

# *The Formation Path of Brand Premium under the New Media Narrative Mechanism: A Case Study of Atour Planet*

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**Abstract.** In the digital media environment, brand competition has gradually shifted from the product and price levels to the consumer mindset level. Social media platforms have also transformed from information dissemination channels into important Spaces for brands to express content and construct meaning. Against this backdrop, some emerging brands no longer rely on "high cost performance", but instead enhance their brand value through lifestyle narratives. This article takes Atour Planet as a case and adopts the methods of literature analysis and case analysis to construct an analytical framework of "brand narrative - consumer mindset - behavioral transformation - brand premium". Research has found that brands can promote consumers to form emotional identification and brand association through emotional content and scene narratives, and gradually build trust in social interactions, thereby driving them to complete behavioral transformation along the path of "attention - interest - search - purchase - share". Research shows that the formation of brand premium does not solely rely on product attributes, but rather stems from the degree to which the brand occupies a position in consumers' minds.

**Keywords:** new media narrative, brand premium, consumer mindset, AISAS model, brand trust

## **1. Introduction**

The current study is based on the potential of the emerging brands to develop their brands, actualize brand value, and even brand premiumization, within the digital media surroundings. Nowadays, brand competition is no longer directly about products and prices, but it is the struggle who gets into the minds of the consumers first. The manner in which brands are communicated has changed notably especially when brands are dealing with the highly developed social media platforms. These platforms are channels of disseminating information as well as spaces of importance that brands can use to put content across and create meaning.

However, over the recent years there are other emergent brands who no longer focus on high cost performance, but rather add value to the brand through building lifestyle stories. It is common to find that such brands have continued to generate certain life visions in the social media, thus, to shape the interpretation and grading of the brand by consumers.

Under the context of the given background, this paper begins with the marketing communication requirements of new brands, synthesizes the attributes of new media platforms, and modifications in

the cognitive trajectory of consumers, and so tries to develop a path model upon which brands should pursue a brand-level enhancement by means of new media narrative. Atour Planet is used as the object of the research in this paper. It pioneered its products with the hotel-like products as a selling point, but slowly enhanced emotional and lifestyle manifestations through sleep aesthetics and healing spaces and attained dissemination and distribution on social media platforms creating a kind of internet celebrity effect of influence on the consumer.

Regarding research methods, the methods that have predominantly been applied in this paper are literature analysis and case analysis. The path model created is outlined and approved by means of the classification and examination of theories and practical instances. Finally, the paper will elaborate on how Atour Planet applies the new media narrative practices to manipulate the cognitive process of consumers and attain brand premiumization formation.

## 2. Literature review

Brand premium and brand equity are issues that the academic community in the global arena has given attention to at a relatively early stage. The theory of brand equity was the initial one to be proposed by Aaker. Keller also indicated in the customer-based brand equity theory that brand value is as a result of the brand knowledge structure inherent in the mind of consumers such as brand awareness and brand image. The brand is able to attain greater market value and premium capacity when the consumers develop favorable and distinct brand associations with the brands. The academic fraternity has expanded upon the concept of brand equity in the past few years. Pina and Dias indicated in systematic literature review that connotation of brand equity is slowly reversing towards a dynamic mechanism of construction, which is dominated by the perception, emotional experiences, and interaction processes by consumers. This change shows that brand value is no longer purely a creation of the product itself, but will be a set of cognitive and emotional capital that customers develop as a consequence of the constant experience with the brand. This tendency is more apparent in the new media communication environment. Brands keep on advancing user experience by content narrative, situational expression, which makes brand equity construction increasingly reliant on emotional identification and mental positioning such that it offers a platform through which brand premium can be achieved [1].

The role of content and symbols in the brand image construction is the subject of growing number of studies in the discipline of brand communication. Lifestyle narrative is considered as one of the significant approaches, which give brands more powerful symbolic meanings through being integrated into everyday life situations. Holt suggested the cultural brand theory under a cultural side stating that brands can give identity and cultural meaning to consumers as a result of the narrative and social cultural context. This meaning-making ability allows developing stronger emotional bonding with the consumers and brands, and hence brand value [2].

The AISAS model is very common in describing the consumer behavior line in the digital communication environment. AISAS has two additional stages, Search and Share compared to the classical AIDA model, which are more consistent with the consumption peculiarities in the social media setting. Recent research has indicated that KOL communication and user-generated material in social media may immensely increase brand trust and purchase intention [3]. Meanwhile, the role of the emotional aspects in the consumer decision making is becoming slowly more crucial, and emotional identification is now a significant variable to determine consumer behavior [4].

