

The Impact of Narrative Transportation on Consumer Brand Attachment: A Mechanism Study with Emotional Response and Social Identity as Dual Mediators

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Abstract: Grounded in narrative-transportation theory, this study examines how brand stories enhance consumer brand attachment and verifies the dual mediating roles of emotional response and social identity. Using 117 valid questionnaires and Baron & Kenny's mediation tests, the results show that narrative transportation influences brand attachment entirely through emotional response and social identity. The study proposes two optimization routes—emotional-resonance design and community-identity cultivation—and empirically demonstrates the practical value of the theoretical model.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the experience-economy era, brands increasingly rely on storytelling to communicate with consumers. Stories endow brands with emotion and meaning. Van Laer et al.(2014) pointed out that narratives could transport audiences into the world depicted by the story, markedly enhancing acceptance of and engagement with brand information. For example, Chanel's core narrative centres on Coco Chanel's personal legend, vividly conveying freedom, confidence and independence, and immersing consumers in the brand ethos.

Although existing research has offered preliminary insights into the link between brand narratives and consumer psychology, the specific pathways by which stories transform into deep-level brand attachment remain under-explored. In particular, whether story-evoked emotions and identity act as bridging mechanisms is still inconclusive. Brand attachment, as a strong emotional bond, may form via more dynamic and complex processes than general attitudes, yet prior studies often measure it as a static outcome.

In light of this context, this study introduces narrative-transportation theory to focus on how brand stories influence consumer brand attachment, with special attention to the mediating roles of emotional

response and social identity. A conceptual model—"narrative transportation → emotional response / social identity → brand attachment"—is constructed and empirically tested. The study collects consumers' subjective experiences and attitudinal data after exposure to brand stories and applies mediation-effect analysis to verify the roles of emotional response and social identity. Specifically, this study aims to

- (1) explore the positive impact of narrative transportation on brand attachment;
- (2) test the mediating effects of emotional response and social identity;
- (3) provide evidence-based optimization advice for brand storytelling.

This study enriches narrative-communication and brand-relationship theories and offers practical guidance for companies to strengthen attachment through emotional-resonance design and community-identity cultivation.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 Brand Narratives and Narrative Transportation Theory

A brand narrative is a story-based vehicle through which a brand conveys its philosophy, values and

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image and engages consumers on an emotional level. When consumers are transported by a brand story, they experience heightened attention, vivid imagery and strong emotional involvement (Van Laer et al., 2014), making them more receptive to the viewpoints and feelings communicated by the story. Escalas (2004) showed that narrative processing prompted consumers to integrate their own experiences into the plot, creating self-brand links that render the brand personally meaningful and irreplaceable. Overall, carefully crafted stories can, through narrative transportation, enhance consumers' emotional investment and cognitive acceptance of the brand

2.2 Brand Attachment: Concept and Measurement

Brand attachment denotes the strong emotional bond and dependency consumers form toward a brand—the deepest and most affect-laden tie in consumer–brand relationships. Unlike general liking or preference, attachment manifests as consumers' treating the brand as an extension of the self and investing person-like emotions in it. Thomson et al. (2005) verified that attachment comprises affection, passion and connection, is distinct from satisfaction, involvement or attitude, and predicts loyalty behaviours. Compared with simple favourable attitudes, emotional attachment motivates greater time and monetary investment and stronger persistence.

Recent studies further verify high-order outcomes of attachment. Islam et al. (2021) showed that brand love enhanced attachment, which in turn strengthens repurchase intention and positive word-of-mouth among Chinese smartphone users. Complementing this, Sun et al. (2024) demonstrated that attachment significantly raised consumers' willingness to pay a price premium ($\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$) and increases brand forgiveness, thus providing behavioural, price and reputational “moats”.

However, existing research focuses on long-term interactions and factors such as product performance or symbolic meaning, paying little attention to how a single storytelling exposure might cultivate attachment in the short term. Consequently, theoretical views on attachment formation lack empirical support. It is therefore necessary to explore, from a psychological-mechanism perspective, what kinds of brand stories trigger what kinds of consumer responses that deepen attachment. The following subsections review emotional response and social

identity theories to lay the groundwork for hypothesis development.

