

Emotional Narratives and Customer Loyalty: A Case Study of Aēsop

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Abstract: In the competitive market, emotional-healing brands lack sufficient academic research on how to build customer loyalty through emotional narratives. Taking Aēsop, a representative skincare brand of emotional-healing type, as the research object, this study adopts interpretivism as the research philosophy and single case study as the research design, with semi-structured interviews and observational research for data collection and thematic analysis for data analysis. It explores the ways and mechanisms of Aēsop's use of emotional narratives to establish emotional connections with consumers and maintain long-term customer loyalty, aiming to fill the research gap of emotional-healing brands and provide practical insights for the industry.

Keywords: Emotional Narratives; Customer Loyalty; Aēsop; Emotional-Healing Brands; Brand Storytelling

1. Introduction

In today's competitive marketplace, emotional storytelling is considered a key tool for establishing long-term customer loyalty[1]. For instance, the sports brand NIKE has established strong brand loyalty by telling stories that encourage self-empowerment, while the high-tech brand Apple conveys innovation and emotional resonance through its brand stories and product designs [2,3]. Although how these brands strengthen customer loyalty through emotional narratives has been studied, emotional-healing brands, as an emerging category, have not garnered sufficient academic attention. Emotionally healing brands primarily connect with consumers through emotional care, well-being, and self-care, thereby differentiating themselves from traditional brands that often compete on functionality and price [4]. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by examining how emotionally healing brands use emotional narratives to retain customer loyalty.

Aēsop, a renowned skincare brand, fosters strong brand loyalty through its emotional brand narratives and distinctive in-store experience, conveying values of self-care and emotional healing [5]. Therefore, Aēsop is an ideal case study for this research.

Therefore, the portfolio's research question is: How does Aēsop use emotional narratives to retain customer loyalty? The objectives of the portfolio are, first, to explore the aspects and mechanisms by which the brand creates emotional connections with consumers, and second, to investigate how emotional narratives help Aēsop achieve long-term success in building brand loyalty.

2. Research Philosophy

In this study, I have chosen Interpretivism as the research philosophy. Interpretivism asserts that social phenomena are constructed from individuals' subjective experiences and emotions, and understanding these phenomena requires deep insight into individuals' perspectives, feelings, and social contexts.

The theoretical framework of Interpretivism emphasises a deep understanding of human behaviour, emotions, and social interactions, rather than simply relying on quantitative analysis. According to Lucarelli et al.[6], the interpretivist approach has unique value in consumer research because it reveals the emotional connections and social meanings behind consumer behaviour. This approach is particularly suited to studying emotional-healing brands, as the emotional connections between brands and consumers are deep and subjective.

From an interpretivist perspective, this research will examine how Aēsop, as an emotional-healing brand, uses its brand storytelling and emotional consumer experiences to foster emotional identification and retain customer loyalty. As Ponelis [7] points out, interpretivism is well-suited to exploratory research, particularly when there are few existing models, and the study aims to

understand human experiences.

3. Research Design

This study adopts a Case Study as the research design. A case study is a qualitative research method that is suitable for exploratory research, particularly when the research questions aim to deeply understand “how” or “why” phenomena occur. Through case studies, researchers can analyse a single case or multiple cases to uncover the underlying mechanisms of complex phenomena. In this study, how emotional-healing brands use emotional storytelling to retain customer loyalty remains underexplored. The case study design allows us to explore how Aēsop builds emotional connections with consumers and sustains long-term brand loyalty through brand stories and emotional narratives.

Case study design enables the collection of in-depth information from interactions between the brand and consumers, which helps us understand how consumers perceive emotional storytelling and how these narratives influence their emotional responses and loyalty. According to Rashid et al. [8], case study methods are well-suited to exploring complex social phenomena, particularly when researchers seek to understand the motivations, emotions, and meanings underlying consumer behaviour. For emotional-healing brands, emotional storytelling and brand stories are key drivers of consumer emotions and loyalty; a case study provides an appropriate framework for investigating these dynamics.