Nevertheless, the current studies use AISAS model primarily in the view of e-commerce conversion or advertising performance, and only infrequently in conjunction with the development mechanism of brand premium. Thus, this paper tries to joint the new media narrative process to the

AISAS model, beginning with the route of consumer mental shift, to make a systematic examination of the formation procedure of brand premium.

### **3. Theoretical foundation and research framework**

In the context of new media communication, the formation of brand value no longer solely depends on product functions, but rather more on the cognitive and emotional construction process in consumers' minds. To systematically analyze how new media narratives affect brand premium, this paper, based on brand asset theory, brand community theory, and new media communication research, constructs an analytical framework of "new media narrative - consumer mind - brand premium".

#### **3.1. Theoretical foundation**

##### **3.1.1. Brand equity theory**

Aaker.D.A. pointed out that brand equity is a collection of assets and liabilities related to the brand name, and these elements can either increase or decrease the value that products or services create for enterprises and consumers. Among them, brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty are the core dimensions that constitute brand equity. Brand premium essentially stems from the accumulation of brand equity, and the core of brand equity lies in the brand associations and cognitive structures in consumers' minds. Therefore, understanding brand premium requires an analysis from the perspective of consumer cognition.

##### **3.1.2. Brand community theory**

In the new media environment, the construction of brand meaning has gradually shifted from being dominated by enterprises to being participated by consumers. Albert and Thomas proposed the concept of "Brand Community", arguing that a brand community is a social relationship structure based on the brand, and its core characteristics include common consciousness, rituals and traditions, as well as moral responsibility [5]. In the social media environment, consumers participate in the construction of brand communities by sharing, commenting and interacting, thereby engaging in the process of constructing brand meaning. This process strengthens consumers' identification with the brand value, easily generating trust, satisfaction and a sense of belonging, transforming from consumer psychology to participant psychology, and is likely to further influence consumers' purchasing decisions.

##### **3.1.3. New media brand communication theory**

With the development of new media, the way of brand communication has undergone significant changes. "Social media has transformed the way brands communicate, enabling interactive and co-creative engagement with consumers." Dwivedi pointed out that social media has shifted brand communication from a one-way transmission model to an interactive and co-creative process [6].

The characteristics and functions of new media can clearly meet the needs of brand interaction and co-creation. Firstly, interactivity and co-creativity: It breaks the traditional media's "one-way transmission" model, shifting information dissemination from "sender-receiver" to "two-way interaction". Therefore, users are not only recipients of information, but also producers and disseminators of content [7]. Secondly, decentralization: Information is no longer monopolized by a

few media institutions, but spreads and re-produces through multiple entities on the network platform. Both ordinary users and content creators can become communication nodes. New media, with its main features of interactivity and co-creativity, decentralization, makes it more convenient for consumers to use functions and also changes the way of brand communication, providing the prerequisite conditions for the production of content narratives, and helping brands shift from functional information transmission to the construction of lifestyle and emotional significance.

### 3.1.4. Consumer behavior transformation mechanism

The consumer behavior pattern has changed in large proportions in the context of new media. The conventional AIDMA model can no longer be used to analyze consumer decision making process in digital media environment. Using the AISAS model (Attention -Interest-Search-Action-Share), it is employed to explain the whole process of transformation of consumers in the internet environment after receiving the information to acting on it.

Attention (Attention): This is where consumers are exposed to the brand content through the flow of information.

Interest (Interest): Get first interest in the brand or the product.

Search (Search): Resort to the seeking of further information.

Action (Action): Finalize the buying process.

Share (Share): Diffuse the experience of usage via social media.

### 3.2. Research framework

It is against this background that the present paper suggests the following research framework: Within the new media communication, brands create consumption meanings, with the aid of narrative mechanisms, and, finalize the transformation process between cognition and emotion to the behavior, through the mental path of the consumer. Behavior sharing will also be involved in the replication of brand meanings thereby creating a cycle of reinforcement and eventually enhancing the creation of brand premium.

The model is as follows: Figure 1.

