

Exploring the Impact of Product Symbolism on Consumer Loyalty: A Perspective from Consumption Ritualization

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Abstract

Purpose: This research proposes the symbolism–ritualization–loyalty model, integrating the perceived value–loyalty model and the ritual–loyalty model within the SOR framework to explore the relationships between product symbolism, consumption ritualization, and consumer loyalty.

Design/methodology/approach: The study used non-probability/judgmental sampling procedure and conducted an online survey on 522 digital consumers from *WeChat* and *Alipay* mobile apps. A structural equation modeling with PLS approach was employed to examine the direct and indirect effects among the variables.

Findings: The results indicate that both symbolic value and product–event fit have significant direct effects on personal ritual, which in turn positively affects consumer loyalty; product–event fit has a significant direct effect on emotional solidarity, ultimately leading to consumer loyalty; personal ritual has an indirect effect on consumer loyalty through emotional solidarity.

Practical implications: It is recommended that organizations should incorporate consumption ritualization strategies into their loyalty programs. Meanwhile, marketers should have a strong awareness of external events and be adaptable in implementing timely ritualization practices.

Research limitations: Due to the sampling data being limited to China and digital products, we cannot determine whether these research findings can be generalized to other cultural backgrounds or types of products.

Originality/Value: This research contributes by proposing the symbolism–ritualization–loyalty model, providing a comprehensive understanding of how incorporating appropriate symbolic value into products that align with external events can enhance consumer loyalty

from the perspective of consumer ritualization.

Keywords: Product Symbolism, Symbolic Value, Product–Event Fit, Consumption Ritualization, Emotional Solidarity, Loyalty

1 Introduction

In today's business world, consumer perceived quality and loyalty has become a core competitiveness (Y. Chen et al., 2021; Chi et al., 2009). As a marketing strategy, using the cultural meaning and symbolic value of the product or brand to actively promote consumer purchase and brand loyalty has a well-established theoretical foundation (Duesenberry, 1949; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Bhat & Reddy, 1998), and has been adopted by many industries (C.-F. Chen et al., 2021; De Toni et al., 2021; Han & Kim, 2020; Liu et al., 2020). By combining products with specific symbolic meanings, firms can enhance consumers' affective commitment and loyalty to the brand, thereby increasing product sales and market share (Jian et al., 2019; Anisimova, 2016).

When mentioning the positive impact of product symbolism on consumer decision making, ritualization is considered by some scholars as a strong explanatory perspective (Park, 1999; A. Sharma et al., 2017; Knottnerus, 2016). When a consumption experience is ritualized, the consumer engages in repetitive symbolic and typical behaviors (Park, 1999; A. Sharma et al., 2017; Fei et al., 2021; Ratcliffe et al., 2019). Existing studies emphasize that these ritualized behaviors need to be embedded in a symbolic and meaningful system that is larger than the instrumental purpose, that is, ritualized behaviors emphasize meaningfulness and the meanings are conveyed through their performers (Rook, 1985; Prexl & Kenning, 2011; Hobson et al., 2018; Morton et al., 2020). For example, singing before eating cake, turning off the lights, closing eyes when making wishes and blowing candles are to convey celebrating birthday and positive hope for the coming year. Birthday rituals make the cake lose most of its functional attributes as food (Ratcliffe et al., 2019). On game day, wearing team colors, singing club songs, and decorating body are common sports fan rituals with obvious symbolism, but they do not really have a beneficial effect on team performance (Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2021).

Some studies have shown that consumption ritualization may also be a mediating process that promotes consumer loyalty, in addition to common positive factors such as brand trust or commitment (Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2021; Meng et al., 2021; Neale, 2010; Ribeiro et al., 2018). This may be attributed to the characteristics of rituals—repetitiveness and resistance to change—which lead to higher retention rates of participants, reflecting higher behavioral loyalty to products or brands (Rook, 1985; Mellens et al., 1996; Ishak & Ghani, 2013; Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2021). Moreover, the process of consumption ritualization may also challenge the traditional mediating processes of cognitive and emotional responses, because rituals are usually considered to be strict, formal, repetitive behaviors that are accompanied by a considerable degree of self-control and regulation of psychological processes (Hobson et al., 2018). In other words, consumers are not always in a positive mood at some stages of the ritual, although they eventually show positive behavioral outcomes.

If product symbolism is often linked to the concept of consumption ritualization and is considered important for it, and at the same time consumption ritualization may represent a different way of achieving consumer loyalty, then there may be a novel strategic thinking. Specifically, under the efforts of marketers, the cultural value of products can be excavated, and consumption rituals can be strategically created, and this strategic creation may have better operational value for marketing decisions (Fei et al., 2021).

