

Impact of Emotional Attachment and Self-Brand Connection on Repurchase Behavior: The Mediating Role of Attitudinal Loyalty and Behavioral Loyalty

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Abstract. This study focuses on Chinese fast food enterprises and employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Building on existing research on repurchase behavior and incorporating the characteristics of Chinese fast food consumption, this study constructs an influence mechanism model of repurchase behavior for Chinese fast food consumers. Emotional attachment and self-brand connection are employed as independent variables, while attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty serve as mediating variables. An empirical analysis was conducted on 300 consumers from first-tier and new first-tier cities in China. The results show that the emotional attachment and self-brand connection have a significant positive influence on the repurchase behavior of Chinese fast food. Further analysis shows that emotional attachment and self-brand connection can have a positive impact on the repurchase behavior of Chinese fast food through the intermediary effect of attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. The research results can provide theoretical support and measure basis for the implementer of Chinese fast food enterprises.

Keywords: Chinese fast food, Mediating effect, PLS-SEM, Repurchase behavior.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the increasingly fierce market environment, the sustainable development of the Chinese fast food industry has become the focus of attention. Emotional attachment (EA) and self-brand connection (SBC) exist in consumers' choice of Chinese fast food. Improving the emotional attachment and self-brand connection can improve the repurchase behavior (RB). Although emotional attachment and self-brand connection have been studied for a relationship with consumer behavior, most of the studies are responsible for a single factor. At the same time, there are also insufficient factors affecting the repurchase behavior of Chinese fast food. Based on this, this study uses the partial least squares structural equation model (PLS-SEM) to systematically analyze the key factors affecting the repurchase behavior of Chinese fast food.

The results not only enrich the theory of consumer behavior, but also provide policy advice and operational guidance for Chinese fast food.

1.1. Background of the Study

With the rapid development of the catering industry, the Chinese fast food sector is showing a strong growth trend. According to the research 2023 report, China's Chinese fast food market has exceeded 1.2 trillion yuan, accounting for nearly 40 percent of the entire catering industry. This not only reflects the increase of consumer demand, but also shows the huge potential of Chinese fast food brands in meeting the needs of the public and personalized. Consumers change their lifestyle, demand for fast food beyond price and convenience, and pay more attention to brand value and emotional experience (Liu & Sun, 2021). According to Yum China's 2022 financial report, the repurchase rate of its Chinese fast food brand increased by 15%, indicating that emotional and brand connection is becoming the key to influencing consumer behavior. The post-90s and Generation Z have gradually become the main market force, and they prefer to choose brands that reflect their personal values and lifestyles (Wang et al., 2020). According to the survey, more than 70% of consumers give priority to brand cultural characteristics and emotional attraction when choosing fast food brands (Chen et al., 2021). Despite the broad market prospects, Chinese fast food brands also face fierce competition. In this context, the key to enhance brand loyalty lies in order to enhance consumers' emotional attachment and self-brand connection, which is the core problem to be solved in the Chinese fast food industry (Zhang & Li, 2022).

The study of emotional attachment and self-brand connection is of guiding significance to the theoretical and practical management of Chinese fast food brands. In-depth analysis of its impact on consumers' repurchase behavior will help to reveal the core competitiveness of Chinese fast food brands in the new era and support the brand development.

1.2. Significance of the Research

This study focuses on the Chinese fast food industry, examining the impact mechanisms of emotional

attachment and self-brand connection on consumer repurchase behavior through the mediation of attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. It holds significant theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical Significance : While emotional attachment and self-brand connection have garnered substantial attention in consumer behavior research, their underlying mechanisms within the Chinese fast food industry remain underexplored. This study introduces attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty as mediating variables to thoroughly investigate their roles in the relationship between emotional attachment, self-brand connection, and repurchase behavior. This approach offers novel insights and theoretical contributions to the field. Through empirical analysis, this study further validates the impact pathways of emotional attachment and self-brand connection on consumer repurchase behavior, providing new empirical evidence and perspectives for consumer behavior theory. By examining both the direct effects of emotional attachment and self-brand connection on repurchase behavior and their indirect effects via attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty, this research enriches the theoretical framework of brand loyalty studies and provides a more comprehensive theoretical foundation for brand management.

