Influencing mechanism of social media content marketing and perceived brand authenticity on brand loyalty of China's insurgent brands: The mediating role of customer engagement

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Abstract
Purpose: This study employed stimuli–organism–response (S-O-R) framework to delve into the influence of social media content marketing and perceived brand authenticity on brand loyalty under the context of China's insurgent brands with regard to customer engagement as a mediator between them.
Design/methodology/approach: The research opted for the online survey questionnaire as the primary data collection method. In total, 226 complete questionnaires were included in this study using purposive sampling. Subsequently, the data underwent analysis using SmartPLS 3.0 software, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the research constructs.
Findings: Findings affirm positive relationships between social media content marketing, perceived brand authenticity, customer engagement, and brand loyalty. Notably, customer engagement acts as an intermediary factor in the connection between them.
Research limitations/implications: This study only focus on the food and beverage categories within the realm of insurgent brands. Future research can broaden the scope by investigating various categories of insurgent brands. Additionally, this study relied on a cross-sectional survey to validate our model. To foster the robustness of the research findings, future research can embrace mixed methods designs.
Practical implications: This study highlights marketing strategies that prioritize content, authenticity and engagement, ultimately driving brand loyalty to enhance the growth and success of insurgent brands.
Originality/value: This research extends the scope of SOR model, applying it to the unique context of China's insurgent brands, an area that has previously lacked empirical exploration. The findings offer valuable insights that can serve as a reference for insurgent brands seeking to cultivate brand loyalty.

Keywords: Brand loyalty, Content marketing, Perceived brand authenticity, Customer engagement, Insurgent brands

1. Introduction
In the past few years, the landscape of business has undergone a significant metamorphosis, courtesy of advancements in internet technology and the meteoric ascent of social media and

e-commerce platforms. These shifts have brought forth a multitude of diverse and abundant channels and media outlets. Consequently, this changing paradigm has birthed fresh market opportunities, resulting in the emergence of a substantial cohort of insurgent brands in China. Insurgent brands have harnessed new technologies and pioneering marketing techniques to play a pivotal role in enhancing and expanding product categories, driven by the upward trajectory of Chinese brand exploration and consumer upgrading (Ke & Wang, 2021). Insurgent brands typically adopt a challenger mindset, questioning the status quo and aiming to offer something different and compelling to consumers compared to established players. These brands often innovate either in product design, distribution methods, pricing strategies, or branding approaches. They introduce new ideas or technologies that challenge conventional industry practices. Unlike established corporations, insurgent brands often have a strong sense of purpose and values that resonate with their target audience, and they highly focused on understanding and catering to customer needs and desires. The Chinese government has introduced policies aimed at expediting the development of new consumption patterns and lending support to insurgent brands in 2017, 2020, and 2021. As a result, insurgent brands are at the forefront of propelling a fresh wave of consumption dynamics. In the digital media era, the gap between brands and consumers has significantly narrowed, communication has become more streamlined and efficient, and brand growth has witnessed an acceleration (Gan & Wan, 2021). Collectively, these factors create an advantageous milieu for the inception and flourishing of insurgent brands.

The ascent and proliferation of insurgent brands have indeed been conspicuous, yet a significant proportion of them grapple with a relatively brief existence. Notably, Tmall, the online shopping platform operated by Alibaba Inc., has revealed stark statistics. In 2020, the one-year survival rate for insurgent brands that established a presence on the Tmall platform was less than 50%, and for those settling in 2021, this figure plummeted to a mere 30%. A central challenge faced by these insurgent brands lies in their struggle to cultivate a consistent and dedicated customer following, resulting in low product repurchase rates and diminished brand loyalty. This conundrum is underscored by a 2022 report from the Boston Consulting Group, indicating that merely 36% of customers consistently adhered to a single brand over the preceding two years, while a staggering 81% of customers exhibited a propensity to switch from one brand to another. In the crucible of competition and survival, the pressing question for insurgent brands revolves around their ability to retain existing customers while concurrently ensnaring new ones, thereby fostering brand loyalty among both established and prospective customers.

Social media content marketing assumes a pivotal role for businesses to exert a profound influence on their brand image, products, and services while establishing deeper connections with their customers (Lou et al., 2019). By consistently furnishing valuable content, brands have the potential to cultivate organic word-of-mouth and attain substantial reach and influence (Du, 2017). Additionally, this practice plays a pivotal role in nurturing an engaged and loyal customer base, ultimately fostering brand loyalty (Lou & Xie, 2021). Hence, this emerging phenomenon calls for fresh research to delve into its underlying mechanisms and assess its overall effectiveness on customer engagement and brand loyalty.

