

A Structural Equation Model of Causal Factors Influencing Brand Loyalty toward Functional Beverages among Generation Z Consumers in Bangkok

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Received : Jan 28, 2026 Revised : May 11, 2026 Accepted : May 19, 2026

Abstract

This study develops and empirically tests a structural equation model (SEM) to examine the causal factors influencing brand loyalty toward functional beverages among Generation Z consumers in Bangkok. Drawing on relationship marketing and experiential marketing theories, the proposed model investigates the effects of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and brand experience on brand trust and brand loyalty, while exploring the mediating role of brand trust. Data were collected from 300 Generation Z consumers in Bangkok who had consumed functional beverages within the past six months using a multi-stage sampling technique. Structural Equation Modeling was employed to analyze the hypothesized relationships.

The findings indicate that brand experience plays a central role in driving brand loyalty, both directly and indirectly through brand trust. This suggests that experiential interactions influence both immediate responses and long-term commitment through trust. In contrast, eWOM demonstrates a limited and inconsistent role; it does not significantly influence brand trust and exhibits a significant negative effect on brand loyalty, suggesting that exposure to online information may encourage comparison rather than reinforce commitment.

These results highlight the importance of distinguishing between experiential and informational mechanisms in understanding consumer behavior. In the context of functional beverages, where perceived risk is higher, consumers appear to rely more on experiential validation than on externally generated information. The study contributes by clarifying the differential roles of these mechanisms and by showing that brand trust functions as an effective mediator primarily in experience-driven pathways. The findings also suggest that firms should prioritize authentic and consistent brand experiences to build sustainable brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers in Bangkok.

Keywords: Functional beverages, Electronic word of mouth, Brand experience, Brand trust, Brand loyalty

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Over the past decade, consumer behavior has undergone significant transformation, particularly among Generation Z consumers. Commonly defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2009 (Kotler et al., 2021), this cohort has grown up in a highly digitalized environment characterized by constant connectivity, rapid information exchange, and extensive exposure to online content. As a result, Generation Z consumers are technologically proficient, information-oriented, and increasingly concerned with personal health and well-being.

Compared with previous generations, Generation Z places greater emphasis on the functional and health-related benefits of products, particularly those associated with physical performance, cognitive enhancement, immunity, and overall wellness (Innova Market Insights, 2025; McKinsey & Company, 2025). This generation also demonstrates extensive pre-purchase information search behavior and relies heavily on peer-generated content, such as online reviews and social media discussions, reflecting a strong demand for authenticity, transparency, and credibility in marketing communication.

Within this context, functional beverages have emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments in the global health and wellness market. These products, defined as non-alcoholic drinks enriched with bioactive ingredients that provide health benefits beyond basic nutrition (Gupta et al., 2023), have experienced rapid growth driven by increasing health awareness and preventive consumption trends. Recent industry evidence indicates that this growth continues globally and is also reflected in Thailand, particularly in urban markets such as Bangkok, where consumers have greater access to health-related products and digital information channels (Euromonitor International, 2025; Kasikorn Research Center, 2024).

Despite this rapid expansion, brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers remains relatively unstable. This group is characterized by low switching costs, a preference for variety, and limited long-term attachment to brands (Fromm & Read, 2018). In health-related product categories such as functional beverages, perceived risk further complicates loyalty formation, increasing the importance of trust and experiential evaluation in consumer decision-making processes (Na et al., 2023).

Existing literature identifies eWOM and brand experience as two key drivers of brand-related attitudes and behaviors. eWOM serves as a major source of online information that shapes consumer perceptions and influences decision-making in digital environments (Yadav & Rahman, 2018). At the same time, brand experience has been recognized as an important determinant of brand trust and loyalty, particularly in consumption contexts where direct interaction and perceived performance play a central role (Bae & Kim, 2023).

However, the relative roles of informational and experiential mechanisms in shaping brand loyalty remain theoretically unresolved. While eWOM is often assumed to positively influence trust and loyalty, emerging evidence suggests that its effectiveness may vary depending on context and consumer characteristics. In highly digitalized environments, excessive exposure to online information may lead to skepticism and reduced reliance on externally generated content. In contrast, experiential cues may provide more credible validation of product performance, particularly in health-related consumption contexts.