Practical Significance: This study unravels the impact mechanisms of emotional attachment and self-brand connection on consumer repurchase behavior, offering actionable strategic recommendations for Chinese fast food brands. Brands can enhance consumers' emotional attachment and self-brand connection through emotional marketing and enriching brand cultural connotations, thereby increasing consumer loyalty and repurchase behavior. In the context of globalization, Chinese fast food brands face fierce competition from international chains. By analyzing the mechanisms of emotional attachment and self-brand connection, this study provides theoretical support for how domestic brands can leverage emotional strategies to enhance their competitiveness and better withstand the impact of international brands. Moreover, by exploring the mediating roles of attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty, this study offers brand managers a clearer path for management. Brands can optimize their management practices and improve operational efficiency by fostering consumer attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty to drive repurchase behavior. As consumer demands evolve, the Chinese fast food industry must continuously innovate and optimize its practices. This study provides valuable insights for marketing strategies and management, contributing to the sustainable development of the industry and enhancing its competitiveness and market performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Emotional attachment refers to the deep emotional bond that consumers develop with a brand, characterized by a strong preference for the brand, psychological satisfaction, and emotional dependence. This attachment is typically long-term and stable, emerging gradually through ongoing interactions between the consumer and the brand (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). Unlike general attitudes or preferences, emotional attachment emphasizes an emotional attachment and reflects the consumer's emotional investment in the brand. The formation of emotional attachment is influenced by multiple factors, including the consumer's personal experiences, the brand's positioning in emotional value, and whether the brand's core values resonate with the consumer (Fournier, 1998). When a brand provides consumers with emotional satisfaction beyond functional attributes, consumers are likely to develop a higher degree of emotional dependence on the brand. Emotional attachment is considered a significant driving force for brand loyalty, enhancing consumer preference for the brand and significantly influencing both repurchase behavior and word-of-mouth recommendations.

Self-Brand connection refers to the psychological process by which consumers associate a brand with their self-concept, reflecting the role of the brand in consumers' self-identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). This connection is formed when consumers perceive that a brand expresses or enhances their personality, values, or lifestyle. It signifies a deeper level of identification between the consumer and the brand, encompassing not only cognitive recognition of the brand's functionality but also the brand's support for consumers' self-expression. The formation of self-brand connection is typically based on the alignment between the brand and the consumer on emotional, social, and identity levels. When a brand conveys cultural values or symbolic meanings that consumers identify with, the connection becomes more robust (Belk, 1988). Self-brand connection has a profound impact on consumer behavior, including increased brand loyalty, higher repurchase behavior, and greater willingness to recommend the brand. By focusing on consumers' emotional and identity needs in marketing, brands are more likely to build a strong self-brand connection.

Repurchase behavior refers to the act of consumers choosing a particular brand again following positive experiences with its products or services, driven by their recognition of the brand's quality, value, or emotional appeal (Oliver, 1999). This behavior typically manifests as a long-term preference, reflecting the deepening of consumers' trust and loyalty towards the brand. Repurchase is not merely a continuation of a consumption decision but also an active affirmation of the brand's value by consumers. The factors influencing repurchase behavior are diverse and include consumer satisfaction with the brand, the closeness of the emotional relationship between the brand and the consumer, and the brand's differentiated positioning in the market (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). When consumers believe that a brand consistently meets or exceeds their expectations, they are more likely to remain loyal and maintain their purchasing habits. By establishing

emotional bonds with consumers, brands can not only reinforce purchase intentions but also inspire word-ofmouth recommendations, thereby expanding their market influence.

