Review Article

Emotional Branding and Customer Loyalty: Gen Z in Japan and Indonesia

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Abstract: Global brands increasingly struggle to retain Generation Z consumers who demand emotionally resonant and culturally relevant brand experiences. In Japan, where emotional restraint and symbolic messaging dominate consumer-brand interactions, Gen Z tends to bond with brands through aesthetics, storytelling, and quiet symbolism. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, Gen Z consumers exhibit high emotional expressiveness and loyalty to brands that foster social connection, authenticity, and community engagement. This paper analyzes how emotional branding mechanisms—such as brand love, emotional attachment, and self-congruity—function differently across these cultural settings. It reveals that while Japanese Gen Z responds to minimalist branding with embedded cultural cues, their Indonesian counterparts engage more with emotionally charged narratives and influencer-driven content. These distinctions offer practical insights for tailoring emotional branding to fit not only cultural norms but also platform-specific behaviors, such as Instagram aesthetics in Japan and TikTok virality in Indonesia. The study contributes actionable strategies for brands aiming to sustain loyalty among Gen Z in culturally diverse Asian markets.

Keywords: emotional branding; customer loyalty; Generation Z; digital consumer behavior; brand storytelling

1. Introduction

Brands are increasingly relying on emotional engagement to foster consumer loyalty. Emotional branding—defined as the strategic use of affective appeals to build consumer-brand relationships—has emerged as a key driver of loyalty by stimulating brand love, trust, and self-identification [1], [2]. This is particularly relevant for Generation Z (Gen Z), a cohort known for its demand for authenticity, emotional expressiveness, and digital connectivity ([3], [4].

Gen Z's loyalty behaviors differ notably from earlier generations. They are less responsive to traditional persuasion and more influenced by emotional relevance and value alignment [5], [6]. Emotional branding that resonates with their identity and beliefs—such as inclusivity, individuality, and social purpose—can lead to deeper emotional bonds and enduring loyalty [7], [8]. Yet, even within this digitally savvy cohort, cultural background continues to shape how emotional cues are interpreted and how loyalty is formed [9], [10].

Cross-cultural differences are especially pronounced when comparing Gen Z consumers in Japan and Indonesia. Japan, a high-context culture, emphasizes subtlety, harmony, and indirect communication, which influences how emotional appeals are conveyed and received [11], [12]. In contrast, Indonesia, while also collectivist, exhibits a more expressive communication style and relational social orientation [13]. These differences suggest that

emotional branding strategies may not be universally applicable, even among generational peers.

Despite increasing interest in emotional branding, much of the literature generalizes across demographics or focuses on adult consumers in Western contexts. Limited research explicitly compares Gen Z across culturally diverse Asian markets or analyzes how emotional branding mechanisms function within their cultural logic [14], [15]. Moreover, while emotional branding studies commonly explore constructs such as brand love and attachment, few examine how these constructs are communicated or framed differently in distinct cultural contexts [16].

This literature-based review seeks to address that gap by offering a cross-cultural comparison of emotional branding and customer loyalty among Gen Z in Japan and Indonesia. It highlights the affective mechanisms—such as brand love, self-congruity, attachment, and trust—that underlie emotional loyalty, and explores how these mechanisms interact with cultural norms and communication styles. The novelty of this review lies in its generational and cultural specificity, offering insights for brands seeking to localize emotional branding strategies while retaining global resonance.

2. Methods

This study adopted a narrative synthesis approach to examine how emotional branding influences customer loyalty among Generation Z consumers in Japan and Indonesia. The review focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2024, sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using combinations of keywords such as "emotional branding," "brand love," "customer loyalty," "Generation Z," "cross-cultural branding," "Japan," and "Indonesia." Inclusion criteria required that studies explicitly addressed emotional branding constructs and their effects on consumer loyalty or related behavioral outcomes within Asian cultural settings, particularly involving Gen Z cohorts. Excluded were studies focusing solely on brand equity, rational decision-making models, or B2B contexts.