This issue is particularly salient among Generation Z consumers, who are highly exposed to digital information yet increasingly critical of its credibility. Moreover, existing research has not sufficiently examined how these mechanisms operate in health-related product categories, where perceived risk and credibility concerns play a central role. As a result, the mediating role of brand trust in translating informational and experiential inputs into brand loyalty remains insufficiently understood.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the causal relationships among eWOM, brand experience, brand trust, and brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers in Bangkok using a structural equation modeling approach. By distinguishing between informational and experiential pathways and examining the role of brand trust, this study seeks to refine existing brand loyalty models and provide a more nuanced understanding of consumer behavior in health-related and digitally saturated markets.

1.2 Research Question

What are the causal factors influencing brand loyalty toward functional beverages among Generation Z consumers in Bangkok, particularly the roles of eWOM, brand experience, and brand trust?

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are formulated to align with the proposed conceptual framework and hypothesized relationships. Specifically, the study aims to:

- 1) Examine the influence of eWOM and brand experience on brand trust among Generation Z consumers.
- 2) Investigate the direct effects of eWOM and brand experience on brand loyalty.
- 3) Examine the influence of brand trust on brand loyalty.
- 4) Investigate the mediating role of brand trust in the relationships among eWOM, brand experience, and brand loyalty.

2. Literature review and Hypothesis development

2.1 Functional beverages

Functional beverages have emerged as a prominent segment of the global health and wellness market, driven by increasing consumer emphasis on health enhancement, disease prevention, and convenient nutrition (Gupta et al., 2023). These products are characterized by the inclusion of bioactive ingredients, such as vitamins, minerals, probiotics, and botanical extracts, which provide physiological benefits beyond basic nutritional value. Such benefits include improved immune function, cognitive performance, digestive health, and overall well-being.

The expansion of this category is particularly evident among Generation Z consumers, who tend to prioritize health-oriented lifestyles and proactive self-care practices. Unlike conventional beverage products, functional beverages are often associated with performance optimization and long-term health outcomes. Consequently, consumption decisions in this category are more complex and involve higher perceived risk and uncertainty, as consumers must evaluate not only product effectiveness but also safety and credibility (Na et al., 2023).

In response to this uncertainty, consumers rely on both externally generated information and internally formed evaluations when making purchase decisions. Informational inputs derived from eWOM contribute to shaping perceptions of credibility, while experiential cues obtained through direct or indirect interactions with a brand provide

more concrete validation of product performance (Ismagilova et al., 2020). However, the relative effectiveness of these mechanisms remains insufficiently understood. This issue is particularly salient in health-related contexts, where perceived risk is higher and consumers are more cautious in evaluating product claims. The need to clarify how informational and experiential factors interact in shaping brand trust and brand loyalty therefore represents an important research gap.

2.2 Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Theoretical background

eWOM refers to consumer-generated communication through which individuals share opinions, evaluations, and experiences about products or brands via digital platforms such as social media, online communities, and review websites. In contemporary digital environments, eWOM has become a central source of information that shapes consumer perceptions and supports decision-making processes (Yadav & Rahman, 2018; Utami & Saputri, 2020).

The effectiveness of eWOM is largely influenced by key informational attributes, including source credibility, message quality, and information quantity. Credible and high-quality information can reduce uncertainty, enhance perceived reliability, and influence consumer evaluations. A larger volume of reviews may also provide richer informational cues, enabling consumers to make more informed decisions (Chen et al., 2021; Mendoza-Moreira et al., 2025).

However, the influence of eWOM is not always uniformly positive. In highly digitalized environments, consumers are exposed to large volumes of online content, which may lead to information overload and increased skepticism (Ismagilova et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant among Generation Z consumers, who tend to critically evaluate online information and may question its authenticity. As a result, the effectiveness of eWOM becomes context-dependent and may vary across product categories and consumer segments.