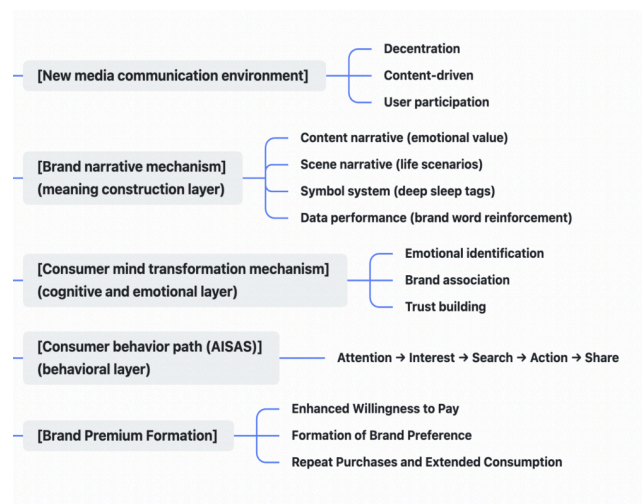


Figure 1. The formation mechanism of brand premium

## 4. Case analysis: narrative mechanism of Atour Planet

### 4.1. Content narration

For Atour Planet, new media communication has not involved the tradition of communicating through the lines of the product functions as applied in the previous home textile brand. Rather, it has created a lifestyle story using such keywords as relaxation and healing, and related the products to the dream lifestyle.

Atour Planet links its products to the social cultural backgrounds like family reunions and emotional care by using the theme of Sleep well, and the whole year will be great during the marketing period of the Spring Festival. The communication by the brand is carried out in different forms of media like TV commercials during the New Year, music content, and helps to transform the initially personalized behavior of sleeping into an expression of emotion with social meaning. Here the consumers are initially drawn to the festive atmosphere (Attention), then develop interest in the form of emotional resonance, and buy the products to use as a gift in the actual consumption (Action). Meanwhile, they also disseminate similar content in social platforms (Share), thereby establishing a course of behavior of emotion-driven purchase - social dissemination and diffusion.

According to reception of emotions, Atour Planet further converts the product functionality to particular usage experience by classifying the life circumstances, thus improving the sense of immersion of the users.

Besides online content, other offline experience projects such as Deep Sleep Paradise, among other ones, are also practiced in order to transform the product functions to visible spatial scenes offered by Atour Planet. The brand is also augmented by encouraging user engagement through offline activations and interactivity installations and achieves content distribution by (check-in) dispersion on the short-video platforms. On completion of the experience, consumers tend to replicate their actions (Share) subsequently to be part of the spreading which enables the brand information to be dispersed among users in a second round.

### 4.2. Scene narration

Adotopia is not anchored on one communication node; rather, it is consistent in creating brand narratives in a variety of time dimensions. An example is that in the spring festival it is focused on emotional attachment; in summer it is focused on comfort; when dealing with daily contents it focuses on mental relaxation with theme like night reading. This multi-timepoint content strategy makes the brand to be visible at various points in the lives of consumers always thus building up its presence.

The behavioral pathways of consumers also exhibit the corresponding adjustments in other situations: in the situation of festival, they tend to be involved in the more emotionally-oriented buying practices; in the seasonal case, they are experiencing more about how to use the product; and in the daily content, they are inclined to compute rational judgments based on search and comparison. Contextual content has been demonstrated to produce noteworthy effects on the user levels of immersion and conversion, and this may be one of the factors leading to the effectiveness of the communication of Adotopia in the multi-scenario narratives.

### 4.3. Symbol system

This study expresses that within new media, the symbolic representations within the consumption space have the potential of affecting the consumer comprehension and emotional experience of the brand. Such symbols are present both in the offline environment and constantly being multiplied by visual representations on the site, producing a powerful impact on the brand acknowledgment and emotional bond of the consumers [8].

Designed in terms of color, Atour Planet favors a blue and white color scheme to be used to create the atmosphere of relaxation and tranquility; offline environments and content images also render the sense of comfort and silentness by means of simple designs. This visual representation is given severally in several transmissions, which creates a consistent impression to the consumers.

On the language level, the brand is constantly reaffirming itself on keywords like deep sleep, relaxation, and goes further with the idea of Deep Sleep Paradise and Caring or Sleep, making deep sleep not an object feature of the product, but now a lifestyle brand. In the process, as the consumers are exposed to the content associated with it, they will slowly develop the association that deep sleep = relaxation = Atour thus giving preference to this brand in further decisions.

### 4.4. Data performance

Based on information analysis, the search popularity of the brand name, Atour Planet, has gradually become higher than the popularity of any given product names, as a result of which the consumers have transitioned to using the term not to search products but to search brand names in the process of information acquisition. This shift indicates the elevated reputation of the brand to the minds of consumers.