However, this strategy lacks support from a conceptual framework, despite the existing literature providing a path from ritualization to loyalty (the ritual–loyalty model) (Neale, 2010; Xue, 2021; Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2021). As for product symbolism, many studies consider it as a potential driver of loyalty through service value (i.e., symbolic value), but they do not mention variables related to rituals (C.-F. Chen et al., 2021; Dalal & Aljarah, 2021; Han & Kim, 2020), thus failing to establish a path from symbolic value to ritualization. Furthermore, prior to being linked to consumer ritualization, the measurement of symbolic value primarily involves the connection between the product and the consumer's social identity, personal image, unique taste, and differentiation from others (Dalal & Aljarah, 2021; Gilal et al., 2018; Han & Kim, 2020). These measurements do not include the consistency of product symbolism with external events (times, occasions). However, when transitioning to a ritual context, this factor becomes crucial as rituals, to some extent, may involve the process of meaning transfer (Hobson et al., 2018; Kenney & Zysman, 2016).

To fill up the above two knowledge gaps, this study explores how incorporating appropriate symbolic value into products that align with external events can enhance consumer loyalty from the perspective of consumer ritualization. After integrating existing foundational theories, the study proposes the symbolism–ritualization–loyalty model. The analytical tool used in this study is the stimuli–organism–response (SOR) framework. Unlike other studies on consumption ritualization, the proposed model draws on meaning transfer theory (McCracken, 1989; Speed & Thompson, 2000). It takes product symbolism as an antecedent of consumption ritualization and identifies two constructs, i.e., symbolic value and product–event fit, as components of product symbolism (stimuli). This study also introduces mediating structures that are highly related to the ritualization process (organism), including personal ritual representing personal perspective and emotional solidarity representing social (interactive) perspective. Structural equation modeling (SEM) is used to describe the proposed model. The results provide a practical significance to encourage marketers to actively dig up the cultural meaning and symbolic value behind products and make it “on point” so as to strategically create consumption rituals to enhance customer loyalty in competitive environment.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 The SOR Framework

The SOR model was first proposed by Woodworth (1926), which distinguished from the behaviorist’s stimuli–response (SR) model, emphasized the mediating mechanism of individual factors or internal consciousness between stimuli and responses (Xu et al., 2022). Based on previous studies, Mehrabian and Russell (1974) proposed two response dimensions, approach

and avoidance, further improving the SOR theory, that is, they believed that the external environment would affect the user perception, emotion and other psychological states, thereby causing individuals to make approach or avoidance behaviors (Ming et al., 2021). In the context of marketing and consumer behavior, this model is often used to analyze how shopping environment characteristics and elements trigger consumer emotional responses, and then affect consumer purchase motivation and behavior (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982).

The SOR theoretical framework consists of three parts: stimuli, organism, and response. *Stimuli* refers to factors in the external environment that may affect individual cognitive and emotional processes (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Xu et al., 2022). Stimuli can be related to product symbolism, which refers to the meaning or value that products represent, such as brand image, social status, personal style (Ravasi & Rindova, 2004; Allen, 2002). In this study, product symbolism is used to stimulate consumers' sense of ritual and emotional solidarity. *Organism* refers to the changes in individual psychological states, such as emotional responses or cognitive responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Xu et al., 2022). In this study, organism is composed of consumers' personal ritual and emotional solidarity, which respectively represent the individual perspective and social perspective of consumer responses in the ritualization process (Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2021). *Response* refers to the outcome variable of individual attitude or behavior, usually manifested as approach or avoidance (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Xu et al., 2022). In this study, response is reflected as consumer loyalty to a product or brand, which means consumers' continuous preference and support for the product or brand (Ishak & Ghani, 2013; Oliver, 1999; Uncles et al., 2003).

2.2 Product Symbolism

In the marketing literature, product symbolism, often referred to symbolic value of a product, is defined as a product value that is associated with cultural or social meanings embedded in the product or brand (Ravasi & Rindova, 2004; Allen, 2002). These meanings include a range of abstract ideas and beliefs related to the product, usually deemed as the opposite of the utilitarian characteristics of the product (Allen, 2002). In the field of marketing practice, Duesenberry (1949) was the first to notice that consumers may regard consumption as a symbolic act, rather than focusing on the benefits they can get from product functions. Subsequently, Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) suggested that marketers should give clues about symbolic meanings to consumers through the process of implementing 4Ps (product, price, place and promotion). In an exploratory factor study conducted by Bhat and Reddy (1998), consumers were confirmed to be able to clearly distinguish product symbolism from its functional characteristics.

In recent years, a large number of empirical studies have shown that product symbolism has a positive impact on positive outcomes in consumer behavior fields such as purchase intention, brand loyalty, etc. These studies propose influencing mechanisms that basically include mediating constructs, such as brand attitude, flow, sentimental value (De Toni et al., 2021; Han & Kim, 2020; Liu et al., 2020). In this study, the path from product symbolism to consumer loyalty is mediated by consumption ritualization, because ritual by its nature is a symbolic

activity—people feel sense of ritual from rigid and repetitive actions precisely because they convey symbolic value beyond instrumental purpose (Rook, 1985; Prexl & Kenning, 2011; Norton & Gino, 2014; Kapitány & Nielsen, 2015; Ratcliffe et al., 2019). In summary, product symbolism can be seen as either a service value that the product provides to consumers, or as a necessary condition for triggering the ritualization process.