Relationship with other variables and hypotheses

Prior research suggests that eWOM positively influences brand trust by enhancing perceived credibility and reducing information asymmetry (Dianingtyas et al., 2021; Puteri et al., 2025; Gunawan & Wayan, 2022). When online information is perceived as reliable and useful, consumers are more likely to develop confidence in brand claims.

eWOM has been found to influence brand loyalty by reinforcing positive attitudes and encouraging repeat purchasing behavior (Doan, 2019; Siregar et al., 2021; Azis et al., 2023). Through mechanisms such as social influence and peer endorsement, eWOM can shape consumer preferences even in the absence of direct experience.

However, emerging evidence suggests that the effectiveness of eWOM becomes context-dependent (Yadav & Rahman, 2018; Ismagilova et al., 2020). In health-related product categories, consumers may require experiential validation before forming trust and loyalty, as externally generated information alone may not be sufficient. This highlights a theoretical gap regarding the relative importance of informational versus experiential mechanisms in shaping brand-related outcomes. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: eWOM positively influences brand trust.

H2: eWOM positively influences brand loyalty.

2.3 Brand experience

Theoretical background

Brand experience refers to consumers' internal responses arising from direct or indirect interactions with a brand. These responses include sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions that are triggered by brand-related stimuli such as product usage, packaging, and communication (Bae & Kim, 2023).

In contemporary consumption contexts, brand experience extends beyond direct usage to include indirect exposure through digital platforms, where consumers observe and interpret others' experiences (Tafesse, 2016; Yang et al., 2019). This broader perspective emphasizes that both direct and vicarious experiences contribute to consumer evaluation.

From a theoretical perspective, experiential mechanisms provide a more direct and credible basis for evaluation compared to informational inputs (Na et al., 2023). Unlike eWOM, which relies on externally generated content, brand experience offers tangible validation of product performance. This distinction becomes particularly important in health-related contexts, where consumers face higher perceived risk and require more reliable evidence to support decision-making.

Relationship with other variables and hypotheses

Prior research consistently demonstrates that brand experience positively influences brand trust by creating meaningful and reliable interactions between consumers and brands (Jantharaphaporn & Wanarat, 2020; Na et al., 2023; Puteri et al., 2025; Sumarmi & Wijayanti, 2023). When consumers perceive a brand as engaging and dependable, they are more likely to develop confidence in its performance.

In addition, brand experience has been shown to directly influence brand loyalty by strengthening emotional attachment and reinforcing positive evaluations (Bae & Kim, 2023; Widnyasari & Darma, 2025). These experiential interactions encourage repeat usage and long-term commitment.

Despite strong empirical support, existing literature has not clearly established the relative roles of experiential and informational mechanisms, particularly among Generation Z consumers who are highly engaged with digital content yet increasingly skeptical of its credibility. This raises the possibility that brand experience may play a more dominant role than eWOM in shaping trust and loyalty. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Brand experience positively influences brand trust.

H4: Brand experience positively influences brand loyalty.

2.4 Brand trust

Theoretical background

Brand trust refers to consumers' confidence in a brand's ability to consistently deliver reliable performance, act with integrity, and demonstrate concern for consumer well-being (Villagra et al., 2021; Na et al., 2023). Within contemporary marketing literature, trust is conceptualized as a relational construct that reflects consumers' willingness to rely on a brand under conditions of uncertainty and perceived risk.

In health-related consumption contexts, trust assumes a particularly important role due to the difficulty of evaluating product outcomes prior to consumption. As such, trust functions as a mechanism for reducing uncertainty

and facilitating stable consumer–brand relationships (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). It enables consumers to rely on brands even when complete information is unavailable, thereby supporting consistent decision-making behavior.

Recent research conceptualizes brand trust as a multidimensional construct comprising credibility, integrity, and benevolence (Villagra et al., 2021; Widnyasari & Dharma, 2025). These dimensions capture both cognitive evaluations of reliability and affective perceptions of care and sincerity, which together shape overall trust in the brand.

Relationship with other variables and hypotheses

Brand trust is widely recognized as a critical antecedent of brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Na et al., 2023). When consumers perceive a brand as trustworthy, they are more likely to develop long-term commitment, engage in repeat purchasing behavior, and resist switching to competing alternatives (Sumarmi & Wijayanti, 2023; Azis et al., 2023). By reducing perceived risk and strengthening emotional attachment, trust supports the development of enduring consumer–brand relationships.