Furthermore, focusing on a single case allows the research to concentrate resources on deeper analysis. By studying Aēsop, we can examine in greater detail the relationship among brand storytelling, emotional narratives, and consumer loyalty, rather than merely surface-level brand performance. A single-case study eliminates the complexity of comparing multiple brands, thereby allowing greater control over the study's scope and depth and yielding more actionable, generalizable findings. The representativeness of Aēsop in the emotional-healing brand sector makes this study valuable not only for understanding the brand's success factors but also for providing practical insights for the broader industry. Therefore, selecting Aēsop as the case study aligns with the research objectives and effectively helps us understand the practical applications of emotional storytelling in

managing consumer loyalty within emotional-healing brands.

4. Data Collection

To explore the research question of how emotional-healing brands use emotional storytelling to retain customer loyalty, this study will employ two data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and observational research. These methods complement each other and provide in-depth insights into the emotional connection between consumers and the Aēsop brand.

4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are a flexible data collection method that allows researchers to ask predefined questions while remaining responsive to participants' responses. It is widely recognised as an effective method for collecting data on participants' experiences and motivations, making them ideal for exploring consumers' emotional reactions to brand storytelling [9]. This study will use semi-structured interviews to explore how consumers perceive brand storytelling and emotional narratives, and how these emotional connections influence brand loyalty.

Participants will be selected through purposive sampling to ensure they are loyal Aēsop consumers with a strong emotional connection to the brand. The study plans to interview 10-15 participants to provide a representative sample and capture a range of emotional experiences.

The primary data collection tool will be the interview guide, as shown in Appendix 1, which includes open-ended questions on core research themes, such as brand storytelling, emotional experiences, and brand loyalty. Interviews will be recorded using audio recording equipment for later transcription and analysis. The transcription tools will be used to convert the interview recordings into text, ensuring the accuracy and completeness of the data.

4.2 Observation

According to Gill et al. [10], Observation can document consumer behaviours in real settings, providing data that complements interview findings. We will use observation as a supplementary data-collection method. The researcher will conduct non-participant observation in 2-3 Aēsop stores to record consumers' behaviours, emotional reactions, and

interactions with the brand's storytelling and store design.

The researcher will observe 2-3 Aēsop stores to ensure a diverse sample of consumer behaviours. Each observation will last 1-2 hours, and the researcher will focus on consumers' in-store emotional reactions and behaviours, recording significant interactions.

During the observation, the researcher will use the observation checklist in Appendix 2 to systematically record consumer behaviours and emotional responses. The checklist will include specific items, such as consumer interactions, emotional responses, and purchasing behaviours, to ensure the completeness and consistency of the data. If necessary, the researcher will also use video-recording tools to capture nonverbal behaviours, such as facial expressions and body language, thereby providing a richer dataset for analysis.

5. Data Analysis

To analyse the collected data, this study will employ Thematic Analysis as the primary method. Through thematic analysis, researchers can extract key themes related to emotional experiences, brand identification, and loyalty from interviews, observations, and other data, thereby uncovering how Aēsop employs emotional storytelling to sustain customer loyalty.

We chose Thematic Analysis as the primary method because it can handle complex emotional data in Aēsop's brand storytelling. Through thematic analysis, we will identify consumer responses and emotional reactions to brand narratives and how these reactions influence their loyalty. Thematic Analysis will help extract core themes related to brand stories, emotional experiences, and loyalty motivations, and through in-depth analysis of these themes, explore how consumers form emotional connections with the brand through storytelling. According to Mishra & Dey [11], thematic analysis plays a crucial role in case study research by systematically uncovering complex social phenomena through in-depth analysis of a few cases.

Since this study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy, Thematic Analysis aligns well with this approach. Interpretivism emphasises understanding individuals' subjective experiences and emotions, and Thematic Analysis helps researchers focus on emotions

and the construction of meaning within the data, thereby enabling them to know how participants perceive and respond emotionally to brand narratives. This approach allows the researcher to capture the underlying meanings of consumers' emotional responses to brand storytelling and how these emotions translate into brand loyalty.