In addition to content marketing, the way customers perceive a brand's authenticity also exerts an influence on their brand loyalty (Kumar & Kaushik, 2022). When customers perceive a brand as genuinely trustworthy and aligned with their values, it fosters a deep sense of allegiance. This sentiment, consequently, results in customers making repeat purchases and spreading recommendations through word-of-mouth. (Hong & Ahn, 2023). For insurgent brands, this holds particular significance since they often grapple with limited brand recognition and reputation in comparison to established industry players. By curating engaging experiences and encouraging customers to share these experiences online, insurgent brands can

effectively harness the power of their engaged customers, transforming them into enthusiastic brand advocates.

Remarkably, there has been a noticeable gap in discussions regarding how content marketing, perceived brand authenticity, and brand loyalty intersect with consumer engagement, particularly within the realm of China's insurgent brands. Aligned with this premise, the present research endeavors to elucidate the sequential process whereby content marketing and perceived brand authenticity, operating through the mediator of customer engagement, contribute to the cultivation of brand loyalty. This investigation employs the stimuli-organism-response model as its theoretical framework to explore these dynamics comprehensively.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Stimulus – Organism – Response Model (S-O-R)
This research builds its conceptual framework rests upon the *'stimulus–organism–response'* (S-O-R) model, a theoretical framework pioneered by Mehrabian and Russell in 1974. The S-O-R framework posits that external environmental factors or stimuli serve as triggers, initiating cognitive and emotional responses within the internal state of consumers, ultimately manifesting as specific consumer behaviors, or responses. To clarify, the S-O-R model comprises three distinct components: stimulus, organism, and response. It functions as a meta-theory framework for the analysis of individual behavior (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2023), and has evolved into a pivotal construct for elucidating the mechanisms governing consumer behavior (Ibrahim et al., 2021). Scholars have further contended that stimuli need not be confined solely to external factors; rather, the scope of stimuli should encompass elements that extend beyond the psychological and emotional domains (Fan et al., 2023). Building upon this perspective, the present study considers the value propositions inherent in content marketing and the perceived brand authenticity as stimuli. These stimuli, in turn, prompt the consumer engagement, functioning as the organism in this context, which ultimately yields discernible marketing outcomes, such as alterations in brand loyalty.

2.2. Brand Loyalty
Brand loyalty constitutes an important factor in bolstering a brand's equity and profitability (Haudi et al., 2022). When consumers exhibit brand loyalty, they demonstrate a reduced sensitivity to factors such as price fluctuations and other variables associated with the organization. This diminished sensitivity translates into a steadfast, long-term patronage of the brand (Casteran et al., 2019). In essence, brand loyalty serves as a robust shield against market volatility, ensuring sustained customer commitment and thereby fortifying a brand's financial performance and market position.

Brand loyalty is conceived within the confines of a framework comprising three integral components: behavioral loyalty (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2011; Coelho et al., 2018), attitudinal loyalty (e.g., Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; Rauyruen & Miller, 2007; Thompson et al., 2014), and a combination of behavioral and attitudinal (e.g., Oliver, 1999; Wansink, 2003; Nyadzayo et al., 2018). Behavioral loyalty is focus on the repurchase to a product or service in the future that will not change regardless of the circumstances (Nguyen et al., 2011), while attitudinal loyalty is characterized as a lasting reflection of customers' perceived attitude toward a brand, unaffected by anything or any situation, and with an internal tendency to continue buying behavior (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). The third facet of loyalty, known as composite loyalty, combines both behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty. Among the notable paradigms elucidating the interplay between attitudes and behavioral loyalty, Oliver's definition in 1999 stands as one of the most renowned. Their research furnished a conceptual blueprint for loyalty, positing that brand loyalty entails a robust commitment to consistently revisit or engage with a

continued preference for the product or service over time, resulting in repeated purchases from the brand, even when confronted with situational influences and marketing endeavors that might otherwise induce switching behavior. In this study, we intend to assess brand loyalty through a comprehensive framework that encompasses all three of these dimensions.

2.3. Content Marketing

Content marketing revolves around a deliberate approach to creating and sharing meaningful, relevant, and reliable content. Its main aim is to captivate and maintain a specific audience while encouraging financially rewarding customer actions (Content Marketing Institute, 2018). Content marketing has emerged as a rapidly expanding phenomenon within the realm of marketing communication. (Lou et al., 2019). Its purpose is to shape, enrich, or sustain customer connections, making it a versatile tool for cultivating brand recognition, encouraging engagement and trust, nurturing sales leads, and bolstering brand loyalty (Kakkar, 2017). In contrast to advertising, the main objective of content marketing is to establish and sustain enduring engagement and relationships with consumers, rather than directly persuading potential customers to purchase the company's offerings (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Therefore, although content marketing remains dedicated to fostering long-term sales and brand loyalty, its approach prioritizes the initial cultivation of consumer engagement.