However, the formation of brand trust may depend on the nature of its antecedents. Informational inputs derived from eWOM can provide initial signals of credibility, but their effectiveness may be constrained by issues such as information overload and skepticism (Ismagilova et al., 2020; Yadav & Rahman, 2018). In contrast, experiential cues derived from brand interactions may offer more reliable validation of product performance, particularly in risk-sensitive contexts (Na et al., 2023).

This distinction suggests that brand trust may be differentially influenced by informational and experiential mechanisms; however, existing research has not clearly established their relative importance in shaping brand loyalty. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Brand trust positively influences brand loyalty.

The mediating role of brand trust

Brand trust serves as a mediating mechanism that links both informational and experiential stimuli to the development of brand loyalty (Na et al., 2023). By reducing perceived risk, reinforcing positive evaluations, and strengthening emotional commitment, trust facilitates the translation of consumer perceptions into long-term relational outcomes (Na et al., 2023; Widnyasari & Dharma, 2025; Sang & Cuong, 2025).

Brand trust functions as a mechanism that transforms short-term evaluations into sustained relational commitment, consistent with relationship marketing theory (Na et al., 2023; Sang & Cuong, 2025). However, empirical findings remain inconclusive regarding its mediating role across informational and experiential antecedents, indicating a context-dependent effect. This gap motivates the examination of the differential mediating role of brand trust among eWOM, brand experience, and brand loyalty. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6: Brand trust mediates the relationship between eWOM and brand loyalty.

H7: Brand trust mediates the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty.

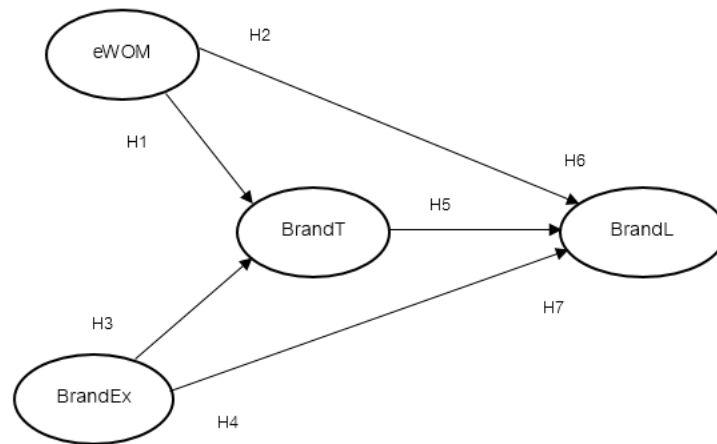


Figure 1 Conceptual framework illustrating the hypothesized relationships among eWOM, brand experience, brand trust, and brand loyalty

2.5 Research variables

This study incorporates four latent variables, classified into exogenous and endogenous constructs. The exogenous latent variables are eWOM and brand experience. eWOM consists of three dimensions: information credibility, message quality, and information quantity. Brand experience comprises four dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral experiences.

The endogenous latent variables are brand trust and brand loyalty. Brand trust includes reliability, integrity and transparency, and brand benevolence. Brand loyalty consists of two dimensions: behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Population and sample

The population of this study consists of Generation Z consumers aged 18–28 years residing in Bangkok who have consumed functional beverages within the past six months. Bangkok was selected as the research setting due to its urban lifestyle, high population density, and wide availability of functional beverage products.

The sample size was determined based on recommended guidelines for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Given the number of observed variables, a minimum sample size was considered sufficient to ensure reliable estimation. To enhance statistical power and robustness, data were collected from 300 respondents. All responses were screened for completeness and validity, and a total of 300 valid responses were included in the final analysis.

A multi-stage sampling approach was employed. In the first stage, several districts in Bangkok were randomly selected. In the second stage, purposive sampling was used to recruit respondents who met the study criteria. Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via social media platforms, including Facebook and LINE.

Although the sample focuses on Generation Z consumers in Bangkok and relies on online data collection, this approach is appropriate for capturing digitally active consumers who represent the primary target group of this study. However, the findings should be interpreted with caution, as they may not be fully generalizable to other populations.