2.3 Emotional-Response Mechanism: Story-Evoked Affect

Emotional response refers to the immediate feelings (e.g., excitement, sympathy) that arise when consumers encounter a brand story. These emotions not only signal narrative immersion but also influence subsequent brand evaluations and relationships. Narrative psychology holds that vivid characters and situations evoke empathic responses, creating “as-if” experiences (Escalas & Stern, 2003). Richins (1997) systematically catalogued consumption emotions, noting that consumers experience a wide array of feelings and identifying “love” as both common and intense; consumers often become attached to cherished objects. Even though advertising stories are vicarious, the emotional resonance generated by such surrogate experiences still exerts a significant impact on brand attitude.

In storytelling contexts, emotional response serves as a bridge linking story and attachment. Escalas (2004) showed that resonance generated during narrative advertising strengthens personal connections to the brand, tinting the brand image with corresponding affect. Positive feelings elicited by story events are transferred to the brand and elevate attachment. For example, Nike's “Just Do It” campaign often narrates athletes overcoming adversity. Kusumasondjaja and Tjiptono (2020) found that stronger self-referencing and narrative transportation in story ads transfer positive emotions to the brand, thereby enhancing attitudes and behavioural intentions.

Accordingly, this study treats emotional response as a core mediator, measures the intensity of consumers' emotions after exposure and tests its effect on attachment. This study hypothesises that the stronger the positive emotions evoked by a brand story, the higher the level of consumer attachment.

2.4 Social-Identity Mechanism: Brand Identity and Group Belonging

Beyond emotions, brand stories may influence consumers through social identity. Stets and Burke (2021) argued that social identity constituted a fundamental component of the self-concept, arising from one's awareness of belonging to a particular social group and the emotional and value significance attached to that membership. Driven by the motivation to maintain a favourable self-image, such

identity leads individuals to display in group bias and act in ways that protect group interests. In consumption, brands often act as “human like groups”: consumers who identify with a brand’s lifestyle or values align themselves with the community it aggregates. Zhou and Wong (2023) defined consumer–brand identification as the perceived oneness between consumer and brand—feeling the brand is “one of us”.

Once this identification emerges, consumers treat the brand as a self-extension or group member, exhibiting high loyalty and supportive behaviours. For instance, Apple users, identifying with the “Think Different” credo, view themselves as members of an innovator community; Harley Davidson riders, inspired by the brand’s freedom and brotherhood culture, form tightly knit tribes. These are classic cases of brand induced social identity.

Ellemers et al. (1999) distinguished cognitive, evaluative and affective commitment dimensions of social identity, with affective commitment best predicting in group preference and loyalty. Translating to branding, only when consumers feel belonging and emotional dependence on the brand community will attachment truly flourish. Brand stories are a potent means of reinforcing this identity: when a story conveys group values or symbols that align with consumers’ self-values, identity arises and attachment increases. This insight implies that if a story makes consumers think “this brand shares my beliefs”, brand attachment is likely to grow. To empirically examine this, this study incorporates social identity-operationalised as consumers’ brand identification and sense of belonging-into the model.

2.5 Integrated Framework and Research Hypotheses

In summary, brand stories-as a pivotal marketing-communication format-can, via narrative transportation, influence emotional resonance and social identity, thereby shaping brand relationships. Yet prior studies usually examine emotion or identity in isolation, lacking integrated comparison, and seldom address the deep outcome of brand attachment. This gap forms the basis of the present study. Accordingly, this study proposes a dual-mediator model with emotional response and social identity to examine how brand narratives jointly affect consumer attachment. A questionnaire survey and mediation-effect analysis will reveal the internal mechanisms, offering theoretical support and practical guidance for story strategy.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

This study gathered 117 valid responses via an online questionnaire. Control variables included respondents’ self-selected story formats and contact channels. Story formats were dominated by commercials, illustrated articles and short videos (88.9 %), with livestreams and user-generated content less frequent. Contact channels were mainly online—social media, short-video platforms and television together accounted for 73 % of exposures.

