	

To avoid serious correlation among the selected variables, the variance inflation factor test, denoted by VIF, was performed on each variable. As shown in Table 6, the mean value of VIF across the sample variables is 1.43, and every individual value is well below the conventional threshold of 10, which indicates that no pronounced multicollinearity is detected across the variables included in the regression models.

4.4. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

4.4.1. The Impact of Brand Narrative Strategy on Consumer Brand Loyalty

The regression results of the main effect of brand narrative strategy on consumer brand loyalty are shown in Table 7. It can be seen from Column (1) of the table that when only the core explanatory variable BNS is included, the regression coefficient is 0.634, which is significantly positive at the 1 percent level. After the introduction of all control variables, it can be seen in Column (2) that the regression coefficient of BNS is 0.512 and remains significant at the 1 percent level, while the explanatory power of the model rises from 0.345 to 0.398. A clear direct positive effect of brand narrative strategy on consumer brand loyalty is therefore established, and H1 is strongly verified. Among the control variables, brand familiarity and daily usage duration are both significantly positive. Accumulated exposure thus supports loyalty independently of narrative quality.

Table 7. Main Effect Regression Results

Variable	(1) *BL*	(2) *BL*
BNS	0.634*** (21.437)	0.512*** (17.836)
Gender		0.043 (0.752)
Age		-0.006* (-1.874)
Edu		0.058** (2.114)
Inc		0.037 (1.428)
Use		0.061*** (3.126)
Fam		0.147*** (5.213)
Constant	1.719*** (11.842)	1.376*** (7.485)
N	876	876
R^2	0.345	0.398
F	459.545	82.176

Note: values in parentheses are t statistics. Three asterisks denote significance at the 1 percent level, two asterisks at the 5 percent level and one asterisk at the 10 percent level.

4.4.2. Chain Mediating Effect of Narrative Transportation and Brand Identification

The estimation of Model (1) through Model (4) is reported in Table 8. In Column (2) the coefficient linking BNS to NT is 0.586 and is significantly positive at the 1 percent level, which shows that brand narrative strategy promotes immersion in the brand story world and is consistent with H2. In Column (3) the coefficient of NT on CBI is 0.398 and the residual coefficient of BNS is 0.241, and both are significant at the 1 percent level, and the intermediate link of the proposed chain is thereby established. In Column (4) the coefficient of BNS falls to 0.262 while the coefficients of NT and CBI are 0.213 and 0.264 respectively. The direct coefficient attenuates relative to the value of 0.512 obtained in Column (1). Combined with the significance of both mediators, this indicates partial mediation rather than full mediation.

Table 8. Regression Results of the Chain Mediating Effect

Variable	(1) *BL*	(2) *NT*	(3) *CBI*	(4) *BL*
BNS	0.512*** (17.836)	0.586*** (18.942)	0.241*** (6.874)	0.262*** (8.427)
NT			0.398*** (11.256)	0.213*** (6.548)
CBI				0.264*** (8.936)
Gender	0.043 (0.752)	0.051 (0.836)	0.028 (0.472)	0.031 (0.583)
Age	-0.006* (-1.874)	-0.004 (-1.128)	-0.007* (-1.906)	-0.005 (-1.542)
Edu	0.058** (2.114)	0.042 (1.516)	0.049* (1.783)	0.046* (1.847)
Inc	0.037 (1.428)	0.029 (1.104)	0.034 (1.283)	0.026 (1.096)
Use	0.061*** (3.126)	0.074*** (3.582)	0.053*** (2.687)	0.043** (2.418)
Fam	0.147*** (5.213)	0.118*** (4.126)	0.136*** (4.783)	0.098*** (3.816)
Constant	1.376*** (7.485)	1.208*** (6.312)	0.842*** (4.267)	0.913*** (5.128)
N	876	876	876	876
R^2	0.398	0.376	0.412	0.512
F	82.176	74.518	76.294	101.487

Note: values in parentheses are t statistics. Three asterisks denote significance at the 1 percent level, two asterisks at the 5 percent level and one asterisk at the 10 percent level.

The individual indirect effects implied by the coefficient estimates in Table 8 are defined in Model (8), where the coefficient symbols correspond to those specified in Model (2) through Model (4).

$$Ind_1=\gamma_1\theta_2, \quad Ind_2=\delta_1\theta_3, \quad Ind_3=\gamma_1\delta_2\theta_3 \tag{8}$$

Table 9. Bootstrap Test of the Indirect Effects

Path	Effect	Boot Std. Err.	Lower limit	Upper limit
Total effect	0.512	0.029	0.456	0.569
Direct effect	0.262	0.030	0.203	0.321
Total indirect effect	0.250	0.027	0.199	0.305
BNS to *NT* to *BL*	0.125	0.021	0.086	0.168
BNS to *CBI* to *BL*	0.064	0.014	0.038	0.093
BNS to *NT* to *CBI* to *BL*	0.062	0.012	0.040	0.087

Note: bias corrected percentile bootstrap with 5,000 resamples and 95 percent confidence intervals.