Numerous studies have undertaken the task of elucidating the intricate causal connection that exists between social media content marketing and its consequential effects on customer engagement and brand building (Raji et al., 2019; Lou & Xie, 2021). These research have not only deepened our understanding of the subject matter but have also fortified the prevailing consensus that social media content marketing serves as a potent catalyst for augmenting customer engagement and fortifying brand loyalty. While the field of content marketing research remains relatively new, progress have been made in appraising the significance of content marketing as a driver of consumer behavior, as noted by Du Plessis (2017). However, it is worth highlighting that investigations into the realm of content marketing, particularly within the context of insurgent brands, have been relatively limited in scope. Additionally, scholarly interest in social media-based content marketing has been on the rise, establishing itself as a burgeoning research area within the field of marketing. Nonetheless, according to a recent study by Social Media Examiner in 2022, a mere 11% of the survey participants expressed confidence in their organizations' level of sophistication in content marketing (Social Media Examiner, 2022). This underscores the fact that there is still ample space for enhancement in this domain.

2.4. Perceived Brand Authenticity

The notion of authenticity, as explored in business literature, has been approached from multiple perspectives, yielding a range of implications. At its core, authenticity encompasses the alignment of one's actions with their genuine self, emphasizing fidelity to one's true character and sincerity. Authenticity implies that individuals are guided by authentic thoughts and genuine emotions, motivating their actions and decisions (Moulard et al., 2016). Brand authenticity is a concept originates from social constructs, residing within the customer's cognitive realm, and consequently, it exhibits a degree of subjectivity (Napoli et al., 2014). In essence, brand authenticity can be likened to a mirror reflecting the customer's interpretation of brands' conduct. In this research, we embrace the perspective of perceived brand authenticity as the evaluation and perception shaped by individual customers concerning a brand's fundamental nature, marked by its distinctive identity and its commitment to customer consciousness and self-empowerment, as conveyed through a spectrum of activities (Fritz et al., 2017; Schallehn et al., 2014; Campagna et al., 2023). Hence, brand authenticity offers consumers a feeling of self-identity, leading to fostering brand authenticity may cultivate robust

consumer-brand relationships.

Recent research into brand authenticity suggests that it is intricately linked to favorable brand perceptions via various avenues. For example, Morhart et al. (2015) discovered that heightened perceived brand authenticity corresponds to intensified emotional brand attachment and a greater inclination to share positive brand recommendations. Furthermore, extensive survey studies have substantiated a positive association between brand authenticity and customers' intentions to make purchases (Fritz et al., 2017). Building upon these insights, we anticipate that consumers' perceived brand authenticity will exert an influence on the sustained customer engagement and the development of brand loyalty. Notwithstanding its increasing significance, the literature has not yet explored the connections between perceived brand authenticity and brand loyalty, meditated by customer engagement, particularly within the landscape of China's insurgent brands. As such, this study endeavors to bridge this scholarly gap and furnish valuable perspectives on how perceived brand authenticity facilitates brand loyalty.

2.5. Customer Engagement

In contemporary marketing, consumer engagement has gained prominence as a pivotal and central concept. Its core emphasis lies in delivering interactive encounters for customers (Brodie et al., 2011) and extending an array of advantages that transcend mere transactional interactions (So et al., 2014). Consumer engagement materializes when individuals exhibit a willingness to partake in interactive engagements with entities such as brands or organizations (Kumar & Kaushik, 2022b). Previous research has put forth various viewpoints regarding consumer engagement, portraying it as a psychological state residing within customers' minds, as discussed by Brodie et al. (2011), a dynamic process, as elucidated by Bowden (2009), or even as a manifestation of behavioral responses, as highlighted by Harmeling et al. (2017). For the purpose of this study, customer engagement represents the interactive relationship formed between customers and brands, expressed through mental, emotional, and behavioral interactions that extend beyond the realm of transactional interactions, in accordance with the conceptualization provided by So et al. (2014).

Embedding the research within the S-O-R model constitutes a formidable theoretical underpinning. In accordance with this influential framework, the stimuli, such as content marketing and perceived brand authenticity, act as triggers, eliciting cognitive and affective responses within individuals. These responses, in turn, culminate in distinct outcomes, specifically, the development of brand loyalty. By integrating customer engagement as an intermediary factor, this study adheres to the foundational principles of the S-O-R framework, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness of its conceptual framework and upholding theoretical consistency. By delving into the intricate function of customer engagement as a mediator in this particular context, the study endeavors to illuminate the precise dynamics and mechanisms at play within the Chinese market, thus augmenting the reservoir of valuable insights within the current scholarly landscape.