3.2 Measurement instrument

A structured questionnaire was developed as the primary data collection instrument based on relevant theories and empirical studies related to eWOM, brand experience, brand trust, and brand loyalty. Measurement items were adapted from previously validated scales and refined to suit the context of functional beverage consumption among Generation Z consumers.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first section included screening questions to confirm respondents' eligibility. The second section gathered demographic information. The third section assessed respondents' functional beverage consumption behavior. The final section measured the four latent constructs: eWOM, brand experience, brand trust, and brand loyalty.

All construct items were measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), following established measurement practices (Likert, 1961).

3.3 Validity and reliability

Content validity was evaluated by three experts in marketing and quantitative research using the Index of Item–Objective Congruence (IOC). The IOC values ranged from 0.67 to 1.00, indicating adequate alignment between the measurement items and the research objectives. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The results indicated that all constructs exhibited alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, demonstrating satisfactory reliability in line with established methodological standards (Hair et al., 2019).

3.4 Statistical analysis and ethical considerations

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. First, descriptive statistics were employed to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and functional beverage consumption behavior using frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

Second, data normality was assessed by examining skewness and kurtosis values. All values fell within acceptable ranges, indicating that the data met the normality assumptions required for SEM analysis.

Third, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the measurement model and to verify the relationships between observed variables and their respective latent constructs. After establishing acceptable measurement model fit, SEM was performed to test the hypothesized causal relationships among the constructs.

Model fit was evaluated using multiple goodness-of-fit indices, including the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df), Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2019) and Kline (2023).

This study was reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Panyapiwat Institute of Management (Approval No. PIM-REC 032/2568).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Respondents' profile

A total of 300 valid questionnaires were obtained for analysis. The demographic profile of the respondents indicates that the majority were female (64.7%). With respect to age distribution, respondents aged 18–22 years constituted the largest group (38.7%), followed by those aged 23–28 years (33.7%). Most respondents held a bachelor's degree or equivalent (67.0%), and the majority reported an average monthly income in the range of 15,001–30,000 THB (60.7%).

Overall, the sample represents a young, well-educated, and middle-income urban population, which is consistent with the characteristics of Generation Z in Bangkok. This profile is considered appropriate for examining consumption behavior in the functional beverage market, particularly among digitally active consumers.

4.2 Correlation analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the study variables. The results indicate that all constructs are significantly correlated at the 0.01 level, suggesting meaningful associations and supporting further structural analysis.

Table 1 Correlation matrix

Variables	eWOM	Brand experience	Brand trust	Brand loyalty
eWOM	1			
Brand experience	.844**	1		
Brand trust	.739**	.838**	1	
Brand loyalty	.610**	.794**	.803**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The results of the correlation analysis are summarized in Table 1. All key constructs are found to be positively and significantly correlated with one another. Overall, this suggests that higher levels of brand experience, brand trust, and engagement with online information are associated with stronger brand loyalty. Notably, the relationships among brand experience, brand trust, and brand loyalty appear particularly strong, indicating the potential importance of experiential and relational factors in shaping consumer behavior.

4.3 Reliability and validity of the measurement model

The measurement model was evaluated for reliability and validity using CFA, with the results reported in Table 2.

Table 2 Measurement model reliability and validity

Latent variables	Indicators	Factor loading (λ)	CR	AVE
eWOM	X1	.896	.915	.782
	X2	.877		
	X3	.880		
Brand experience	X4	.782	.913	.725
	X5	.889		
	X6	.894		
	X7	.838		
Brand trust	Y1	.951	.944	.849
	Y2	.879		
	Y3	.934		
Brand loyalty	Y4	.973	.873	.777
	Y5	.779		

All constructs demonstrate satisfactory levels of internal consistency, with reliability coefficients exceeding recommended thresholds. In addition, the indicators show adequate convergence in representing their respective latent variables. These findings suggest that the measurement instrument is both reliable and valid for capturing the key constructs examined in this study, thereby providing a sound basis for subsequent structural analysis.