A total of 42 articles met the inclusion criteria, of which 25 addressed emotional branding and loyalty mechanisms in general or cross-cultural settings, 9 focused specifically on Gen Z consumers, and 8 dealt directly with either Japan or Indonesia as cultural markets. While no empirical analysis was conducted, insights were derived through qualitative comparison and thematic categorization of findings, theories, and methodologies. Special attention was paid to studies employing Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Hall's context theory, and consumer behavior frameworks such as brand love, brand attachment, and self-congruity. The selected literature was analyzed for patterns related to emotional branding effectiveness, cultural communication styles, and generational attitudes toward loyalty. The review aimed to contextualize emotional branding practices across cultural boundaries while identifying potential divergences in message framing, emotional response, and brand relationships specific to Gen Z in Japan and Indonesia.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings from the reviewed literature are organized into thematic categories that highlight how emotional branding operates across cultures, with a specific focus on Generation Z in Japan and Indonesia. This generation, known for its digital fluency and value-driven consumption, offers a unique lens to examine emotional branding strategies in contrasting cultural contexts—Japan's high-context, collectivist culture versus Indonesia's emerging blend of traditional collectivism and digital individualism. The analysis emphasizes not only the mechanisms of emotional branding but also the cultural, communicative, and generational variables that shape brand-consumer relationships.

3.1 . The Reviewed Studies

The literature review synthesized 42 peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2024, focusing on emotional branding and customer loyalty among Generation Z consumers. These studies were geographically centered on Asia, particularly Japan and Indonesia, while also including comparative cross-national studies involving other collectivist and individualist cultures (e.g., China, South Korea, the United States). Notably, 17 studies directly explored emotional branding strategies within the context of Gen Z, and 12 of these examined youth

consumer segments in East and Southeast Asia (e.g., Aji, Berakon, & Md Husin, 2020; Sugimoto & Nomura, 2023).

The selected studies applied a variety of theoretical frameworks, with brand love [1], emotional brand attachment, and brand-self congruity [17] being most prevalent. For cross-cultural interpretation, Hofstede's dimensions—especially individualism–collectivism and power distance—were consistently employed to contextualize consumer-brand emotional dynamics [10], [18]. In addition, high- versus low-context communication theory [11] was widely used to differentiate message framing effectiveness across cultures [19].

The reviewed studies spanned sectors including fashion, digital services, skincare, and mobile technology, all of which are highly relevant to Gen Z lifestyles. For example, Takahashi and Ishida [20] investigated the emotional framing of mobile app brands among Japanese students, finding that symbolic aesthetics and non-verbal emotional cues had stronger resonance than explicit messages. Conversely, in Indonesia, research by Rachmawati and Prabowo [21] showed that personalized and verbally expressive emotional branding significantly enhanced loyalty intentions among digitally engaged youth.

Although the studies generally affirmed the positive link between emotional branding and loyalty outcomes, they revealed variations in the emotional triggers that resonate with Gen Z in different cultures. Japanese Gen Z consumers tend to respond more to harmony-driven and subtle emotional branding, while their Indonesian counterparts prefer direct, aspirational, and community-oriented brand messages. These cultural nuances suggest that even within collectivist paradigms, emotional branding strategies must be highly localized and generationally attuned.

A noticeable gap was the lack of experimental or longitudinal studies directly comparing Japan and Indonesia. Most research was either context-specific or based on cross-sectional surveys without cultural controls. Thus, while this review provides meaningful insight, it underscores the need for more comparative, cross-generational studies that delve deeper into the emotional psychology of Gen Z in diverse Asian settings.

3.2 . Emotional Branding Mechanisms and Loyalty Outcomes

Emotional branding strategies aim to establish deep, affect-laden connections between consumers and brands, especially among Gen Z, whose brand preferences are shaped not only by functionality but also by symbolic and emotional relevance. In both Japan and Indonesia, emotional branding functions through various psychological mechanisms that foster loyalty, yet the pathways through which these emotions are activated can vary culturally.

One of the most widely studied constructs is brand love, which encapsulates elements of passion, affection, and long-term commitment toward a brand. Research has shown that brand love significantly predicts positive consumer behaviors such as repurchase intention, brand advocacy, and resistance to negative information [22], [23]. In the context of Japanese Gen Z, brand love is often mediated by subtle storytelling and aesthetic harmony that align with cultural preferences for understated emotional expression [24]. In contrast, Indonesian Gen Z consumers respond more strongly to expressive emotional cues embedded in aspirational messaging and social identity appeals [25].

Emotional brand attachment is another central mechanism, referring to the psychological bond that consumers feel with a brand over time. This attachment can be driven by symbolic associations, personal memories, or consistent emotional reinforcement through marketing interactions [2], [26]. In Japanese culture, attachment is often formed through quiet resonance with cultural rituals or values embedded in the brand, such as respect, precision, or subtlety [27]. In Indonesia, emotional attachment is typically catalyzed by brands that foster a sense of community and shared values, especially when aligned with religiosity or national pride [28].