3. Hypothesis Development

3.1. Content Marketing and Customer Engagement

Content marketing's efficacy lies in its capacity to deliver content that resonates deeply with the target audience, providing relevance and value that captures their attention and encourages interaction (He et al., 2016). Moreover, content marketing facilitates two-way communication, enabling consumers to express their opinions and questions, fostering a sense of involvement. It also leverages storytelling techniques to establish emotional connections, tapping into psychological principles that enhance engagement (He et al., 2021) . This approach's ongoing nature, with a consistent stream of fresh content, promotes regular interactions and sustained

engagement. Additionally, content marketing often serves as an educational platform, offering valuable insights and information, which has been shown in academic studies to be highly appreciated by consumers (Lou & Xie, 2021). These interconnected factors collectively contribute to the heightened levels of engagement. According, we introduce the following hypothesis:

H1: Content marketing correlates positively with customer engagement among customers of China's insurgent brands.

3.2. Content Marketing and Brand Loyalty

Research findings have consistently identified content marketing as a potent catalyst for enhancing brand-related constructs, including but not limited to brand trust (Ajina, 2019) and brand attitude (Müller & Christandl, 2019). However, concerning the domain of brand loyalty, there exists a noticeable void in scholarly exploration, particularly within the specific context of China's insurgent brands. Social media-based content marketing, as evidenced in studies conducted by Ajina (2019) and Bu et al. (2021), serves as a valuable tool for brands seeking to educate their target audience or forge emotional connections regarding their offerings. This educational and emotionally resonant approach holds the potential to heighten the likelihood of customers not only making purchases but also engendering brand loyalty over time. For example, a fitness apparel brand could leverage social media to showcase workout routines featuring their products in action, along with tips on fitness and nutrition. This approach not only educates their target audience about the functionality and performance of their apparel but also creates an emotional connection by inspiring individuals to lead a healthy lifestyle. By engaging their audience with motivational content and practical advice, the brand encourages potential customers to try their fitness apparel, which can lead to increased repurchase intention, WOM, and attitudinal preference. Taken together, we posit the following hypothesis:

H2: Content marketing has a positive relationship with brand loyalty among customers of China's insurgent brands.

3.3. Perceived Brand Authenticity and Customer Engagement

When customers view a brand as genuine, dependable, and in harmony with their values and convictions, it cultivates a robust sense of trustworthiness and credibility(Rosado-Pinto et al., 2020) . This trust forms the bedrock of a deep emotional connection between brands and customers, inspiring them to actively engage with the brand. Authenticity creates a positive brand image, attracting customers who believe in the brand's values and mission. Moreover, authentic brands tend to share compelling and relatable stories, evoking emotions that drive customer engagement. Customers feel valued and heard when brands are open and transparent, leading to increased interactions and willingness to provide feedback. In essence, perceived brand authenticity cultivates a loyal and emotionally invested customer base, driving higher levels of customer engagement. Accordingly, we present the following hypothesis:

H3: Perceived brand authenticity has a positive relationship with customer engagement among customers of China's insurgent brands.

3.4. Perceived Brand Authenticity and Brand Loyalty

Perceived brand authenticity engenders a sense of trust and credibility among consumers. When customers view a brand as genuine, trustworthy, and in alignment with their values and beliefs, it establishes a strong foundation of trust (Lee & Chung, 2019). This trust is pivotal in the development of brand loyalty, as customers are more likely to stay loyal to brands they view as reliable and authentic. Additionally, perceived brand authenticity fosters an emotional bond between customers and brands (Francioni et al., 2020). Chinese consumers, like consumers worldwide, seek not just functional benefits but also emotional connections with

brands. When consumers believe that a brand genuinely cares about their values and well-being, it evokes positive emotions and a sense of belonging. These emotional bonds contribute to brand loyalty, as customers tend to remain loyal to the brands that resonate with their emotions and principles. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Perceived brand authenticity has a positive relationship with brand loyalty among customers of China's insurgent brands.

3.5. Customer Engagement and Brand Loyalty

Customer engagement, characterized by active participation and interaction with a brand, facilitates a deeper emotional bond between customers and brands. This emotional bond, often rooted in shared values and meaningful experiences, fosters emotional affinity and commitment to the brand (Barari et al., 2021). Academic research has consistently shown that consumers who form emotional connections are inclined towards brand loyalty, which encompasses repeat purchases and positive referrals endorsements (Naumann et al., 2020). Moreover, under the context of insurgent brands, where competition and consumer choice are abundant, fostering strong customer-brand relationships through engagement becomes even more critical. Engaged customers are not only more loyal but also more likely to overlook alternatives and stay committed to a brand they feel emotionally connected to. Consequently, in the dynamic and highly competitive landscape of China's insurgent brands, customer engagement acts as a potent catalyst, enhancing brand loyalty by nurturing emotional bonds, trust, and a sense of belonging among consumers. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5: Customer engagement has a positive relationship with brand loyalty among customers of China's insurgent brands.

