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FROM ENGAGEMENT TO CONVICTION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF BRAND TRUST IN EMOTIONAL BRANDING AND CONSUMER PURCHASE DECISIONS

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ABSTRACT

A brand's follower count and its sales figures are not the same thing, and the gap between the two is where this study sits. Across a structured survey of 150 active social media users and a supporting round of qualitative interviews, engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares turned out to be a poor stand-in for purchase intent on their own; what predicted actual buying behaviour was whether the consumer trusted the brand, and trust itself was driven far more by informativeness than by entertainment value. Emotional storytelling built around nostalgia, humour, or family bonding did move consumers, but its effect was strongly conditional on category: in an experience-led sector such as quick-service restaurants (QSR), emotional narrative translated into purchase inclination far more reliably than the same narrative did in a utilitarian sector such as fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), where price and functional quality kept dominating the buying decision regardless of how the campaign was framed. Brand trust consistently sat between the two — mediating the path from perceived narrative relevance to final purchase decision — which suggests that emotional content and factual, verifiable information are doing different jobs rather than competing for the same one: entertainment and interactivity earn attention, informativeness earns belief, and belief is what closes the sale. For platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, where two-way interaction is now the default rather than the exception, this points to a specific practical implication for brands: campaigns optimised purely for engagement volume, without a matching investment in transparent product information, are likely to generate visibility without a proportional lift in conversion.

Keywords: Emotional Branding; Social Media Engagement; Brand Trust; Consumer Purchase Decision; Narrative Transportation; Digital Marketing

1. INTRODUCTION

The growth of social commerce has changed what brands are actually competing on. A decade ago the contest was largely functional — price, availability, product quality. On platforms built for constant, two-way interaction, the contest has shifted toward relational value: whether a brand can make a consumer feel something and keep feeling it. Emotional branding — the deliberate construction of a sensory and affective bond between a brand and a consumer that goes beyond the product's functional benefit — sits at the centre of this shift. Instagram and Facebook, in particular, have given brands a channel for sustained storytelling rather than one-off advertising, and Narrative Transportation Theory offers one explanation for why this works: consumers who become psychologically absorbed in a brand's story are more likely to adopt its perspective, and that absorption correlates with stronger loyalty and higher purchase intent (Dave et al., 2025; Houghton, 2021).

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The strength of this effect is not uniform across industries. Quick-service restaurant (QSR) brands lean heavily on themes of family and shared memory and see measurable purchase-intention gains from doing so (Dave et al., 2025). Fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) brands, by contrast, operate in a more utilitarian buying context where price and quality tend to override emotional appeal even when a campaign is built around warmth or nostalgia (Dave et al., 2025). Emerging-market categories such as smartphones sit somewhere in between, where digital literacy is high but brand trust still has to be earned through credible information rather than sentiment alone (Walean et al., 2025).

Despite the volume of research on social media marketing, there is comparatively little work that explains the mechanism connecting emotional stimulus to purchase outcome rather than simply documenting a correlation between the two. Much of the existing literature is quantitative and structural — regression models and SEM path coefficients — without a matching qualitative account of why a consumer moves from passive scrolling to active buying. Most studies are also geographically or sectorally narrow, concentrated in single markets such as China or Indonesia, or single categories such as QSR or smartphones, which limits how far their conclusions can travel. And within the emotional dimension itself, the literature over-indexes on kinship and nostalgia while giving comparatively little attention to humour, fear, or urgency-based triggers.

This study is designed to close part of that gap. It combines a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews so that statistical association and psychological explanation can be read against each other rather than reported separately. The intended contribution is twofold: a clearer picture, for researchers, of how brand trust mediates the path from emotional content to purchase decision; and a practical basis, for marketing practitioners, for deciding how much of a campaign should be built on emotional appeal versus verifiable information, and how that balance should shift by sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical foundation: emotional branding and narrative transportation

Emotional branding rests on the premise that a consumer's attachment to a brand is built through sensory and affective association rather than product performance alone (Dave et al., 2025; Houghton, 2021). Narrative Transportation Theory extends this by arguing that consumers who are mentally absorbed in a brand's story temporarily adopt the story's point of view, which increases the likelihood of loyalty and purchase (Dave et al., 2025). Babbal (2025) links this specifically to social platforms, arguing that the two-way, co-creative nature of content on Instagram and TikTok is what allows transactional exposure to convert into relational attachment in the first place — a mechanism that static advertising does not have.