2.1. Hypothesis Development

2.1.1. The Relationship Between Emotional Attachment and Repurchase Behavior

Emotional attachment refers to the deep emotional attachment between consumers and the brand. If customers experience emotional satisfaction to a brand, they are more likely to continue choose that brand (Thomson et al., 2005). The theory of the relationship between brands and consumers emphasizes the promotion of the sustainability of consumer behavior by providing emotional value and establishing longterm and stable relationships (Fournier, 1998). Customer's emotional attachment clearly drives the behavior of repurchases. Emotional attachment also makes customers prefer a brand in many choices (Park et al., 2010). In fast-moving consumer goods sector, a consumer wants to increase their purchases if it is emotionally dependent on a brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In the luxury industry, if brands can engage customers, they are loyal to it for a long time (Japutra et al., 2014). It is very obvious that the consumer behavior is positively influenced by the brand emotional attachment. When choosing brands, customers tend to prefer those brands that can meet their emotional needs, and this tendency is directly reflected in their purchasing choices (Zhang & Li, 2022). The core of improving consumer loyalty lies in the driving force of emotional attachment (Batra et al., 2012). Once consumers have an emotional attachment with the brand, they often feel closer to the brand and are more willing to choose it over and over again (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Emotional attachment also makes customers like the brand more, so they are more willing to keep buying it (Oliver, 1999; Thomson et al., 2005).

Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₁: Emotional attachment positively affects repurchase behavior

2.1.2. The Relationship Between Self-Brand Connection and Repurchase Behavior

Self-brand connection describes a psychological phenomenon in which consumers link a brand to their personal identity. Self-brand connection describes a psychological phenomenon in which consumers link a brand to their personal identity. Self-Brand Connection describes a psychological phenomenon in which consumers link a brand to their personal identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). According to the social identity theory, if the characteristics of a brand are consistent with the identity of consumers, consumers are more likely to regard the brand as a part of their self-image, thus enhancing their loyalty to the brand and their willingness to make repurchases (Belk, 1988). This connection enhances the emotional value of the brand in the daily lives of consumers and lays the foundation for sustained buying behavior.

Self-brand connection can significantly promote repurchase behavior. Self-brand connection can significantly promote repurchase behavior. In practical studies in the automotive field, brand attachment has been proven to enhance consumers' lasting preference for specific brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). In the luxury market, research has also confirmed that consumers tend to choose brands that fit with their personal characteristics and values, thus demonstrating high brand loyalty (Japutra et al., 2014). In the consumer market, self-brand connection in China has been found to have a significant impact on purchasing decisions. Consumers are more willing to choose brands that align with their personal cultural identity and values (Zhang & Li, 2022). Research has similarly demonstrated that brands which craft an image congruent with consumers' self-identity can significantly boost consumers' intention to repurchase (Batra et al., 2012), thus affecting the repurchase behavior. By choosing brands that align with their personal identity, consumers not only express themselves but also gain social recognition, thereby deepening their preference for the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006).

Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Self-brand connection positively influences repurchase behavior

2.1.3. The Mediating Role of Attitudinal Loyalty

Brand loyalty theory proposes that consumer loyalty to brand can be divided into attitudinal loyalty at psychological level and actual action at behavioral level. Attitudinal loyalty is the positive recognition and emotional tendency of consumers to the brand, while behavioral loyalty is the external expression of this attitude. Emotional attachment and self-brand connection are the key driving forces for the formation of attitudinal loyalty. This psychological connection can affect consumers' purchasing decisions and make them prefer brands with deeper connection with themselves among various choices (Oliver, 1999; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Social identity theory emphasizes that when a brand can reflect the personal identity and value of consumers, it will help consumers psychologically find a sense of belonging and self-identity. The congruence between the brand and consumer identity reinforces a supportive attitude towards the brand at the psychological level of consumers, which is subsequently manifested in their actual behavior as repurchase behavior. Emotional

attachment enhances consumers' psychological preference and brand loyalty by strengthening brand identity fit (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). The consumer-brand relationship theory views the interaction between consumers and brands as connections similar to interpersonal relationships. When a brand can meet consumers' emotional needs and align with their values and self-concepts, consumers will form a closer emotional attachment to the brand. This dependency enhances consumers' positive attitude towards the brand, by strengthening attitudinal loyalty, it establishes a stable connection between consumers' emotions and the actual purchase behavior of the brand. The theory reveals the core role of brand loyalty in consumer decision-making and provides a profound theoretical explanation for the long-term development of brands (Fournier, 1998).