2.3 Consumption Ritualization

Consumption ritualization is a marketing term that is closely linked to the concept of ritual (Park, 1999; A. Sharma et al., 2017). The concept of ritual originated from religion and is now widely applied in various non-religious contexts. It refers to those predefined sequences of symbolic actions that are characterized by formality, repetitiveness, and non-utilitarianism (Rook, 1985; Hobson et al., 2018; Kapitány & Nielsen, 2015; Ratcliffe et al., 2019). People perform rituals to mark specific events and convey their underlying symbolic meanings (Norton & Gino, 2014; Prexl & Kenning, 2011; Vohs et al., 2013). A personal ritual can be replicated, imitated and repeated in a group, evolving into a collective ritual (Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2021; Hobson et al., 2018). Members participating in collective rituals often need to make and prepare symbolic objects or resources to get mutual focus of attention. These symbolic resources with specific meanings are more like visual and auditory symbols representing members' identities, rather than having an impact on utilitarian outcomes (Collins, 2014; Hill et al., 2021). Rituals have both personal and social attributes and are reflected in different research perspectives (Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2021). If one chooses to observe from personal perspective, it will emphasize the meaningfulness, repetitive patterns and rules contained in the ritual, as the way it is defined; while when the research perspective focuses on its social aspect, it will use the concept of collective ritual more frequently, while deriving themes such as social identity, sense of belonging, emotional solidarity (Collins, 2014; Hobson et al., 2018; Woosnam & Norman, 2010).

According to Park (1999), consumption ritualization is such that a consumption situation or consumer behavior is ritualized by ritual occasion or ritual behavior. If consumption experience becomes ritualized, the consumer performs repetitively symbolic and typical behaviors in commitment. Consumption ritualization-related studies not only focus on the meaning system composed of social and cultural components that evolve naturally from traditional customs and etiquette styles, but also focus on the meaning or values artificially constructed in consumers' minds by marketers' efforts. In other words, under the efforts of marketers, product symbolism can be excavated, thus consumption rituals are strategically created (Ratcliffe et al., 2019; Ozenc, 2021). For example, marketers use a series of positive and effective strategies to implant the slogan "Twist, Lick, Dunk" and the way it represents how to eat Oreo cookies into the minds of consumers, actively constructing the product symbolism of Oreo, and differentiating Oreo cookies from other competitors' products, becoming a more attractive brand - thanks to the symbolic value dimension of Oreo cookies, the actions of twisting the two chocolate cookie wafers apart, licking the frosting out, and dunking the remains in milk become a ritual, which has been at the heart of numerous warm family moments (Fei et al., 2021; Steger, 2022).

2.4 Consumer Loyalty

Consumer loyalty denotes the continuous favorable connection between a business and its customers, which leads to recurring purchases and encourages existing consumers to select a product or service over a variety of similar options offered by competitors (Dick & Basu, 1994; Ishak & Ghani, 2013; Jacoby et al., 1978; Oliver, 1999). It may be linked to a brand, a category of products/services, a physical store, a website, an application, an activity, or a lifestyle (Uncles et al., 2003).

The concept of consumer loyalty comprises two dimensions: behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty. Behavioral loyalty is primarily assessed through observable consumer behaviors, such as repeat purchases, purchase proportion, and purchase frequency (Ishak & Ghani, 2013; Mellens et al., 1996). Attitudinal loyalty refers to a set of positive beliefs and attitudes held by consumers towards a product, brand, or company, which may include commitment, trust, and brand love (Dick & Basu, 1994; Uncles et al., 2003).

For businesses, consumer loyalty is critical as it can lead to increased sales revenue and profit levels by promoting repeat purchases and cross-selling. Furthermore, it signifies a healthy relationship between the company and its customers, which can lower consumer price elasticity and fortify their resistance to competitors and substitutes (Y. Chen et al., 2021).

3 Model and Hypotheses

Figure 1 depicts the model and its components. Based on the SOR framework, it shows the behavioral mechanism of how product symbolism (stimuli), including the symbolic value contained in the product and the fit of that value with an external event (time, occasion), promotes consumer loyalty (response) by eliciting consumers’ personal ritual and emotional solidarity (organism). In short, the model shows how product symbolism and product–event fit affect personal ritual and emotional solidarity, both of which affect consumer loyalty, thus further defining the interrelationships between the study components.