On contents hosting platforms like rednote, many users post their experience of use in the form of pictures, texts and short videos creating an endless UGC (User-Generated Content) deluge. The content ecosystem generated through user participation does not only increase the scope of communication of the brand, but it also increases the trust transmission among the consumers to some degree. Through integrating the respective research of both iiMedia Research and Kantar BrandZ Global Brand Equity Report, one may discover the fact that, when consumers are inclined to select brands bearing transparent lifestyle markings and emotive value manifestations in decision-making, as opposed to judging them on the basis of functional qualities [9]. Thus brands that possess distinct emotional worth and lifestyle manifestations possess greater likelihood of developing differentiated cognition in the minds of the buyers, thus attaining premium capabilities [10].

## 5. The formation path of brand premium in new media narratives

### 5.1. The new media communication environment

This relates to the new media environment of communication that will be introduced in the course of the project.

Within the new media communication framework, dissemination of information has taken place in a platform based and decentralized format, and brand capture of consumers attention has been altered to include no longer ad placement but content competition. New forms of forms like short videos and graphic content promotion have assumed the chief role as carriers of disseminating information. The role of content goes beyond the purpose of transmitting information to form a significant basis of constructing brand meaning.

Meanwhile, users of the communication process have changed considerably and now are an active participant and the producer of the content. Brand stories are co-created by the users via comments, sharing and content writing and are always contributing and redefining brand meaning in new situations. The social media interaction mechanism increases the participation of the user, which contributes to greater brand trust. Thus, brand communication in the new media is based not only on the content, but also on the trust building process created through the participation of the user.

## 5.2. Brand narrative mechanism

Brands collectively create consumption meaning with the help of the new media environment in terms of both content narrative and scene narrative. On the one hand, the content narrative is focused on the emotional value that positions products in the ideal life conditions with the terms like deep sleep and relaxation, in this way, allowing transcending of the functional qualities. Conversely, scene narrative describes particular situations in life so that consumers can experience their lives in the content and as such make them easier to identify, hence, improving the feeling of immersion.

In a study of the effects of the stories on consumers it was mentioned by Escalas: "Narratives enable self-referencing and enable consumers to relate brand meanings with their lives" [11]. This means that stories are capable of eliciting self reference, which allows consumers to correlate brand meanings to their experiences. Thus, the construction of particular scenes, including the baby kicking blankets and staying in stuffy bed are applied in Atour Planet to assist consumers in self identification process as they learn the information to enhance the effectiveness of the conversion of the material.

Using emotional narrative may result in the consumer more likely to create emotional resonance and also affect their consumption decision making. This conclusion means that a brand evokes feelings stimulating with the content is more likely to prompt the consumption of positive attitudes by the consumers, which translate into the actual purchase behavior. Thus, there is theoretical support of Atour Planet that encourages conversion to consumption by expressing feelings at the festivals and nodes.

In the ongoing dissemination, brands become more or less stable in terms of symbol system in both successful visual and verbal repetition. To which, as the main idea, deep sleep is constantly doing operations, evolving it not only as a product functionality but as a label of a way of life. This function has, in actual sense, lowered the cognitive expenditure of the consumers thus facilitating them to have direct associations to the brand when they are confronted with a similar need without necessarily reassessing the commodity, thus enhancing the efficiency of making a decision.

## 5.3. Consumer mindset transformation mechanism

Consumers under the protracted pressure of the narrative mechanism first form an emotional connotation where the lifestyle mirrored by the brand is linked to the needs of the consumers. This is another step of moving past being known to acceptance of the brand. Fournier in theory of brand relationship said: The consumers develop a relationship with their brands that are similar to interpersonal relationship. This view stresses the fact that a similar emotional connection to interpersonal relations may be established between the consumers and the brands. Thus, once the consumers become aware of the so-called deep - sleep lifestyle, the process of establishing the relationship between consumers and the brand begins. The more frequently they interact, the more the consumers will get used to stable brand associations, where their concepts like deep sleep will be

associated with particular brands. This associative system helps the brand take a favourable stance in the decision making process of the consumers, which enhances its competitive advantage.

Trust, in its turn, is gradually built on the emotional identification and brand association. Although on the one hand, the predictability of the brand in this or that situation minimizes the uncertainty of information, on the other hand, this sharing among users and recommendations of KOLs provides the so-called social evidence and strengthens trust. The creation of the mindset of consumers is not only dependent in terms of rational consideration, but also influenced by emotions and social ambience. According to Luo Yuanyuan in her study of the phenomenon of the wild consumption, emotional resonance and social identification can have a strong positive impact on the intention to be involved and purchasing behavior of consumers. The new media environment constantly fuels this emotion - mediated process with social propagation, therefore, intensifying the brand cognition to behavior conversion process [12]. Moreover, Chaudhuri and Holbrook also pointed out: Brand trust results into purchase loyalty, as well as attitudinal loyalty [13]. This study indicates that individual brand trust does not only impact the purchase behavior, but also the attitude loyalty of consumers. Thus, once loyalty is achieved, consumers turn out to be more inclined to keep using the brand and to develop a preference in the long term.