Self-congruity, or the alignment between the brand's image and the consumer's self-concept, has emerged as particularly salient among Gen Z due to their ongoing identity formation and digital self-presentation. Brands that reflect a consumer's ideal or actual self-image tend to elicit stronger emotional loyalty [29], [30]. For example, in Japan, self-congruity may be expressed through alignment with aesthetic minimalism or niche subcultures such as kawaii or tech-inspired identities. In Indonesia, self-congruity is often linked to religiously appropriate branding or youth movements that reflect progressive values.

Brand trust also remains a foundational component in fostering emotional loyalty. Trust in the brand's competence, benevolence, and integrity enables consumers to engage in

affective relationships without perceived risk [31], [32]. Among Gen Z in Japan, trust is developed through consistency, craftsmanship, and heritage—attributes that symbolize long-term reliability. Meanwhile, Indonesian Gen Z tends to build trust more rapidly, often based on peer reviews, social media transparency, and the brand's perceived alignment with communal values [33].

These mechanisms—brand love, emotional attachment, self-congruity, and trust—are not mutually exclusive but often co-occur to reinforce emotional loyalty. The reviewed literature suggests that in Japan, the affective mechanisms are more subtle and identity-reflective, relying on brand heritage and visual harmony. In Indonesia, emotional mechanisms are more expressive, community-focused, and influenced by digital interactivity. This variation highlights the need for context-specific strategies that acknowledge emotional dynamics not just as universal traits but as culturally mediated constructs.

3.3 . Cultural Dimensions Influencing Emotional Branding

Cultural values significantly shape how consumers interpret, respond to, and internalize emotional branding. For Gen Z consumers in Japan and Indonesia, distinct cultural frameworks inform how emotional appeals are processed and how they influence brand loyalty. These differences can be meaningfully analyzed using established cultural models, particularly Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Schwartz's theory of cultural value orientations, which offer explanatory insights into how emotion-driven branding strategies operate across societies.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions model identifies Japan as a high uncertainty avoidance, collectivist, and moderately masculine society, where social harmony, long-term orientation, and indirect communication are emphasized [34]. This cultural setting encourages brands to adopt emotional branding strategies that are subtle, respectful, and aligned with group norms. Gen Z consumers in Japan tend to favor brands that evoke nostalgia, tranquility, or aesthetic harmony—emotions that reflect cultural ideals such as wa (harmony) and omotenashi (hospitality) [27], [35]. Emotional branding is most effective when embedded in narratives that uphold shared cultural rituals and convey unspoken values through design and symbolism.

In contrast, Indonesia scores high on collectivism but also shows a stronger indulgence orientation and lower uncertainty avoidance, indicating a more expressive and emotionally demonstrative consumer culture [12]. Gen Z in Indonesia often values emotional branding that emphasizes warmth, enthusiasm, and community connection. Religious values also play a prominent role in shaping emotional preferences, with brands that incorporate Islamic identity elements, compassion, or moral storytelling achieving stronger affective bonds with youth consumers [28], [36]. In this context, emotional authenticity and alignment with social values are vital in enhancing consumer trust and attachment.

Schwartz's cultural value orientations further illuminate how emotional branding differs between these two societies. Japan aligns with values such as embeddedness and hierarchy, meaning emotional branding must operate within socially accepted boundaries and maintain a respectful tone [37], [38]. Emotional messages that invoke group belonging, tradition, or discipline resonate more effectively. Conversely, Indonesian culture reflects values of harmony and affective autonomy, allowing greater space for emotionally expressive and individualized branding appeals [39], [40]. Indonesian Gen Z consumers tend to favor emotional content that promotes personal growth, shared aspirations, and social mobility.

These cultural differences also impact brand–consumer interaction styles. In Japan, emotional branding is often mediated through visual storytelling, cultural motifs, and experiential cues that require interpretation, aligning with the country's high-context communication style [24], [41]. Indonesian consumers, operating within a relatively lower-context environment, often prefer emotional messages to be more explicit, relatable, and digitally mediated, especially through social platforms and influencer endorsements [25], [33].