3.6. The Mediating Role of Customer Engagement

Content marketing, when effectively executed, provides valuable and engaging content that resonates with consumers. This resonance can foster initial interest and brand awareness (Lou et al., 2019). Moreover, when customers view a brand as authentic, they are more inclined to engage with it actively. Such engagement can manifest in various forms, including active participation on social media platforms, sharing positive experiences, and providing feedback. Engaged consumers not only make repeated purchases but also become advocates who spread positive word-of-mouth, further enhancing brands' reputation, and exhibit higher levels of brand loyalty (Naumann et al., 2020). Within the landscape of China's insurgent brands, where competition is fierce and trust-building is essential, the intermediary function of customer engagement becomes particularly crucial. Therefore, we introduce the following hypotheses:

H6: Customer engagement acts as a mediator linking content marketing and brand loyalty among customers of China's insurgent brands.

H7: Customer engagement acts as a mediator linking perceived brand authenticity and brand loyalty among customers of China's insurgent brands.

Fig. 1 illustrates the conceptual framework that serves as the guiding foundation for the study.
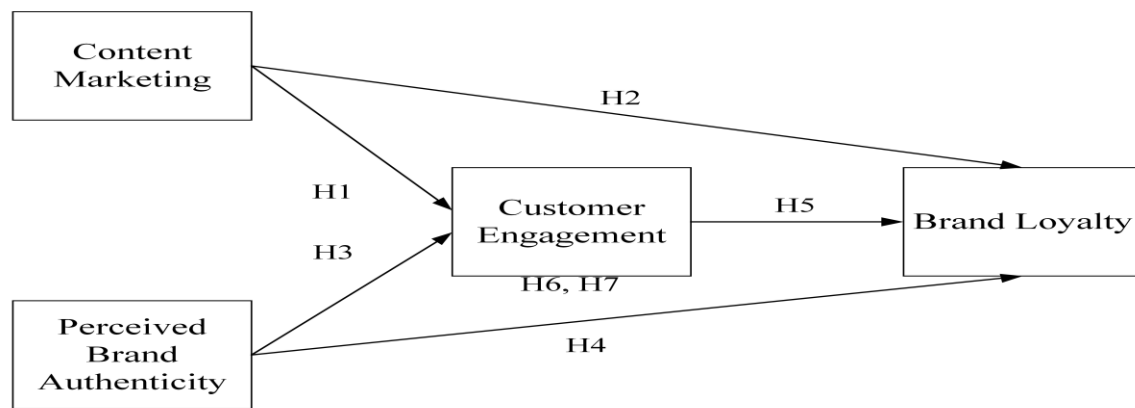
Fig.1 Conceptual Framework

4. Methods

4.1. Research Context
This study was undertaken within the domain of China's insurgent brands sector, characterized by several distinctive attributes. Firstly, insurgent brands exhibit a strong commitment to fostering product and category innovation. Secondly, they channel their efforts toward catering to emerging consumer segments. Thirdly, insurgent brands place significant emphasis on cultivating their brand identity and facilitating the transmission of brand values. Research findings suggest a growing consumer inclination toward organic and health-conscious food choices, contributing to substantial expansion within the natural food and beverage industry (Wang, 2021). Additionally, the food and beverage industry garnered the highest level of investment in the year 2020, as reported by ebrun (2021). Consequently, this study centers its attention on the food and beverage product category, recognizing the paramount importance of cultivating brand loyalty to ensure the sector's enduring viability and progress.

4.2. Research Instruments
The survey consisted of three sections: initial screening questions, measurements of key constructs, and inquiries into respondents' demographic information. To gauge the constructs, we employed items drawn from existing literature, with response choices spanning from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" using a five-point Likert scale. Content marketing was assessed with four items adapted from Lou et al. (2019). Four items derived from Campagna et al. (2023) to evaluate perceived brand authenticity. Three indicators of customer engagement were adapted from Chou et al. (2023). Brand loyalty was tested using four items derived from Lee et al. (2023). To uphold the questionnaire's quality, we engaged the input of two marketing academic experts and two industry specialists for a pre-test phase. Based on the feedback provided by these experts, several item modifications were implemented. Furthermore, we carried out a back translation process to facilitate the translation of the questionnaire from English to Chinese (Cha et al., 2007). Subsequently, a pilot test involving 30 respondents yielded no concerns regarding internal consistency, as all alpha values surpassed the desired threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2021).

4.3. Data Collection

Data collection for this study utilized an online questionnaire. In contrast to traditional face-to-face surveys conducted in offline settings, the utilization of online questionnaire collection presents distinct advantages, notably in terms of cost reduction and the mitigation of potential bias arising from geographical homogeneity. This method enhances the generalizability and applicability of research findings, providing a cost-efficient and geographically diverse method for data collection. The methodology employed for data collection encompassed several rigorously executed steps. Initially, a meticulous process of questionnaire design was undertaken to ensure the instruments effectively captured the research objectives. Following this, a pre-testing phase was implemented to gauge the questionnaire's reliability and validity, refining its structure and content as needed. Subsequently, the final survey was conducted, with the distribution and collection of questionnaires facilitated through a third-party platform named Wenjuanxing. This digital platform not only streamlined the data gathering process but also provided a secure and efficient means of reaching and engaging with the study participants. These systematic and well-defined procedures were instrumental in ensuring the robustness and integrity of the collected data.