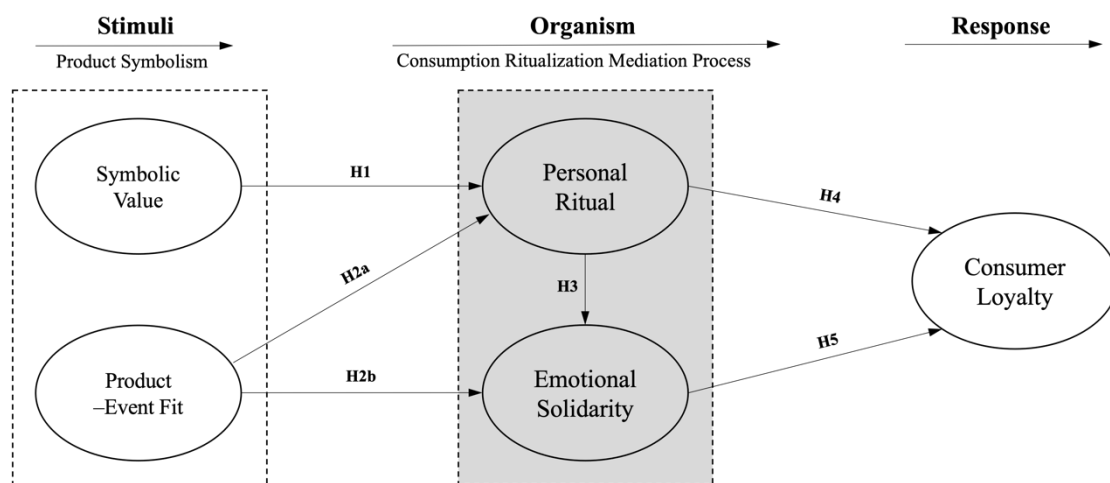


Figure 1: Research model

3.1 Stimuli

As mentioned in Section 2.1, stimuli are the starting point of the SOR framework. As factors in the external environment that may affect consumer cognition and emotion, they are the driving force for consumer behavior and the antecedent variables of behavioral patterns (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Xu et al., 2022). In this study, product symbolism is an external stimulus. According to McCracken's (1989) theory of meaning transfer, product symbolism first exists in material life, which is composed of categories and principles of mainstream culture, then transfers to commodities, and finally transfers to consumer life, thus realizing its circulation in consumer society. McCracken (1989) argues that some tools, such as advertising, facilitate this transfer—Advertisers look for objects, characters and contexts in the external world that already contain specific meanings, and rely on these elements to implant specific meanings into advertisements, while maintaining consistency among products. That is to say, on top of the goal of transferring meaning, product symbolism requires two dimensions: one is to contain symbolic value, and the other is to be consistent with external events. Therefore, in this study, product symbolism is set as a construct with two dimensions: symbolic value and product–event fit.

As mentioned in Section 2.2, symbolic value refers to the cultural (or social) meaning that a product can convey beyond its functional (or instrumental) purpose. In the field of marketing, this value is usually measured by consumer perception of the symbolic meaning implied by a product or brand (Ravasi & Rindova, 2004). Since sequential actions involved in rituals need to be embedded in a symbolic and meaningful system that transcends instrumental purposes, or in other words, symbolic meaning is one of the necessary attributes of rituals, symbolic value can be considered as leading to the occurrence of personal ritual (Hobson et al., 2018; Morton et al., 2020). Hobson et al. (2018) summarized the psychological mechanism of symbolic value triggering personal ritual as a kind of top–down processing. They argue that the symbolic meaning embedded in behaviors or events may help individuals compensate for emotional, goal-driven, and social deficiencies, and reduce anxiety caused by them. In addition, some scholars also tend to believe that product symbolic value can be constructed and designed by marketers, thus forming consumption rituals (Ratcliffe et al., 2019; Ozenc, 2021).

Regarding product–event fit, it measures the consumer's attitude towards the meaning pairing between the product and the external event, and the extent to which the pairing is perceived as being well-matched or a good fit (Speed & Thompson, 2000). First, this external fit may significantly affect the establishment of personal rituals. According to Mick's (1986) view on the polysemy and situational dependence of symbols, the meaning of symbols (such as product) is not fixed, but depends on individual experience, cultural background and situational factors. Therefore, the same product may have different symbolic values or trigger different personal ritual responses under different events (times, occasions). Simply put, consumers' personal ritual may be formed based on an intrinsic situational memory mechanism (Xi & Yan, 2018). Second, the external fit of product symbolism may also significantly affect consumers' emotional solidarity. According to the social constructionism, product value (including symbolic value) should be understood as value in social context, shaped by social forces,

reproduced in social structure, and possibly asymmetric for relevant participants (Edvardsson et al., 2011). Many consumer socialization studies have also revealed that an individual's cognition, attitudes and behaviors related to consumption are inseparable from their participation as a member of society (Essiz & Mandrik, 2022; Ho & Teo, 2022; Moisiu & Beruchashvili, 2022; Yahya et al., 2019). Therefore, when the symbolic value of a product is highly consistent with an external event (time, occasion) that a consumer is experiencing, the consumer may be more likely to associate this product with their socialization context, thus deepening their commitment to the product (Chang & Tseng, 2015; Sung et al., 2012). At the same time, in the social context, the experiencers of the same external event (those who experience it at the same time or in the same place) will share some product values (including symbolic value) and emotional experiences with others, and achieve an emotional solidarity based on common values and shared moods (Hill et al., 2021).

According to the above arguments, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Symbolic value positively influences personal ritual.

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): Product–event fit positively influences personal ritual.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): Product–event fit positively influences emotional solidarity.

3.2 Organism

In the SOR framework, organism refers to the emotional responses of consumers that are triggered by environmental stimuli (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Xu et al., 2022). This study conceptualizes the organism as a consumption ritualization process. During this process, personal rituals can be transformed into collective rituals when they are shared within a group (Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2021; Fei et al., 2021; Hobson et al., 2018). Ritual behaviors can be copied, repeated, and imitated by individuals and group members alike, enhancing interpersonal interaction (Collins, 2014; Hill et al., 2021; Rook, 1985); Ritual meanings can also be communicated and transferred among individuals (Hobson et al., 2018; Prexl & Kenning, 2011).