#### **5.4. Consumer behavior path**

The change in the mindset results in consumer behavior following a standard AISAS route. Emotional and situation related contents first attract the attention and generate interest of the users. Next, customers take an active role by undertaking searches of information based on their needs including the analysis of assessment and usage experiences. This process is an indication of a transition between inactive acquisition of information by consumers and active one. Upon the process of information verification, consumers engage in purchasing behaviour and share through dissemination. This study indicates that success of brand communication is becoming more and more dependent on the mechanism of user participation and content diffusion. This process will help in increasing perception of consumers and emotional attachment towards the brand that will help them change their behavior. User-generated content does not limit its influence over the brand but also provides references to other consumers, thereby creating a mechanism of purchase - share - further influence [14].

#### **5.5. Brand premium formation**

Based on the recognition and trust, the price sensitivity of the consumers will gradually decrease to the brand and one will be more inclined to purchase the brand which is reflected in terms of being willing to pay more and maintaining the same brand preference. The research of Chaudhuri and Holbrook indicates that brand trust and brand loyalty are correlated directly, and this is also a significant basis to premium of the brand.

The closer a brand relationship, the less the consumers restrict themselves to a single purchase but tend to move towards a repetitive purchase and many category consumption. Such a process indicates the shift in a transactional kind of relations to the long-term relations that the consumers have with the brand. Integrating the perspectives of Fournier, such a relationship construction transforms the brand into not only the provider of the product but rather a part of the lifestyle of the consumer, hence supporting the further sustenance of the brand premium.

## 6. Conclusion

The present research takes the example of the Atour Planet. It is a systematic analysis on the path of realization of the change of the brand towards a premium - oriented mindset within the context of the new - media communication environment. The research results reveal that product functions and price advantages do not have a direct effect on the development of brand premium. Rather, it is a slow process gained through the brand narrative - consumer mind - behavioral transformation.

More precisely, by means of content narrative, scene narrative, and a system of symbols that is functioning as the initial constructions of the consumption meaning the brand is able to turn the product into not only an object of functionality but also a meaningful carrier, which carries the connotation of lifestyle and emotional importance. It is based on this that consumers slowly acquire emotional identification, brand associations, and the trust based on the behavioral change cycle of attention, interest to search, purchase and sharing (Within the AISAS path). A closer examination of brand premium as a phenomenon helps to realize that the meaning of brand premium does not lie in its elevation through higher prices but shifts in the position of the brand in the mind of the consumer. Once the brand is able to create a consistent emotional resonance within the consumer base and develop well defined cognitive designations, the price elasticity among the consumers will considerably drop and the willingness to pay will soar as well as preference of the brand and repeat purchases. Thus, brand premium formation is actually a journey of change of meaning construction to relations establishment.

New - media communication platforms have a significant supporting role in this direction. On the one hand, the communication structure is decentralized and content-produced, which enables the brand to develop a long-term relationship with consumers due to the constant production of content. Conversely, brand narratives are liberated by the user participation and content co - creation mechanism and no longer exist as a one way expression of the enterprise. Rather they are repeatedly reinforced and extended in the process of interaction.

The new media platforms have become the source of information dissemination as well as significant arenas of trust construction. Brand information creates multiple - point verification in social networks based on KOL recommendations and user -generated content (UGC), therefore, minimizing the indecision in the decision - making process of consumers. In the meantime, it is believed that the amplification properties of platform algorithm to high -quality content can have a disproportionate effect on content with emotional connection and scene immersion to be shared, thus thereby hastening the creation of brand awareness.

Despite the fact that this paper produces a systematic discussion of the brand premium formation path founded on the case studies, it has some limitations. First, the study is mostly founded on the single case of research and there is no cross - branding of the research, this makes the generalizability of findings to be yet to be verified. Second, limited time and data acquisition conditions did not allow the AISAS path to be quantitatively tested in this paper by questionnaires or in experiments, and the reasons behind some of the mechanisms remain mostly a matter of deductions.

Further research can be developed in several dimensions in the future. On the one hand, to investigate the association between brand narratives and consumer behavior, empirical tests may be performed based on either questionnaire surveys or behavioral data analysis. Alternatively, comparative research can be performed to investigate the differences in applicability of this strategy across different products by offering different types of brands.

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