We assessed the statistical significance of these products using the bias corrected percentile bootstrap procedure with 5,000 resamples. Table 9 reports the point estimate, the bootstrap standard error and the lower and upper limits of the 95 percent confidence interval for the total effect, the direct effect and each indirect path. None of the confidence intervals contains zero, and every indirect path is therefore statistically significant. The path that runs from brand narrative strategy through narrative transportation to consumer brand loyalty is the largest

single mechanism, and the sequential path that runs through narrative transportation and then through consumer brand identification is also significant. The total indirect effect of 0.250 accounts for close to half of the total effect of 0.512, and H3 and H4 are therefore supported.

4.4.3. Moderating Effect of Perceived Brand Authenticity

The estimation of Model (5) is reported in Table 10. Column (1) contains the two main effects and Column (2) adds the mean centred interaction term. A coefficient of 0.087 is obtained for the interaction term and is significantly positive at the 1 percent level, and the increment in explanatory power, denoted by ΔR^2, reaches 0.017. The conversion of narrative strategy into loyalty is therefore strengthened by perceived brand authenticity, and H5 is supported. The simple slope of BNS on BL as a function of the moderator is given in Model (9).

$$Simple\ slope = \lambda_1 + \lambda_3 PBA_i \tag{9}$$

Table 10. Moderating Effect of Perceived Brand Authenticity

Variable	(1) *BL*	(2) *BL*
BNS	0.486*** (16.837)	0.478*** (16.284)
PBA	0.204*** (6.812)	0.196*** (6.437)
BNS×PBA		0.087*** (3.912)
Gender	0.038 (0.671)	0.035 (0.624)
Age	-0.005 (-1.612)	-0.005 (-1.548)
Edu	0.051* (1.874)	0.049* (1.812)
Inc	0.032 (1.246)	0.030 (1.183)
Use	0.056*** (2.914)	0.054*** (2.836)
Fam	0.128*** (4.586)	0.124*** (4.452)
Constant	1.214*** (6.837)	1.186*** (6.694)
N	876	876
R^2	0.411	0.428
ΔR^2		0.017
F	84.216	82.463

Note: values in parentheses are t statistics. Three asterisks denote significance at the 1 percent level, two asterisks at the 5 percent level and one asterisk at the 10 percent level. Source: statistical output of the analysis software

Figure 3 plots the simple slope analysis. At one standard deviation below the mean of perceived brand authenticity the slope of brand narrative strategy on consumer brand loyalty is 0.388 with a t statistic of 10.256, while at one standard deviation above the mean the slope rises to 0.568 with a t statistic of 14.873. The gap between the two slopes shows that a consumer who regards the brand as authentic converts narrative exposure into loyalty at a substantially higher rate than a consumer who suspects the narrative of being manufactured for persuasive convenience.