Based on the theory of social identity, a person's self-identity can be either personal or social, depending on their perceived membership in a specific social group (Turner & Oakes, 1986). Through ritual behaviors, individuals signal their social identity to others, expressing their uniqueness, status, and affiliation (Hobson et al., 2018). Personal rituals thus have social implications and functions in people's lives.

Emotional solidarity is defined by scholars as a feeling of identification, affiliation, or cohesion with other individuals who share a common value system. It describes an emotional state that emerges when an individual engages in a collective ritual (Hammarström, 2005; Hobson et al., 2018; Mullins, 2005). Sharing beliefs and behaviors as well as interacting with others are antecedents of emotional solidarity which is a positive consequence of personal ritual as shown by Durkheim (2011).

The positive correlation between personal ritual and emotional solidarity is also rooted in their social and interactive characteristics. Collins's (2014) interaction ritual chain theory posits that interactivity is determined by three factors: group assembly, mutual focus of attention, and

shared mood. When these elements are present, emotions and interactions intensify, culminating in a collective effervescence of solidarity. The personal ritual that fulfills these conditions may lead to emotional solidarity as it fosters a sense of belonging and instill individuals with emotional vigor. Interactive personal rituals convert shared emotions into higher-order social emotions such as solidarity and emotional energy. These rituals express an individual's identity and commitment to the group, thereby promoting cooperation and a sense of unity (Hobson et al., 2018).

According to the above arguments, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Personal ritual positively influences emotional solidarity.

3.3 Response

In the SOR framework, response refers to either approach or avoidance behaviors that depend on the valence of environmental stimuli. Consumers who are exposed to positive stimuli tend to exhibit approach behaviors (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Xu et al., 2022). This study considers consumer loyalty as an approach behavior that responds to product symbolism as a positive stimulus. As explained in Section 3.2, product symbolism is mediated by consumption ritualization as an organism. Previous studies also indicate that consumption ritualization plays a key role in facilitating loyalty (Park, 1999; Neale, 2010).

Firstly, rituals are repetitive, which imply resistance to change and higher retention rates among participants (Rook, 1985; Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2021). Consumer loyalty to a product or brand is also manifested by repeated purchase behavior and high customer retention rates (Ishak & Ghani, 2013; Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Mellens et al., 1996). Therefore, under a certain consumption ritual, consumers are likely to show loyalty patterns towards a product or brand. Secondly, according to the interaction ritual chains theory, collective rituals generate emotional solidarity among participants (Collins, 2014). Likewise, collective consumption rituals can enhance emotional solidarity among consumers, which can then lead to loyalty towards a product or brand (Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2021; Xue, 2021). From the perspective of brand communities, each consumer can be regarded as a member of the community (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001). Consumer loyalty and emotional solidarity are closely related concepts as both of them describe a positive relationship between entities—the former between consumers and brands while the latter between individuals and groups; both are driven by perceived values—the former by perceived brand value (Jacoby et al., 1978) while the latter by perceived common beliefs and intrinsic meanings of rituals (Hobson et al., 2018); both result in similar behaviors—the former in repeated purchase of existing brands over competitors' (Oliver, 1999) while the latter in repeated performance of established rituals within the group over other groups with different rituals (Durkheim, 2011).

In summary, this study examines two pathways from consumption ritualization to loyalty: a) loyalty derived from repetitive behavior embedded in personal rituals; b) loyalty derived from emotional solidarity elicited by personal ritual. Based on this logic, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Personal ritual positively influences consumer loyalty.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Emotional solidarity positively influences consumer loyalty.

4 Research Methodology

4.1 Data Collection and Sampling

Considering the trend of digital consumption and the convenience of online surveys, this study distributed questionnaires to users of five digital products, namely *Red Packet*, *WeRun*, *Double 11 pet cat game*, *Ant Forest*, and *Jiwufu*. These products are mini games launched on *WeChat* or *Alipay* mobile apps, which are respectively the world's largest standalone mobile app and the world's largest mobile (digital) payment platform (Heggestuen, 2014; Passaris, 2019). These five mini-games are considered to contain specific product symbols, such as *Ant Forest*, which is often associated with a low-carbon and environmentally friendly lifestyle due to its product features (Ashfaq et al., 2021; Mi et al., 2021), and *Jiwufu* (translated into English as *collecting five blessings*), which is regarded as a celebration ritual that pursues happiness, well-being, and good luck and follows the traditional customs of the Chinese lunar new year (Guo & Qin, 2018; Pan & Huang, 2020). The respondents were those who had experienced these five mini-games in the past year.

Online questionnaires were used to collect sample data. The questionnaire was posted on the website named *Wenjuanxing* (<http://wjx.cn>) and pushed to the target population through its paid service. A total of 605 samples were obtained from the formal questionnaire survey conducted from March 7 to March 20, 2023. After deleting incomplete and repeated answers, a total of 522 questionnaires were used to analyze the data. Table 1 shows the sample demographic data.