Data collection was accomplished through non-probability sampling with a purposive approach. Given the inherent difficulty in precisely characterizing the consumer population of China's insurgent brands and the absence of an exhaustive census or comprehensive list encompassing all such consumers within the researcher's knowledge, a purposive sampling strategy was employed in this study. This method was chosen to strategically select participants based on specific criteria, allowing for a targeted and insightful representation of individuals affiliated with China's insurgent brands, thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the study's findings. Prior to participation, all respondents received clear information about the research's objectives and were provided with comprehensive definitions of insurgent brands and each variable under consideration. Qualified respondents were selected based on their responses to screening questions, with only those who answered affirmatively included in the final sample. Consequently, 226 questionnaires were deemed suitable for subsequent multivariate analysis. The detailed profile of the participants is outlined in Table 1.

Table1

Sample Demographics (N=226).

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	95	42
	Female	131	58
Age	30 and below	86	38
	31-40	72	32
	41-60	47	21
	61 and above	21	9
Education Level	High school or below	29	13
	Bachelor	111	49
	Master	61	27
	PhD	25	11
Income Level (monthly/ RMB)	Less than 5000	72	32
	5000-10000	106	47
	10001-20000	41	18
	More than 20000	7	3

5. Findings

For evaluating the measurement and structural models, we employed the partial least squares (PLS) modeling technique, utilizing SmartPLS 3.3.6 version as our statistical software tool (Ringle et al., 2015). This choice was made because PLS modeling does not necessitate an assumption of normality, which is particularly advantageous in the context of survey research, where data distribution tends to deviate from the normal distribution (Chin et al., 2003).

5.1. Common Method Variance

Data that gathered from a single-origin across multiple variables in a cross-sectional way often grapple with the challenges related to common method variance (CMV). Consequently, the adoption of a marker variable within the framework of confirmatory factor analysis has gained prominence (Miller & Simmering, 2022). The R^2 and β value were subjected to a comparative analysis both before and after the inclusion of the marker variable, as detailed in Table 2. The findings demonstrated marginal disparities, signifying the non-existence of common method variance (CMV).

Table 2

Common Method Variance Testing with Marker Variable (MV).

Endogenous variable	R^2 without MV	R^2 with MV	β without MV	β with MV
Customer engagement	0.639	0.641	0.152	0.151
Brand loyalty	0.731	0.734	/	/

5.2. Measurement Model Assessment

In evaluating the measurement model, we scrutinized the loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR) in accordance with the criteria set forth by Ramayah et al. (2018). Specifically, loadings were deemed acceptable if ≥0.5, AVE values were considered adequate if ≥0.5, and CR values were considered reliable if ≥0.7. As outlined in Table 3, all loadings and AVEs surpassed the 0.5 threshold, while all CR values surpassed 0.7. In the subsequent step, we evaluated discriminant validity by applying the HTMT criterion, as recommended by Henseler et al. (2015) and refined by Franke and Sarstedt (2019). The HTMT values were appraised against the stricter threshold of ≤0.85, and as depicted in Table 4, all values adhered to this rigorous criterion. Collectively, these tests validate the reliability and validity of the measurement items.

Table 3

Measurement Model.

Variable	Item	Loadings	CR	AVE
Brand Loyalty	BL1	0.734	0.859	0.605
	BL2	0.802		
	BL3	0.787		
	BL4	0.786		
Customer Engagement	CE1	0.742	0.839	0.635
	CE2	0.822		
	CE3	0.824		
Content Marketing	CM1	0.943	0.864	0.618
	CM2	0.765		
	CM3	0.658		

	CM4	0.752		
Perceived Brand Authenticity	PBA1	0.754	0.855	0.595
	PBA2	0.764		
	PBA3	0.772		
	PBA4	0.796		

Notes: AVE= average variance extracted; CR= composite reliability

Table 4
Discriminant Validity (HTMT ratio).

Variable	BL	CM	CE	PBA
BL				
CM	0.825			
CE	0.604	0.793		
PBA	0.724	0.735	0.627	

Note: BL: brand loyalty; CM: content marketing; CE: customer engagement; PBA: perceived brand authenticity

5.3. Structural Model Assessment

Following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2017) and Cain et al. (2016), we conducted an assessment of multivariate skewness and kurtosis on the collected data. The findings revealed a departure from multivariate normality, as evidenced by Mardia's multivariate skewness ($\beta = 4.318$, $p < 0.01$) and Mardia's multivariate kurtosis ($\beta = 45.603$, $p < 0.01$). To address this, and following the guidance of Hair et al. (2019), we opted to present the path coefficients, standard errors, t-values, and p-values for the structural model. These values were generated using a resample bootstrapping procedure consisting of 5000 samples (Ramayah et al., 2018). Furthermore, in response to the critique put forth by Hahn and Ang (2017), which emphasized the limitations of relying solely on p-values for hypothesis testing, we adopted a comprehensive approach. This approach involved considering a combination of criteria, including p-values, confidence intervals, and effect sizes. Table 5 presents a summary of the rigorous criteria we employed to rigorously evaluate the hypotheses formulated in our study.