Studies suggest that attitudinal loyalty can transform the emotional value of emotional attachment into actual behavioral manifestations, manifests as higher purchase frequency and stability among consumers (Dick & Basu, 1994). There is a strong emotional bond between consumers and brands, which further deepens their continued preference for brands through attitudinal loyalty (Fullerton, 2005). By enhancing consumers' sense of belonging to the brand, the self-brand connection positively promotes the repurchase behavior. Brand bonding can enable consumers to choose brands that are closely associated in purchasing decisions by increasing attitudinal loyalty (He & Mukherjee, 2021). In the e-commerce industry, the brand loyalty of consumers directly determines the frequency of their purchases, especially when the brand can meet their basic needs (Pappu & Ouester, 2016). In the Chinese market, the matching degree of consumer identity and brand image significantly improves consumers' brand preference and willingness to buy again through attitudinal loyalty (Sun et al., 2020). The loyal attitude not only enhances consumers' trust in the brand, but also shapes their choice behavior through the dual influence of emotion and cognition. When consumers have high loyalty to the brand, they are more willing to continuously choose the brands they are already familiar with, rather than easily try other brands (Ladhari et al., 2011). This is also true in other markets, in the services and fast moving consumer goods markets (Kim et al., 2008). The diversity of brand characteristics and the difference of consumers' personalized needs also have an impact on the strength of attitudinal loyalty. Consumers who are more sensitive to personalized needs tend to be driven by loyalty, while those who have less connected brands often need more incentives to develop loyalty (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Babin & Griffin, 1998).

Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H*_{*} Attitudinal loyalty plays a mediating role between emotional attachment and repurchase behavior. *H*_{*} Attitudinal loyalty plays a mediating role between self-brand connection and repurchase behavior.

2.1.4. The Mediating Role of Behavioral Loyalty

Behavioral Loyalty is a brand preference demonstrated through actual behavior, typically manifested as repurchases, consistent selection, and active recommendation of the brand. It is the externalization of consumer identification with the brand, and also an important way to maintain the relationship between the brand and consumers. According to the theory of planned behavior, consumers' attitudes can be transformed into actual actions through behavioral intentions, which indicates that behavioral loyalty plays an important role in the connection between emotional or cognitive influence and actual purchasing behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

When consumers develop an emotional attachment to a brand, the depth of this emotion will prompt them to show more pro-brand tendencies in their behavior. Studies suggest that emotional attachment can stimulate consumers' preference for brands and express a higher purchase frequency and willingness to repeat consumption through behavioral loyalty (Thakur, 2016). The fit between brand and consumers' self-understanding promotes the establishment of self-brand connection, thus enhancing the stability of behavioral loyalty. Customers strengthen the emotional bond between them and the brand by constantly supporting and selecting the brand (Kumar et al., 2013). In the field of e-commerce, when consumers show strong behavioral loyalty, their repurchase rate significantly increases. This repurchase is not only because the brand meets the needs of consumers, but also closely related to consumers' feelings towards the brand (Chen et al., 2015). In the service field, behavioral loyalty is seen as an important link to transform emotional dependence into purchase choice, which can greatly enhance the stability of the relationship between customers and brands (Mattila, 2006). In the analysis of the food industry, it is also found that behavioral loyalty is a bridge between brand value recognition and actual purchase behavior, providing a solid foundation for the brand to attract long-term customers (Chinomona, 2013). At the high end of the market, consumers show loyalty through continuous buying behavior, which strengthens the brand's unique position in the luxury sector and deepens the emotional bond between the brand and consumers. (Han et al., 2010). In the FMCG sector, the impact of behavioral loyalty is particularly significant, especially for brands closely linked to consumers, which clearly have a higher sustained repeat rate (Ladhari et al., 2017).

Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_{*} Behavioral loyalty plays a mediating role between brand attachment and repurchase behavior.

H_a Behavioral loyalty plays a mediating role between self-brand connection and repurchase behavior.

2.2. Research Framework

The framework of this study is shown in the Figure 1.