4.2 Measurement

The questionnaire and operational definitions were designed with reference to previous studies (Table 2), and all items were adjusted according to the context of digital consumption.

All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). This study conducted a pilot study to ensure and test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. Five PhDs (including candidates) who specialize in the field of marketing were invited to review the items, revise the wording, eliminate confusion, and translate the questionnaire into Chinese. Subsequently, 56 users who used two mini games on the *Alipay* app were invited to participate in the pilot test to verify the reliability and validity. This means that the formal survey was conducted on the basis of ensuring reliability and validity.

Table 1: Sample demographics (n = 522)

Measure	Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	291	55.75
	Male	223	42.72
	Self-described	8	1.53
Age	Less than 18	7	1.34
	18–25	305	58.43
	26–35	127	24.33
	36–45	68	13.03
	46–55	10	1.92
	More than 56	5	0.96
Occupation	Employee of government agencies and institutions	72	13.79
	Private company employee	51	9.77
	Full-time student	325	62.26
	Teacher	25	4.79
	Freelancer	11	2.11
	Other	38	7.28
Drive of using	Recommended by marketers	41	7.85
	Recommended by other users	107	20.50
	Spontaneously use	334	63.98
	Triggered by a single purchase	40	7.66

Table 2: Operational definitions of the constructs

Construct	Definition	Reference
Symbolic Value	The consumer perception of the symbolic meaning contained in a product, which is the service value related to its social meanings other than the functional purpose	(Dalal & Aljarah, 2021; Gilal et al., 2018; Han & Kim, 2020)
Product–event fit	The consumer attitude toward the meaning pairing of the digital platform service and the external event, and the degree to which the meaning pairing is perceived as well matched or a good fit	(Speed & Thompson, 2000)
Personal Ritual	A symbolic activity of an individual that has repeated patterns and rules, and is characterized by uniqueness, commitment, ceremoniality and nonfunctionality	(Fei et al., 2021)
Emotional Solidarity	A kind of interpersonal emotional connection based on an individual’s experience, describing the perceived emotional closeness and degree of contact	(DongOh & Woosnam, 2020; S. Sharma et al., 2022)
Consumer Loyalty	An ongoing positive relationship between a consumer and a product or a brand that drives repeat purchases and prompts the consumer to choose the product or brand over its competitors offering similar benefits	(Ahmed et al., 2021; Gefen, 2002; Jin & Xu, 2020)

5 Results

We used *SmartPLS* 4 to evaluate the measurement model and structural equation model separately. The former was a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, and the latter was a structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the model fit and perform path analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

5.1 Measurement Model

The results of reliability and validity for each factor are shown in Tables 3 and 4. All factors had internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach’s α) greater than 0.7, composite reliability (CR) exceeding 0.85, and average variance extracted (AVE) greater than 0.5, indicating that the scale had good reliability and was suitable for hypothesis testing (Hair et al., 2019, 2020). All factors’ AVEs and factor loadings exceeded the acceptable levels of 0.5 and 0.7, respectively, and the square roots of AVEs were significantly larger than their correlations with other factors,

indicating that the variables had good convergent validity and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 3: Construct reliability and validity

Construct	item	Mean	STDEV	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Symbolic Value (SV)	SV1	3.906	0.851	0.735	0.816	0.877	0.642
	SV2	3.391	1.006	0.82			
	SV3	2.801	0.885	0.745			
	SV4	3.008	0.994	0.791			
	SV5	2.908	1.035	0.709			
	SV6	3.923	0.919	0.716			
Product–event fit (EF)	EF1	3.776	0.845	0.796	0.905	0.922	0.568
	EF2	3.732	0.887	0.864			
	EF3	3.711	0.952	0.857			
	EF4	3.724	0.884	0.841			
	EF5	3.751	0.936	0.732			
Personal Ritual (PR)	PR1	3.822	0.722	0.715	0.911	0.926	0.557
	PR2	3.454	0.802	0.717			
	PR3	3.575	0.894	0.724			
	PR4	3.525	0.833	0.703			
	PR5	3.454	0.868	0.716			
	PR6	3.692	0.886	0.796			
	PR7	3.726	0.888	0.793			
	PR8	3.883	0.821	0.796			
	PR9	3.772	0.73	0.747			
	PR10	4.004	0.743	0.749			
Emotional Solidarity	ES1	3.251	0.943	0.711	0.876	0.911	0.671
	ES2	3.337	0.854	0.766			

(ES)	ES3	3.335	0.851	0.748				
	ES4	3.402	0.806	0.74				
	ES5	3.596	0.748	0.76				
	ES6	3.812	0.719	0.771				
	ES7	3.659	0.809	0.767				
	ES8	3.515	0.793	0.771				
	ES9	3.757	0.692	0.746				
	Consumer Loyalty (CL)	CL1	3.705	0.789	0.829	0.849	0.887	0.568
		CL2	3.686	0.819	0.853			
CL3		4.142	0.666	0.813				
CL4		3.956	0.776	0.701				