Firstly, we examined the impact of the two predictors on customer engagement, revealing an R^2 of 0.639 ($Q^2 = 0.395$), indicating that these predictors collectively accounted for 63.9% of the variance in customer engagement. Content marketing ($\beta = 0.558$, $p < 0.01$) and perceived brand authenticity ($\beta = 0.274$, $p < 0.01$) exhibited positive associations with customer engagement, thereby supporting H1 and H3. Subsequently, we investigated the influence of the two predictors on brand loyalty. Content marketing ($\beta = 0.490$, $p < 0.01$) and perceived brand authenticity ($\beta = 0.270$, $p < 0.01$) demonstrated positive relationships with brand loyalty, thereby supporting H2 and H4. Lastly, we examined the impact of customer engagement on brand loyalty, yielding an R^2 of 0.731 ($Q^2 = 0.426$) signifying that customer engagement explains 73.1% of the variance in brand loyalty and providing evidence in support of H5.

To assess the mediation hypotheses, we adhered to the recommendations put forth by Preacher and Hayes (2004; 2008), employing bootstrapping to examine the indirect effects. If the confidence interval excludes zero, it provides grounds to infer the presence of significant mediation. As depicted in Table 6, the paths CM→ CE → BL ($\beta = 0.085$, $p < 0.05$) and PBA → CE → BL ($\beta = 0.042$, $p < 0.05$) both exhibited statistical significance. The bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals also did not encompass zero, providing further support for our findings. Consequently, both H6 and H7 were upheld.

Table 5

Hypothesis Testing Direct Effects.

Hypo-thesis	Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	t-values	p-values	BCI LL	BCI UL	f²
H1	CM→ CE	0.558	0.067	8.322	<.001	0.442	0.661	0.279
H2	CM→ BL	0.490	0.068	7.200	<.001	0.373	0.598	0.225
H3	PBA→ CE	0.274	0.074	3.721	<.001	0.151	0.392	0.067
H4	PBA→ BL	0.270	0.064	4.200	<.001	0.169	0.380	0.082
H5	CE→ BL	0.152	0.053	2.872	0.002	0.069	0.245	0.031

Table 6

Hypothesis Testing Indirect Effects.

Hypo-thesis	Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	t-values	p-values	BCI LL	BCI UL
H6	CM → CE→ BL	0.085	0.032	2.667	0.008	0.031	0.161
H7	PBA → CE→ BL	0.042	0.019	2.222	0.026	0.013	0.091

Furthermore, in accordance with the suggestions proposed by Shmueli et al. (2019), we implemented PLS predict. This technique utilizes a holdout sample-based approach to generate predictions at the individual case level for both items and constructs, employing the PLS-Predict method alongside a 10-fold procedure to assess predictive relevance. As outlined by Shmueli et al. (2019), the evaluation of predictive power hinges on the differences among items (PLS-LM). When all item differences are lower, it signifies strong predictive capability; conversely, higher differences suggest weaker predictive relevance. If most item differences are lower, it indicates moderate predictive power, whereas if the most are higher, it suggests lower predictive power. Upon examination of Table 7, it is evident that all errors of the PLS model were lower than those of the LM model. Consequently, we can confidently assert that our model boasts robust predictive performance.

Table 7

PLS-Predict.

Item	PLS RMSE	LM RMSE	PLS-LM
BL1	1.024	1.025	-0.001
BL2	0.832	0.843	-0.011
BL3	0.974	0.976	-0.002
BL4	0.929	0.956	-0.027

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This research endeavor commenced with the aim of deepening our comprehension of how social media content marketing and perceived brand authenticity influence brand loyalty via way of customer engagement acting as a mediator, focusing specifically on insurgent brands within the Chinese context. Primarily, the study introduced a comprehensive conceptual framework grounded in the SOR model, wherein content marketing and perceived brand authenticity serve as stimulus, customer engagement as the organism, and brand loyalty as the

resultant outcome. This investigation corroborated the existence of positive associations among content marketing, perceived brand authenticity, customer engagement, and brand loyalty, aligning with the earlier research by scholars like Lou et al. (2019) and Ajina (2019), who established a favorable connection between content marketing and both customer engagement and brand loyalty (refer to H1-H2). Furthermore, this study's results also harmonized with prior research (Busser & Shulga, 2019), by confirming the significant links between perceived brand authenticity, customer engagement, and brand loyalty (see H3-H4).