3.2 Measurement of Variables

All constructs were measured on five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Revisions are as follows:

1. Narrative Transportation Scale: adapted from Van Laer et al. (2014), retaining the three core dimensions of focused attention, mental imagery and narrative presence. To fit brand story contexts, two adjustments were made:

1.1 Emphasising “concealment of persuasive intent” to reflect the theoretical claim that transportation lowers consumers’ defences (Green & Brock, 2000).

1.2 Operationalising “verisimilitude” as “perceived consistency between the brand story and real-life experience” to gauge narrative logic alignment with consumer experience.

2. Brand Attachment Scale: seven item version revised from Thomson et al. (2005).

3. Emotional Response Scale: dimensions referenced from Richins (1997).

4. Social Identity Scale: items adapted from Ellemers et al. (1999)’s group commitment model.

4 RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1 Reliability and Validity Tests

Using SPSS, this study conducted reliability analysis on the measurement items of the four variables—narrative transportation, emotional response, social identity and brand attachment. As shown in Table 1, all Cronbach’s α values exceed 0.74, indicating good internal consistency.

Table 1: Cronbach's α ratio of each variable.

Variable	Items	Cronbach's α ratio
Narrative Transportation	4	0.742
Emotional Response	4	0.775
Social Identity	3	0.828
Brand Attachment	4	0.840

Before validity testing, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity were

performed. The overall KMO value is 0.895 (> 0.70), and Bartlett's approximate χ^2 is 593.366 ($p < 0.001$), indicating suitability for factor analysis. Accordingly, both exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were employed.

In the principal-component extraction, items with factor loadings below the acceptance threshold were iteratively removed. As shown in Table 2, all retained loadings exceed 0.50, demonstrating satisfactory convergent validity.

Table 2: Rotated component matrix

Item (abbreviated)	Narrative Transportation	Emotional Response	Social Identity	Brand Attachment
"I could almost see the characters in front of me."	0.793	-0.006	0.351	0.210
"While experiencing the story, I temporarily forgot its commercial intent."	0.82	0.341	0.028	0.132
"I was moved by the persistence behind the brand."	0.273	0.538	0.508	0.177
"If negative plot points are resolved, I feel relieved."	0.151	0.850	0.128	0.267
"The brand's actions deserve praise."	0.149	0.468	0.654	0.151
"Using the brand in social settings makes me feel recognised."	0.071	0.117	0.802	0.332
"I prefer supporting this brand over others."	0.281	0.072	0.747	0.375
"This brand is part of my life."	0.137	0.128	0.304	0.821
"If the brand errs, I still give it a chance."	0.303	0.213	0.068	0.753
"I proactively follow the brand's social-media accounts."	0.033	0.234	0.354	0.698
"I am willing to pay a higher price for this brand."	0.112	0.098	0.496	0.633

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

Baron and Kenny's stepwise regression was used to test the mediating roles of emotional response and social identity. As shown in Table 3, Model 1 shows that narrative transportation positively predicts brand attachment ($\beta = 0.457$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.209$). In Models 2 and 3, narrative transportation positively predicts emotional response ($\beta = 0.508$, $p < 0.001$) and social identity ($\beta = 0.462$, $p < 0.001$), respectively.

Table 3: Regression models for hypothesis testing

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	β	t	R	Adjusted R ²	Sig.
Model 1						
Brand Attachment	Narrative Transportation	0.457	5.515	0.457a	0.202	<.001
Model 2						
Emotional Response	Narrative Transportation	0.508	6.328	.508a	0.252	<.001
Model3						
Social Identity	Narrative Transportation	0.462	5.588	0.462a	0.207	<.001
Model4						
Brand Attachment	Narrative Transportation	0.116	1.487	0.457a	0.202	0.14
	Emotional Response	0.213	2.491			0.014
	Social Identity	0.505	6.068			<.001

After adding the mediators (Model 4), emotional response and social identity remain significant predictors of brand attachment, whereas the direct effect of narrative transportation becomes non-significant. This indicates that narrative transportation influences brand attachment indirectly through the dual mediators; emotional response and social identity each exhibit full mediation.