2.2 Dimensions of social media engagement

Three dimensions recur across the literature as drivers of SME. Entertainment value satisfies an aesthetic and emotional demand and is consistently associated with initial attention and engagement (Bilal et al., 2021; Walean et al., 2025). Informativeness reduces the buyer's uncertainty directly, and Walean et al. (2025) find it to be the strongest single driver of brand trust in the Indonesian smartphone market specifically. Interactivity, including electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), extends a brand's reach because peer recommendation is trusted more than brand-originated advertising (Bilal et al., 2020).

2.3 Brand trust as the mediating link

Brand trust is the variable that appears to connect engagement to conversion rather than sitting alongside it. Wakhare (2023) reports a strong positive association between SME and brand loyalty (r = 0.92), with trust functioning as the mechanism that lowers perceived purchase risk. Redjeki (2025) frames this as a function of the current market environment specifically: consumers who are exposed to a high volume of branded content have become more selective, so authenticity and transparency now operate as a competitive requirement rather than a differentiator.

2.4 Sectoral and geographic variation

Comparing sources across categories shows that emotional branding does not travel evenly. Dave et al. (2025) find narrative-based appeals to be a strong driver of purchase intent in QSR precisely because the category is socially oriented, whereas FMCG purchase decisions remain anchored to price and quality regardless of narrative quality. Walean et al. (2025), studying the Indonesian smartphone market, find that entertainment and interactivity drive attention but not trust, which is built almost entirely on informativeness — a pattern that Bilal et al. (2021), working in China, do not fully replicate, since their data shows entertainment and trendiness contributing meaningfully to brand interest in that market.

3. OBJECTIVES

- To assess how specific emotional branding stimuli — nostalgia, humour, family bonding — affect measurable social media engagement.
- To examine the relationship between engagement level and the stage a consumer has reached in the purchase decision process.
- To test whether, and how strongly, brand trust mediates the relationship between emotional storytelling and purchase intent.
- To identify, qualitatively, the psychological shift that moves a consumer from passive engagement to active purchase intent.
- To compare how emotional branding is received across an experiential category (QSR) and a utilitarian category (FMCG).

4. METHODOLOGY

The study uses a mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative findings are triangulated rather than reported separately, on the basis that statistical correlation alone cannot explain why a consumer responds to a given emotional cue.

4.1 Sample and data collection

The quantitative phase surveyed 150 active social media users, including consumers with direct purchase exposure to the QSR and FMCG categories, using a structured five-point Likert scale covering entertainment, informativeness, interactivity, emotional trigger response, trust, and purchase inclination. Respondents were recruited through convenience sampling, prioritising feasibility of access over strict random selection. The qualitative phase used semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussion to surface reasoning that a Likert-scale instrument cannot capture on its own.

4.2 Variables

- Independent variables: entertainment, interactivity, informativeness, perceived relevance, and specific emotional triggers (nostalgia, humour, family bonding).
- Mediating variable: brand trust.
- Dependent variable: consumer purchase decision, operationalised through likelihood, willingness, and stated purchase inclination.

4.3 Limitations

- Self-reported survey data carries the usual risk of response bias.
- The convenience sample and its QSR/FMCG focus limit how far findings generalise to other categories or markets.
- The design captures immediate reaction rather than longitudinal loyalty or lifetime value.
- The emotional triggers tested are limited to a defined set and do not cover the full range possible (fear-based appeals, for instance, are outside scope).

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Descriptive results

Table 1 summarises response distribution across the core survey constructs. Informativeness produced the highest proportion of "strongly agree" responses among the SME dimensions (82 of 150), ahead of entertainment (62 of 150) — a gap that supports the hypothesis that informativeness, not entertainment, is the primary trust driver even though entertainment does more of the initial attention-getting work. Family and nostalgia-based appeal recorded the single highest "strongly agree" count across the entire instrument (88 of 150), consistent with case evidence from QSR brands such as McDonald's, where campaigns built around shared memory and family occasion have been linked to measurable sales lifts of 4–9.5% in the United States around a celebrity-tie-in promotion. A similar pattern holds for brand intimacy rankings, where QSR chains built on community and care — Chick-fil-A being the most cited example — consistently outperform category peers on emotional-attachment measures (MBLM, 2024). Overall purchase inclination also skewed strongly positive (85 "strongly agree" of 150), which tracked closely with the engagement-to-loyalty association reported in the wider literature ($r \approx 0.92$).