Secondly, within the framework of the SOR model, we delved into the sequential mechanism that underscores how organisms mediate between stimuli and responses. In the study, customer engagement assumed the role of a mediator in the associations between content marketing, perceived brand authenticity, and brand loyalty, as indicated by H6 and H7. These findings substantiate earlier research, which has consistently demonstrated that customer engagement consistently plays a pivotal mediating role across different scenarios involving stimuli and responses (Naqvi et al., 2021). Essentially, these outcomes affirm the efficacy of the SOR model in predicting behavioral outcomes.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

This research's outcomes make notable advancements to theory on multiple fronts. Firstly, it enhances the scope of the S-O-R literature by broadening the model's applicability to the context of insurgent brands, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of brand loyalty within this particular online domain-a subject that had hitherto remained unexplored. Moreover, this study introduces a novel stimulus, perceived brand authenticity, into the framework, marking a noteworthy expansion of the model's conceptual boundaries. To achieve this, a meticulously developed, validated, and proposed conceptual model has been advanced.

Secondly, these findings underscore the SOR model's adaptability in extending stimuli beyond traditional environmental factors. It showcases the model's flexibility in accommodating and effectively integrating psychological constructs, such as perceived brand authenticity, thereby enriching its conceptual repertoire. Furthermore, by underscoring the indirect effects that manifest through customer engagement, bridging the realms of content marketing, perceived brand authenticity, and brand loyalty, the research underscores the mediating capacities of the organism component within the SOR framework. This underscores the model's versatility in capturing and elucidating the intricate interplay between stimuli and responses, thus enriching our comprehension of consumer behavior within the dynamic context.

6.2. Practical and Social Implications

The study provides actionable insights that can be applied by insurgent brands in China, emphasizing the critical interplay between social media content marketing, perceived brand authenticity, customer engagement, and brand loyalty. By crafting authentic, useful, and entertaining content that resonates with their target audience's values and beliefs, these brands can foster lasting connections and build trust among consumers. This highlights the need for tailored marketing strategies that prioritize authenticity and engagement, ultimately driving brand loyalty. Moreover, it underscores the importance of monitoring and adapting content marketing efforts based on real-time customer engagement feedback, enabling brands to stay responsive and relevant.

On a broader societal scale, the study supports the trend of consumer empowerment, wherein individuals are encouraged to make informed choices based on authentic brand interactions. It also promotes ethical brand behavior and transparency, fostering responsible corporate conduct. Furthermore, the research reinforces the role of social media as a vital communication platform for brand in the digital age, emphasizing the need for ethical and authentic online brand-consumer interactions. Finally, by enhancing the growth and success of insurgent brands, this

study contributes to increased diversity and meaningful choices in the consumer landscape.

6.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While our study makes substantial advancements in both theoretical understanding and practical implications, it is essential to acknowledge certain constraints that also offer opportunities for future research endeavors. Primarily, our study's focus was confined to the food and beverage categories within the realm of insurgent brands. While this specificity lends depth and relevance to the findings within this particular brand category, it also implies that the applicability of these findings to other categories of insurgent brands remains unexplored. Future research opportunities exist to broaden the scope by investigating various categories of insurgent brands, thereby expanding the generalizability of our findings beyond the food and beverage sector.

Additionally, it is worth noting that our research primarily delved into the dynamics of content marketing, perceived brand authenticity, customer engagement, and brand loyalty within a specific context. Future studies could explore these phenomena within different contexts or cultures to ascertain the extent to which our findings hold true in diverse settings. This not only enriches the understanding of the influencing mechanisms but also fosters a broader view of the complexities of consumer-brand relationships across various landscapes.

Another noteworthy consideration pertains to the core constructs in our model, namely content marketing and customer engagement. In many prior studies, these constructs were often operationalized as unidimensional entities. However, it is crucial to recognize the inherent complexity of these variables, each comprising multiple dimensions that may exert varying influences. To advance our understanding further, we strongly advocate for future investigations to adopt a more nuanced approach. Conceptualizing and operationalizing content marketing and customer engagement in diverse ways would facilitate a deeper exploration of their distinct dimensions and their respective impacts on the overarching model. This approach promises to yield richer insights into the intricacies of these crucial elements in the context of brand loyalty.

Furthermore, our study relied on a cross-sectional self-reported survey as the primary data collection method to support our model. While this approach offers valuable insights, it possesses certain limitations. To enhance the robustness of our research findings, we encourage future studies to embrace mixed methods designs. Combining various research methodologies, such as interview, case study, analysis of archival data, and online survey, offers a holistic and nuanced comprehension of the phenomena under investigation. This multi-method approach not only serves to cross-validate our findings but also captures a more holistic view of the intricate relationships within the research domain.

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