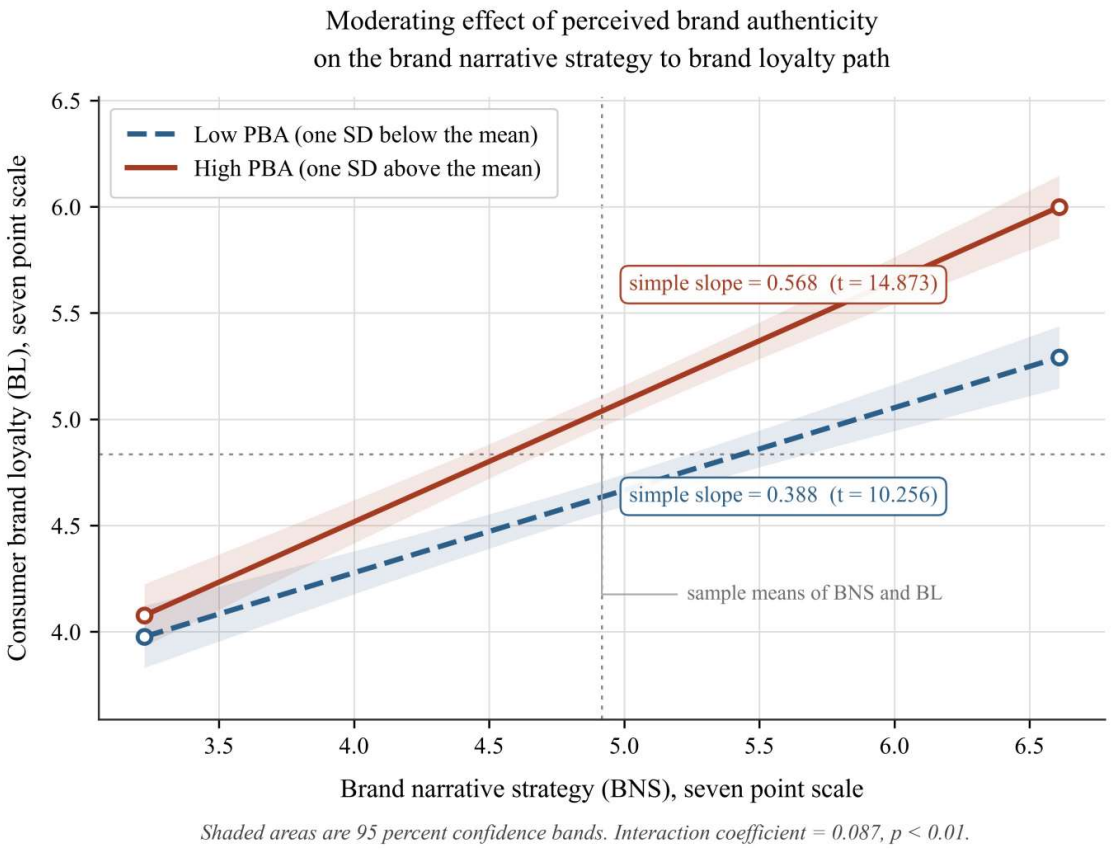


Figure 3. Simple Slope Analysis of the Moderating Effect

4.5. Heterogeneity Analysis

Table 11. Heterogeneity Analysis by Platform Type

Variable	Short video platform	Content community platform
BNS	0.284*** (6.918)	0.198*** (4.673)
NT	0.236*** (5.284)	0.184*** (3.912)
CBI	0.251*** (6.104)	0.279*** (6.428)
Gender	0.036 (0.512)	0.024 (0.318)
Age	-0.006 (-1.284)	-0.004 (-0.874)
Edu	0.052 (1.586)	0.041 (1.208)
Inc	0.029 (0.912)	0.023 (0.746)
Use	0.058** (2.416)	0.031 (1.284)
Fam	0.092*** (2.847)	0.106*** (3.128)
Constant	0.874*** (3.618)	1.028*** (4.126)
N	468	408
R^2	0.536	0.487
F	58.947	45.126

Note: values in parentheses are t statistics. Three asterisks denote significance at the 1 percent level, two asterisks at the 5 percent level and one asterisk at the 10 percent level. Source: statistical output of the analysis software

Table 11 presents the results of the platform based heterogeneity test, which splits the full sample into respondents whose primary channel is a short video platform and respondents whose primary channel is a content community platform, in order to examine the disparities in how brand narrative strategy and the two mediators shape loyalty. In the short video subsample the coefficient of BNS stands at 0.284, which is positive and significant at the 1 percent level and exceeds the corresponding figure of 0.198 obtained in the content community subsample. The coefficient of NT is also larger in the short video subsample, which reflects the capacity of compressed audiovisual formats to generate immersion rapidly. The coefficient of CBI registers 0.279 in the content community subsample and exceeds the figure of 0.251 recorded in the short video subsample, which indicates that identification carries a larger share of the loyalty effect where the platform architecture supports sustained discussion.

Table 12 shows the results of the age based heterogeneity analysis, which divides the sample at the age of thirty. In the younger subsample the coefficient of BNS reaches 0.291 and the coefficient of NT reaches 0.242, and both are notably larger than the corresponding figures of 0.184 and 0.163 recorded in the older subsample. In the older subsample the coefficient of CBI reaches 0.302 and is the largest single coefficient in that column, and older consumers therefore rely more heavily on the durable relational bond and less heavily on the immediate experiential response when forming loyalty judgements.

Table 12. Heterogeneity Analysis by Age Group

Variable	18 to 30 years	31 years and above
BNS	0.291*** (7.426)	0.184*** (3.874)
NT	0.242*** (5.836)	0.163*** (3.218)
CBI	0.238*** (5.914)	0.302*** (6.517)
Gender	0.041 (0.628)	0.018 (0.236)
Age	-0.008 (-1.126)	-0.005 (-0.914)
Edu	0.047 (1.482)	0.053 (1.318)
Inc	0.026 (0.874)	0.035 (1.062)
Use	0.062** (2.538)	0.028 (0.918)
Fam	0.087** (2.564)	0.118*** (3.246)
Constant	0.926*** (3.874)	0.958*** (3.512)
N	542	334
R^2	0.542	0.463
F	71.284	35.912

Note: values in parentheses are t statistics. Three asterisks denote significance at the 1 percent level, two asterisks at the 5 percent level and one asterisk at the 10 percent level. Source: statistical output of the analysis software

4.6. Robustness Analysis

4.6.1. Replacing the Explained Variable

To confirm the robustness of the baseline findings, we replace the composite loyalty measure with the behavioural component alone, which combines repurchase intention and recommendation intention, and reassesses the effect of brand narrative strategy from the standpoint of intended action rather than attitudinal commitment. Estimation results are

reported in Column (1) of Table 13. The coefficient of BNS stands at 0.238 and the coefficients of NT and CBI stand at 0.201 and 0.257 respectively, and all three remain positively significant at the 1 percent level.