6. Ethical Considerations

Firstly, anonymity & confidentiality. Participants use pseudonyms. All personal identifiers in interview and observation data are deleted to protect privacy. Secondly, informed consent. Preparing a clear consent form ahead of time, stating the research purpose, data use, and withdrawal rights. Participants sign only after a complete understanding has been reached. Thirdly, maintaining data security ensures that data is accessible only to researchers and is stored on encrypted platforms. Storage location and access rights are strictly controlled to comply with regulations. Finally, the conflict-of-interest avoidance includes refraining from commercial cooperation with Aēsop and maintaining neutrality. It adheres to academic integrity and does not collect sensitive information.

7. Conclusion

This study takes Aēsop as a single case to explore the application of emotional narratives in building customer loyalty for emotional-healing brands. Based on interpretivist analysis of interview and observation data via thematic analysis, it is clear that Aēsop constructs deep emotional connections with consumers through brand storytelling and immersive in-store experience centering on self-care and emotional healing. These emotional narratives shape consumers' brand identification and further convert it into long-term loyalty. The research verifies the effectiveness of emotional narratives in the operation of emotional-healing brands, filling the relevant academic research gap. Meanwhile, the research findings provide actionable references for other emotional-healing brands to build customer loyalty through emotional narratives. Limitations exist as the study is a single case, and follow-up research can expand the sample scope to multiple emotional-healing brands for comparative analysis to improve the generalizability of conclusions.

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Appendix A

The Interview Guide for the semi-structured interview.

Interview Questions:

Brand Story Recognition:

1. Can you describe your first impression of Aēsop as a brand? (e.g., brand name, logo, advertisements, etc.)

2. Can you remember any specific brand stories or advertisements by Aēsop? What impression did they leave on you?

Emotional Experience:

1. Do you feel that Aēsop products and the brand convey the philosophy of "emotional healing" or "self-care"? Could you describe an experience in which you felt a strong emotional connection while shopping?

2. When purchasing Aēsop products, do you feel an emotional connection with the brand? Can you describe your feelings?

Brand Loyalty:

1. Would you continue buying from Aēsop because of its brand story or emotional experience? If yes, can you explain why?

2. Compared with other brands, do you think Aēsop's brand story resonates more with you? Why?

Brand Suggestions:

1. What do you think Aēsop does exceptionally well, and where could they improve?

2. If given the opportunity, how would you suggest Aēsop strengthen its emotional connection with consumers?

Appendix B

Observation Checklist

Observation Time	Observation Location	Observation Data
2 hours	Suzhou Center (Store Aēsop)	October 10, 2025

Consumer Behaviour Observation:

1. Emotional Reaction upon Entering the Store:

- Observe the consumer's facial expressions and body language upon entering the store.

- Do they appear excited, curious, relaxed, or display other emotional states?

2. Interaction with Store Displays:

- Do consumers interact with the displayed products or areas? (e.g., touch products, stay in certain areas)

- Do they linger in areas related to brand stories or emotional narratives?

3. Purchase Decision Process:

- Do consumers exhibit emotional reactions or choose products related to brand stories or emotional value when making a purchase?

4. Emotional Reaction Upon Leaving the Store:

- What emotional state do consumers exhibit when leaving? Do they seem satisfied, happy, or eager to return?

Non-verbal Responses:

1. Facial Expressions:

- Observe consumers' facial expressions while interacting with brand displays or products—do these expressions reflect emotional resonance?

2. Body Language:

- Observe their posture and actions, such as whether they frequently touch items or show interest.

Appendix C

Data Analysis Steps

This study will use Thematic Analysis as the data analysis method. Below are the specific steps for data analysis.

1. Data Preparation:

All interview recordings will be transcribed into text files, and observation notes will be organised. Ensure all data is prepared for analysis.

2. Data Coding:

During the preliminary analysis, the researcher will use open coding to identify key data on brand storytelling, emotional responses, loyalty, and other relevant topics.

3. Theme Identification:

By comparing coded data, the researcher will identify recurring themes. These may include “emotional connections,” “impact of brand storytelling,” “loyalty motivations,” etc.

4. Theme Refinement and Comparison:

The researcher will further refine the identified themes and compare participants' responses to examine variations in emotional responses and loyalty motivations.

5. Conclusion Synthesis:

Finally, the researcher will synthesise the themes and findings to conclude how Aēsop uses emotional storytelling to retain customer loyalty.