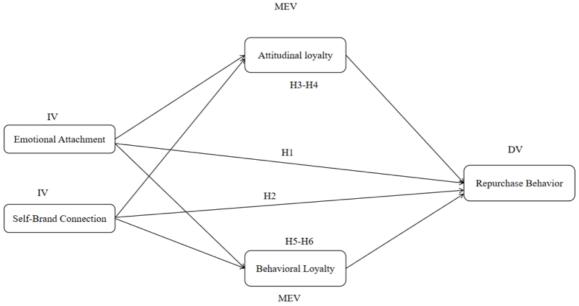


Figure 1: Research Framework

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

The measurement items in this study were all derived from relevant literature (Thomson et al., 2005; Escalas, 2003; Park et al., 2010) and were appropriately modified to suit the characteristics of the Chinese fast food industry to ensure the applicability of the questionnaire. A five-point Likert scale was adopted, with an initial set of 25 items. A pilot survey was conducted using the online platform Wenjuanxing between November 10 and 12, 2024, in China's first-tier and emerging new first-tier cities. A total of 60 responses were collected, and reliability and validity tests were performed. After consulting experts, eight items with low factor loadings or high correlations were removed, resulting in the finalized scale.

The formal survey was distributed via Wenjuanxing from November 15 to November 30, 2024, using convenience sampling in first-tier and emerging new first-tier cities in China. A total of 360 questionnaires were distributed, and after excluding invalid responses such as patterned answers and incomplete submissions, 300 valid responses were obtained, resulting in an effective response rate of 83.3%.

3.2. Research Methods

This study utilized SmartPLS 4.0 software to analyze the collected data. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were conducted using SmartPLS 4.0 to obtain factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and convergent validity for each indicator. Additionally, the measurement model and structural model were employed to test the hypothesized relationships within the research model.

3.3. Data Analysis

3.3.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was evaluated based on convergent validity and discriminant validity. As shown in Tables 1 and Tables 2, the factor loadings for all variables exceeded the threshold criteria, and both Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability (CR) were greater than 0.7. Furthermore, the average variance extracted (AVE) values for all constructs were above 0.5, indicating good convergent validity of the model. Additionally, the AVE values of each variable were higher than the squared correlations between the variable and other constructs, demonstrating that the measurement scales in this study possess adequate discriminant validity.

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Measurement items	Measurement questions	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
	EA1	0.879			
EA	EA2	0.869	0.849	0.908	0.767
	EA3	0.880			
	SBC1	0.847			
SBC	SBC2	0.882	0.835	0.901	0.752
	SBC3	0.871			
	AL1	0.890			
AL	AL2	0.864	0.819	0.892	0.735
	AL3	0.815			
	BEL1	0.905			
BEL	BEL2	0.901 0.858		0.914	0.779
	BEL3	0.841			
	RB1	0.758			
	RB2	0.774			
RB	RB3	0.808	0.870	0.906	0.659
	RB4	0.879			
	RB5	0.879			
able 2: The discriminar AVI	· · ·	BEL	EA	RB	SBC
AL 0.73					
BEL 0.77		0.883			
EA 0.76		0.407	0.876		
RB 0.65		0.441	0.390	0.812	

3.3.2. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis testing was conducted using the bootstrapping method in SmartPLS 4.0, with the results presented in Table 3 and Figure 2. The results indicate that emotional attachment has a significant positive effect on repurchase behavior (β =0.165, T=2.915, P<0.01), and self-brand connection also has a significant positive effect on repurchase behavior (β =0.254, T=4.145, P<0.01). In summary, hypotheses H1 and H2 are supported.

Table 3: Hypothesis testing results.

Hypothesis	Path	Path coefficient	T values	P values	Test Results		
H1	EA -> RB	0.165	2.915	0.004**	Supported		
H2	$SBC \rightarrow RB$	0.254	4.145	0.000***	Supported		
Note: * P<0.05, ** P<0.01, *** P<0.001							

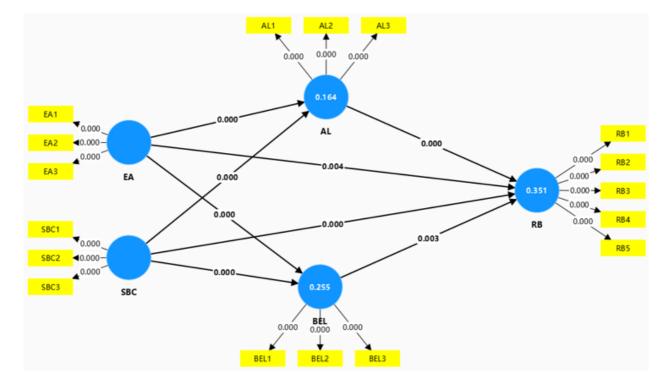


Figure 2: Model path diagram.