In addition, emotional triggers vary by culture. Japanese Gen Z responds more to understated emotional tones such as serenity, elegance, or nostalgia—emotions that reflect restraint and cultural continuity. Indonesian Gen Z consumers are more responsive to emotional triggers that evoke hope, excitement, or social solidarity. This divergence suggests that emotional branding cannot rely on standardized appeals, as emotional salience is contextually constructed through cultural meaning systems [14], [42].

Collectively, the literature indicates that emotional branding is deeply embedded in cultural frameworks that shape consumer affect, identity expression, and loyalty behavior. For Gen Z consumers in both Japan and Indonesia, cultural values do not merely influence emotional interpretation—they condition the very architecture of emotional engagement with brands. Understanding these cultural dimensions is therefore essential for tailoring emotional branding strategies that are not only resonant but also culturally congruent.

3.4 . Communication Styles and Emotional Message Framing

Emotional branding must align with prevailing cultural communication styles to ensure effectiveness. Based on Hall's [11] framework of high- and low-context cultures, Japan and Indonesia—despite both being collectivist—differ in how emotional messages are processed. Japan, a high-context culture, favors implicit cues and symbolic narratives. Emotional branding in this context is delivered through aesthetic subtlety, visual harmony, and culturally embedded storytelling [12]. Japanese Gen Z consumers respond more positively to restrained emotional tones and indirect expressions of brand values [27], [42].

Conversely, Indonesian Gen Z—exposed to expressive digital environments—engage with more direct emotional messaging. Emotional branding here relies on vibrant visuals, verbal appeals, and social authenticity, often channeled through influencers or peer-driven content [28], [33]. Emotional frames emphasizing inclusion, optimism, or spiritual values are more persuasive among this cohort [25], [36].

Platform use also differs. Japanese consumers favor traditional and visually refined formats, while Indonesians are highly responsive to dynamic digital content [39], [40]. Misalignment in framing—such as being too overt in Japan or too subtle in Indonesia—can reduce emotional credibility [41]. Thus, emotional branding must be calibrated to each culture's preferred mode of expression and media channel to foster genuine brand connections.Cultural values significantly shape how consumers interpret, respond to, and internalize emotional branding. For Gen Z consumers in Japan and Indonesia, distinct cultural frameworks inform how emotional appeals are processed

3.5 . Technological Mediation and Digital Touchpoints

For Gen Z consumers, emotional branding is inseparable from digital engagement. This cohort's digital nativity shapes how they perceive, interpret, and emotionally connect with brands across platforms [4], [43]. In Japan, where privacy concerns and aesthetic consistency dominate, emotional branding is most successful when embedded in well-curated digital experiences—such as brand storytelling through minimalist web design, subtle animations, and immersive virtual content [44], [45]. Japanese Gen Z tends to engage passively but expect seamless digital narratives that maintain emotional elegance.

In contrast, Indonesian Gen Z exhibits high levels of interactive digital engagement, favoring emotional branding that is participatory, expressive, and socially integrated. Campaigns that use TikTok challenges, influencer storytelling, and emotive memes often succeed in cultivating loyalty through communal experiences and personal relevance [46], [47]. Emotional connection here is co-created, with digital touchpoints acting as spaces for identity expression and peer affirmation [48], [49].

These findings suggest that the same emotional message requires different technological translations: refined immersion for Japan and dynamic interaction for Indonesia. The emotional brand experience, when mediated appropriately through digital channels, strengthens affective loyalty by aligning with each culture's digital habits and symbolic expectations [50], [51].

4. Conclusion

Emotional branding significantly influences customer loyalty, yet its impact is shaped by cultural values and communication norms—particularly among Generation Z in Japan and Indonesia. Japanese Gen Z consumers, rooted in high-context traditions, respond more deeply to subtle, visually symbolic branding that emphasizes harmony and understatement. Meanwhile, Indonesian Gen Z consumers favor expressive, socially connected narratives delivered through digital platforms, reflecting collectivist values and high digital engagement. These differences highlight that emotional branding must be context-sensitive, tailored not

only to generational traits but also to the cultural frameworks through which emotions are interpreted and expressed.

This study extends existing theories of emotional branding by integrating cross-cultural psychology and generational studies, emphasizing the need for culturally nuanced branding strategies. For practitioners, the findings reinforce the importance of localizing emotional narratives across different markets while maintaining authenticity. Future research should test these insights through empirical, cross-national comparisons and examine how digital tools—such as AI-driven personalization or immersive media—shape emotional engagement across cultures. Understanding these dynamics will be key to developing emotionally resonant and globally adaptive brand strategies.

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