4.6.2. Restricting the Sample by Relationship Duration

A reverse causal reading of the baseline result would hold that consumers who are already loyal pay closer attention to brand stories and therefore report higher narrative scores. To address this concern, respondents who report following the nominated brand for less than six months are excluded, which leaves 741 observations in which the loyalty judgement rests on an established relationship. Estimation results are reported in Column (2) of Table 13. The coefficient of BNS rises slightly to 0.253 and all core coefficients retain their sign and significance. The core research conclusions therefore have good stability, and endogeneity concerns have not substantially interfered with the empirical results.

Table 13. Robustness Test Results

Variable	(1) Behavioural loyalty	(2) Established relationship
BNS	0.238*** (7.614)	0.253*** (7.826)
NT	0.201*** (5.938)	0.219*** (6.174)
CBI	0.257*** (8.312)	0.271*** (8.463)
Gender	0.027 (0.486)	0.034 (0.612)
Age	-0.004 (-1.284)	-0.006 (-1.618)
Edu	0.043 (1.628)	0.048* (1.786)
Inc	0.024 (0.958)	0.028 (1.124)
Use	0.039** (2.148)	0.046** (2.372)
Fam	0.104*** (3.926)	0.092*** (3.418)
Constant	0.978*** (5.324)	0.886*** (4.762)
N	876	741
R^2	0.486	0.524
F	92.375	88.219

Note: values in parentheses are t statistics. Three asterisks denote significance at the 1 percent level, two asterisks at the 5 percent level and one asterisk at the 10 percent level. Source: statistical output of the analysis software

5. Research Conclusion

Using 876 valid questionnaires collected from digital media users in China's mainland as the research sample, we empirically test the mechanism of action between brand narrative strategy and consumer brand loyalty. Brand narrative strategy is found to have a significant positive driving effect on consumer brand loyalty. Sustained practice across narrative authenticity, narrative coherence, narrative relatability and narrative interactivity can be directly transformed into loyalty increments recognised by consumers, The main effect hypothesis is thereby effectively verified.

At the transmission mechanism level, a partial mediation of the association between the two focal variables is jointly carried by narrative transportation and consumer brand identification. Brand narrative strategy not only directly promotes loyalty enhancement but also indirectly

contributes to loyalty growth by drawing consumers into the brand story world and by converting that experiential immersion into a durable overlap between self concept and brand meaning. The complete transmission path, including the sequential route that runs through immersion and then through identification, is supported by the bootstrap evidence, and the total indirect effect accounts for close to half of the total effect.

Perceived brand authenticity governs the strength of the main effect, as the moderation test demonstrates. Where consumers judge the narrative to be a faithful account of what the brand actually does, narrative exposure is converted into loyalty at a substantially higher rate. Narrative investment without substantive alignment thus carries a real risk of discounting rather than persuasion. This is a growing practical concern as machine assisted content production lowers the cost of generating polished stories.

Significant differences in the above effects emerge from platform architecture and consumer cohort, as heterogeneity test results indicate. The direct value of narrative strategy and the contribution of narrative transportation are more prominent on short video platforms and among younger consumers, whereas consumer brand identification carries a larger share of the loyalty effect on content community platforms and among older consumers. The core research conclusions are found to be robust when considering a behavioural loyalty measure and a subsample restricted to established brand relationships.

Several managerial recommendations follow from these results. Brands should manage narrative as a continuing programme rather than as a campaign level asset, since coherence across touchpoints is what allows episodic immersion to accumulate into identification. Narrative resources should be allocated according to platform architecture, with compressed and vivid execution prioritised on short video channels and participatory story extension prioritised in content communities. Any narrative claim should be anchored in verifiable brand conduct, because authenticity determines how much of the narrative effect is permitted to reach loyalty.

There are limitations to this study that suggest directions for further work. The data are cross sectional and drawn from a single national market. This restricts causal inference and cultural generalisation. Brand narrative strategy is measured through consumer perception rather than through content analysis of the narratives actually published. Future research could combine longitudinal panel data with computational analysis of published brand narratives, and could examine whether disclosure of machine assisted narrative production alters the moderating role of perceived brand authenticity.

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