The study tested the mediation effects using the variance accounted for (VAF) approach, which calculates the ratio of indirect effects to total effects. As shown in the table, the indirect effects of emotional attachment (EA)

and self-brand connection (SBC) on repurchase behavior (RB) through attitudinal loyalty (AL) and behavioral loyalty (BEL) were significant, as the 95% confidence intervals did not include zero. Specifically, BEL partially mediates the relationship between EA and RB, with an indirect effect of 0.058 (T = 2.658, P < 0.01) and a VAF value of 42.51%. AL also partially mediates the relationship between EA and RB, with an indirect effect of 0.064 (T = 2.756, P < 0.01). Additionally, BEL partially mediates the relationship between SBC and RB, with an indirect effect of 0.057 (T = 2.690, P < 0.01) and a VAF value of 28.85%. AL also partially mediates the relationship between SBC and RB, with an indirect effect of 0.046 (T = 2.842, P < 0.01). In conclusion, hypotheses H3, H4, H5, and H6 are all supported.

Independent variable	Mediating variable	Dependent variable	Indirect effect	Total Indirect Effect	Total effect	VAF%	Confidence interval	T value	P value	Test Results
EA	BEL	RB	0.058			42.51	(0.018, 0.103)	2.658	0.008**	Supported
	AL		0.064	0.012	0.287		(0.025, 0.117)	2.756	0.006**	Supported
SBC	BEL		0.057	0.103	0.357	28.85	(0.018, 0.101)	2.690	0.007**	Supported
	AL		0.046				(0.019, 0.082)	2.842	0.005**	Supported

Note: * P<0.05, ** P<0.01, *** P<0.001.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Conclusions

Based on the proposed hypothesis, this study explored the impact of emotional attachment, self-brand connection and attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty on the repurchase behavior of Chinese fast food consumers through empirical analysis, and reached the following conclusions:

1. The results demonstrate a significant role of emotional attachment on repurchase behavior. It shows that when consumers have a strong Emotional attachment to a brand, they are more willing to buy its products again and again.

2. The results prove that the self-brand connection significantly positively affects the consumers' repurchase behavior.

3. The results support the significant mediation role of attitudinal loyalty between emotional attachment and self-brand attachment and repurchase behavior. Both emotional attachment and self-brand connection can indirectly influence repurchase behavior through attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty.

4. The results support the significant mediation between emotional attachment and self-branding connection and repurchase behavior. Both emotional attachment and self-brand connection can indirectly influence repurchase behavior through attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty.

To sum up, previous studies on the repurchase behavior of Chinese fast food have rarely conducted empirical evaluation based on emotional attachment and self-brand connection. The results deepen the influence mechanism of emotional attachment and self-brand connection on repurchase behavior. It verifies the intermediary role of attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty in the research model, enriches the research of consumer behavior, expands the research direction of repurchase behavior of Chinese fast food, and has important reference significance for the management of Chinese fast food enterprises.

4.2. Recommendations

Emotional attachment and self-brand connection are crucial to the growth of China's fast food industry. This study is based on an empirical analysis and makes the following recommendations.

1. Strengthen emotional marketing. Chinese fast food brands should use emotional marketing to strengthen consumer-brand attachment. This can be achieved through ads, storytelling, or brand experiences that resonate with consumers. Sharing customer stories and hosting cultural events can enhance consumer engagement and loyalty.

2. Promote self-brand connection. Brands should encourage customers to link their personal identity closely to the brand in order to strengthen their bond with the brand. This can be achieved by creating personalized products or services, providing customized experiences, or using brand spokesmen and influencers. Brands can also use community events and loyalty programs to deepen their ties with customers.

3. Cultivate attitudinal loyalty. Brands should focus on improving consumers' brand attitudes to promote buyback behavior. This can be achieved by providing high-quality products and services, ensuring customer satisfaction, and timely responding to customer feedback. Brands should also regularly collect consumer opinions to continuously improve and adjust strategies.

4. Promote behavioral loyalty. Brands can improve customer behavior loyalty through incentive programs, membership systems, or other incentives. For example, give points, discounts, gifts or other forms of rewards to customers who often buy things.

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