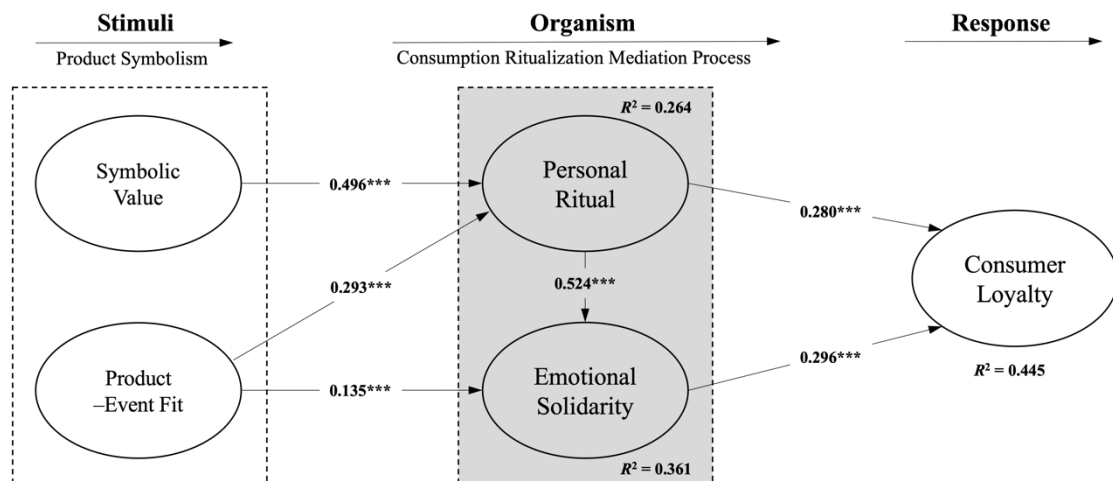
Table 4: Discriminant validity

Construct	SV	EF	PR	ES	CL
SV	0.801				
EF	0.514	0.754			
PR	0.506	0.645	0.746		
ES	0.303	0.437	0.544	0.819	
CL	0.429	0.559	0.663	0.437	0.754

Note: Abbreviations: SV, Symbolic Value; EF, Product–Event Fit; PR, Personal Ritual; ES, Emotional Solidarity; CL, Consumer Loyalty. The square root of AVE is shown in bold (at diagonal).

5.2 Structural Model

The results of the model path analysis, including path coefficients, R^2 values, and corresponding significance levels are shown in Figure 2. *, **, and *** indicate significance levels of $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$, and $p < 0.001$, respectively. The results show that the six hypotheses proposed in Chapter 3 were all accepted with a significance level of 0.001. In addition, the R^2 values of each dependent variable were roughly in the range of 0.3 to 0.5, indicating that the research model had a moderate level of explanatory power (Chin, 1998; Hair et al., 2019).



Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Figure 2: Results of the structural model

5.3 Endogeneity

If an SEM ignores omitted variables that are related to one or more latent variables, it may lead to correlation between error terms of the variables, resulting in endogeneity issues and affecting the robustness of the model (Hult et al., 2018). This study follows the Gaussian copula approach described by Hult et al. (2018) and Papies et al. (2017), "Copula terms" are added to the regression equations, and a bootstrapping algorithm is used in *SmartPLS 4* to detect the significance of path coefficients. The results show that in all path analyses using the Gaussian copula control function approach, the p-values are greater than 0.05, indicating no endogeneity issues in the modeling.

6 Discussion

6.1 Implications for Theory and Research

This study provides several theoretical implications. First, it integrates the perceived value-loyalty model (Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000; Al Chalabi & Turan, 2017) and the ritual-loyalty model that focuses on consumption ritual (Neale, 2010) within the SOR framework and establishes the symbolism-ritualization-loyalty model. This theoretical model reaffirms the importance of symbolic value beyond functional value, and the necessity of incorporating it as one of the product value dimensions that contribute to consumer loyalty. In short, the theoretical framework of this study adds more detailed descriptions to the existing theories of service marketing and relationship management.

Second, this study draws on the meaning transfer theory (McCracken, 1989; Speed & Thompson, 2000) and adds an antecedent—product symbolism—to the ritual-loyalty model, while previous models only treated symbolism as one of the abstract characteristics of ritual behavior, rather than a specific antecedent variable related to product value (Hobson et al., 2018; Morton et al., 2020; Prexl & Kenning, 2011; Rook, 1985). Moreover, based on the relevant literature of the meaning transfer model, two independent variables related to product

symbolism, symbolic value and product–event fit, were both verified to have a significant positive impact on the consumption ritualization process, thus adding content to the existing consumer behavior theories.

Finally, this study reconfirms the significant relationships among personal ritual, emotional solidarity, and consumer loyalty. This means that discussing how to strengthen the positive relationship between consumption ritualization and consumer loyalty from two perspectives—personal and social—is still effective and represents different theoretical paths (Fazal-E-Hasan et al., 2021; Neale, 2010). The completed verification provides two corresponding technical routes for organizations to design marketing strategies specifically related to consumption ritualization.