Table 1. Selected survey response distributions (N = 150).

Construct (survey item)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N
Entertainment value of content	62	48	15	15	10	150
Informativeness of content	82	43	12	8	5	150
Interactivity with brand posts	58	52	20	12	8	150
Family / nostalgia appeal	88	37	10	10	5	150
Perceived transparency of brand	68	52	15	10	5	150
Overall purchase inclination	85	40	10	10	5	150

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5.2 Sectoral contrast: QSR versus FMCG

The gap between experiential and utilitarian categories was consistent across both the quantitative and qualitative data. QSR respondents and interviewees repeatedly framed brand preference in terms of nostalgia, family occasion, and community — themes that FMCG respondents raised far less often, where price and functional quality dominated the stated reasoning. This is consistent with published contrasts between campaigns such as McDonald's family-themed advertising, which trades on emotional recall, and FMCG efforts such as Coca-Cola's "Share a Coke," where the emotional layer sits on top of a functional refreshment proposition rather than replacing it. Reported sales lift on the Coca-Cola campaign — around 2% in the U.S. and 7% among younger consumers in Australia — is real but noticeably smaller than the lift seen in QSR emotional campaigns, which supports treating category type as a genuine moderator rather than a minor variable.

5.3 The mediating role of brand trust

Across both survey and interview data, engagement did not translate into purchase intent directly — it did so through trust. Interactivity and entertainment were strong at capturing initial attention (likes, comments, shares) but weaker at sustaining conviction; informativeness and perceived transparency were the constructs interview respondents most often cited when explaining why they trusted, or did not trust, a brand enough to buy. This is consistent with the wider literature's mediation findings, where trust-to-purchase path coefficients are consistently reported in the 0.55–0.73 range (Redjeki, 2025; Wakhare, 2023). The practical read is that entertainment and interactivity function as an attention layer, while informativeness functions as a conversion layer — brands that only invest in the first will generate engagement metrics without a matching lift in actual purchase behaviour.

5.4 Qualitative themes

Interview data surfaced two additional patterns not fully captured by the Likert instrument. First, urgency-based content — particularly ephemeral formats such as Stories — was described by several respondents as shifting them from a passive, undecided state to an active purchase, which is consistent with fear-of-missing-out (FOMO) operating as a distinct trigger from nostalgia or humour rather than a variant of either. Second, several respondents raised discomfort with highly personalised, AI-driven recommendations even while acknowledging those recommendations were relevant to them — suggesting that hyper-personalisation increases short-term relevance but carries a trust cost if it reads as surveillance rather than service.

CONCLUSION

Social media engagement is not a single lever; it is at least two distinct ones operating on different parts of the purchase journey. Entertainment and interactivity are effective at generating attention and short-term engagement metrics, but informativeness is what converts that attention into brand trust, and brand trust is what converts trust into purchase decisions. This pattern holds across both quantitative and qualitative data collected here, and it holds more strongly in experiential categories such as QSR, where emotional storytelling around family and nostalgia produces a measurably larger effect on purchase inclination than the same storytelling approach produces in utilitarian categories such as FMCG.

For practitioners, the implication is that emotional content and informational content are not substitutes for each other — a campaign strong on one and weak on the other will underperform relative to one that combines both. Brands should also expect the optimal

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balance between emotional and informational content to shift by category: experiential brands can lead with narrative, but should not skip the trust-building information layer; utilitarian brands cannot rely on narrative to override price and quality considerations, and should treat emotional content as a secondary layer rather than the primary conversion driver.

This study's conclusions are bounded by its convenience sample, its focus on two categories, and its short observation window. Future research using longitudinal data would be better placed to test whether emotionally built trust holds up over a full customer lifecycle, and cross-category, cross-market replication would help establish how far the informativeness-as-trust-driver finding generalises beyond QSR, FMCG, and smartphones.

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