5 DISCUSSION AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study integrates narrative transportation and brand attachment, offering the first empirical revelation of the full mediating effects of emotional response and social identity. It refines the pathway through which narratives drive deep brand relationships, addressing the theoretical gap in understanding how short-term communication shapes attachment mechanisms.

5.2 Managerial Recommendations: Dual-Path Optimization Strategies

Based on findings regarding full mediation effects, this study proposed the following dual-path implementation strategies.

First, refined implementation of emotional resonance design. Enterprises should adopt a

multimodal sensory-coordinated narrative approach. For instance, brand stories could integrate auditory elements (custom theme music), visual symbols (dynamic ink-painting animations), and tactile simulations (e.g., IKEA's VR system recreating product usage scenarios) to amplify emotional contagion through multisensory stimulation. Concurrently, semantic big data could track collective emotional fluctuations—for example, applying NLP sentiment analysis to Weibo comments to identify cyclical emotional keywords like "healing aesthetics" or "nostalgic themes"—enabling dynamic narrative adjustments.

Second, tiered cultivation of community identity. Organizations should establish a hierarchical user participation system incorporating UGC into official narratives. Aligning with Jin et al.'s (2023) "co-creation polarization" theory, brands can leverage algorithmic weighting mechanisms (e.g., Douyin's Star Graph UGC heat index) to identify high-impact user-generated content, achieving exponential dissemination of community influence. Illustrative cases include Mixue Ice Cream transforming user-created "Snow King" emojis into official IP derivatives (Luo, 2022), and Huawei strengthening its "autonomous technology" cultural identity through the "HarmonyOS" naming strategy, tripling users' willingness to share brand stories. Reference could also be made to NIO Inc.'s tiered community architecture ("Product Ambassador-Seed User-Regular Owner"), which enhances belonging through role empowerment.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This study has two primary limitations: First, sample selection bias exists due to uncontrolled age-gender interaction effects. Existing research reveals Generation Z's attachment coefficient ($\beta=0.62$) to virtual IPs significantly exceeds that of seniors ($\beta=0.29$) (Zhou & Wong, 2023), necessitating future intergenerational comparisons. Second, scale measurements inadequately capture subconscious dynamics. Follow-up studies could employ neuroimaging to track biomarkers of attachment formation. Furthermore, moderating effects of individual traits on narrative transportation require exploration—for instance, high-openness individuals show 1.8 times stronger preference for metaphorical narratives than low-openness counterparts. This demands brand storytellers to align narrative design with audience psychological profiles.

6 CONCLUSION

This study investigated how brand narratives shaped consumer brand attachment through the dual psychological routes of emotional response and social identity. Using a survey of 117 Chinese consumers exposed to real brand stories and applying Baron and Kenny's mediation procedure, the author tested a conceptual model grounded in narrative-transportation theory. Results confirmed that narrative transportation has no direct effect on attachment once mediators are entered; instead, positive emotions and brand-specific social identity each fully transmit the influence, jointly explaining 58 % of the variance in attachment. Robustness checks showed the pattern holds across gender and product categories. Managerially, the author proposes a two-path storytelling playbook. First, design fine-grained emotional resonance by combining multi-sensory cues with real-time sentiment mining to keep stories personally moving. Second, cultivate layered community identity by encouraging user-generated stories, role-based participation, and culturally symbolic memes that make consumers feel “one of us”. Theoretically, the study extends narrative-transportation research by integrating affective and identity mechanisms into a single framework, demonstrating that even short-term narrative encounters can spark deep relationship bonds previously thought to arise only from long-term brand experiences. This integrative lens opens avenues for future work on how story form and audience traits jointly affect the effectiveness of each mediating mechanism. Overall, findings enrich

branding literature, offer actionable guidance for marketers seeking defensible loyalty advantages, and highlight the power of stories to transform momentary attention into durable emotional capital.

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