6.2 Implications for Practice

This study provides several practical implications. First, the data analysis results show that the symbolic value of products is an important reason for generating personal ritual, and further promotes consumer loyalty. Therefore, we suggest that organizations should consider deploying consumption ritualization strategies and make them an important part of loyalty programs in their management. At the implementation level, marketers should proactively and creatively explore and assign specific symbolic values to products or brands based on consumer needs (especially spiritual needs), drive consumption ritualization with product symbolism, then drive brand loyalty with consumption ritualization. For example, the case of Oreo cookies that appeared in Section 2.3 is a typical successful case of creating a consumption ritual “out of nothing”. It turns out that Oreo's consumption ritualization strategy implanted the product symbolism of "Twist, Lick, Dunk" into markets with different cultural backgrounds around the world, and even used trendy technologies such as AR and gamification to consolidate the good relationship between the brand and consumers (M4G Bureau, 2018; Oreo, 2019).

Second, this study demonstrates that product–event fit has a positive impact on personal ritual and emotional solidarity, and we suggest that marketers should enhance their keen insight and quick response to external environments and incorporate it into basic skills necessary for implementing consumption ritualization strategies. For organizations, any specific time (such as seasonal changes, important festivals), situation (such as special places, occasions, atmospheres), or event (such as influential social events, campaigns, public opinion trends) may become an opportunity for consumption ritualization practices, and what marketers need to do is to seize this opportunity in time and make their ritualization strategies “on point”. A case that exemplifies this skill to the extreme is the “first cup of milk tea in autumn”. On the day at the beginning of Autumn in 2020, this hashtag suddenly went viral on China's social networks. This seemingly inexplicable nationwide craze for celebrating seasonal changes with a small ritual was successfully “borrowed” by many milk tea retailers at the speed of light, selling 1.1 billion cups of milk tea in just four days (Wei, 2021; Zuo, 2021).

Third, this study reconfirms the path of personal ritual leading to emotional solidarity. Therefore, we continue to call for organizations to follow two routes when implementing consumption ritualization strategies. At the individual consumer level, marketers need to

understand consumers' values, ideals, beliefs, and how these personal factors relate to generating personal rituals, which are crucial for designing the narratives, scripts and artifacts of rituals (Rook, 1985; Hobson et al., 2018). At the social interaction level, marketers need to find ways to create the atmosphere required for collective rituals, stimulate consumer interaction and accumulate emotional energy, and facilitate the transmission of rituals, symbolic activities and objects among people (Collins, 2014; Hill et al., 2021).

6.3 Limitations and Suggestions

This study has several limitations that provide insights for future research.

Limitation of geographical scope and product category. The population of this study is consumers in China who have used digital products with specific symbolic values. Since the sample is limited to China, we cannot determine whether these research findings can be generalized to other cultural contexts or different product categories. Different cultures may have different understandings and valuations of product symbolism, while the same product may have different meanings in different cultures (Allen, 2002; Schwartz, 1992). Therefore, future research may need to conduct more extensive cross-cultural and cross-category studies to verify the applicability of these findings in different contexts, as well as whether the insights can be repeated.

Limitation of symbolic value measurement methods. The operational definition of product symbolism used in this study mainly comes from the traditional marketing literature of product attributes such as prestige, social status, unique taste, etc. (Dalal & Aljarah, 2021; Gilal et al., 2018; Han & Kim, 2020), which are often associated with high-end and luxury scenarios and may not apply to other types of consumption. Considering that ritualized consumption does not necessarily require products to have high-end and luxury characteristics, but can be any meaning related to social norms, intrinsic pursuits, and action goals (Hobson et al., 2018), the adaptability of the symbolic value scale used in this study is still worrisome. In future research, in order to enrich the theory related to ritualized consumption, it is not enough to develop measurement tools for consumption rituals, but also need to develop measurement tools for symbolic value that match the definition of consumption rituals, especially with more diverse consumer values.

Limitation of data collection methods. This study chose to conduct surveys facing multiple platforms and multiple products, for better capturing the commonality and universality of ritualization processes triggered by different symbolic values, thereby enhancing the reliability and applicability of the research. However, we still cannot rule out differences in indicator variability between different products. This unobserved heterogeneity may weaken the accurate estimation ability of the PLS path model, which may lead to validity problems in the research (Becker et al., 2013). In future research, separate hypothesis testing and cross-sectional comparison can be conducted for different products, which will help inspire researchers to find other hidden variables that affect the correlation between product symbolism, consumption ritualization and consumer loyalty, thereby paying attention to more detailed and more operational value in this influence mechanism.

Limitation of research methods. The Symbolism–Ritualization–Loyalty Model may contain a complex causal mechanism that results in consumer loyalty as a result of multiple factors interacting (including substitutional and complementary mechanisms). Even for the same factor combination (or "configuration"), there may be differences in the direction of influence of each factor within the combination on high loyalty (Rihoux & Ragin, 2008). Although structural equation modeling helps us understand this causal mechanism to some extent, it still has some limitations in explaining and sorting out complex causal relationships. This means that future research can adopt more comprehensive and flexible methods such as qualitative research, comparative research, case study, and experimental research to reveal hidden details in this complex causal mechanism.

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