4.4 Discriminant validity assessment

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Discriminant validity

Latent Variables	AVE	eWOM	Brand experience	Brand trust	Brand loyalty
eWOM	0.782	0.884			
Brand experience	0.725	0.450*	0.851		
Brand trust	0.849	0.085	0.616	0.921	
Brand loyalty	0.777	-0.207	0.794	0.615	0.881

As shown in Table 3, the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeds its correlations with other constructs, indicating adequate discriminant validity. Nevertheless, the relatively strong correlation between brand experience and brand loyalty suggests a close conceptual relationship, which should be interpreted with caution.

4.5 Structural model fit

The overall goodness-of-fit of the structural model was assessed prior to hypothesis testing as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Model fit indices of the structural model

Model fit indices	Acceptable amount	Final model	Result
χ^2/df	< 3.00	2.919	Accepted
GFI	≥ 0.90	0.953	Accepted
NFI	≥ 0.90	0.978	Accepted
CFI	≥ 0.90	0.985	Accepted
TLI	≥ 0.90	0.967	Accepted
RMSEA	$\leq 0.05-0.08$	0.080	Accepted

As shown in Table 4, the overall goodness-of-fit of the structural model was evaluated using multiple fit indices. The results indicate an acceptable to excellent model fit. The model demonstrates an acceptable to strong fit with the empirical data based on multiple goodness-of-fit indices. This suggests that the proposed conceptual framework adequately represents the relationships among eWOM, brand experience, brand trust, and brand loyalty within the studied context.

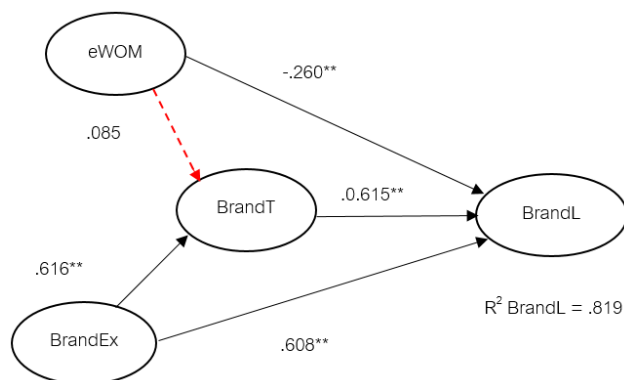


Figure 2 Final Structural Equation Model with Standardized Path Coefficients

4.6 Hypothesis testing results

The hypothesized relationships were tested using SEM, and the results are presented based on the estimated path coefficients and their statistical significance.

Table 5 Structural Path Estimates

Hypothesized path	Estimate (β)	S.E.	C.R.	P-value	Result
H1. eWOM $\rightarrow$ Brand trust	.085	.055	1.566	.117	Not supported
H2. eWOM $\rightarrow$ Brand loyalty	-.260	.071	-3.662	.000**	Not supported
H3. Brand experience $\rightarrow$ Brand trust	.616	.059	10.388	.000**	Supported
H4. Brand experience $\rightarrow$ Brand loyalty	.608	.098	6.178	.000**	Supported
H5. Brand trust $\rightarrow$ Brand loyalty	.615	.104	5.914	.000**	Supported

** $p < .001$

Table 5 presents the results of the structural model, focusing on the direct relationships among the constructs. The findings indicate that eWOM does not significantly influence brand trust ($\beta = 0.085$, $p = .117$), leading to the rejection of H1. In addition, eWOM has a statistically significant effect on brand loyalty ($\beta = -0.260$, $p < .001$); however, the relationship is negative and contrary to the proposed hypothesis. Therefore, H2 is not supported. This result suggests that exposure to online information may not strengthen consumer commitment and may instead weaken brand loyalty.

In contrast, brand experience demonstrates a strong positive influence on both brand trust ($\beta = 0.616$, $p < .001$) and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.608$, $p < .001$), supporting H3 and H4. These findings indicate that consumers who perceive a brand as engaging and reliable are more likely to develop trust and maintain long-term relationships. Furthermore, brand trust has a significant positive effect on brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.615$, $p < .001$), supporting H5 and confirming its role as a key relational mechanism in strengthening consumer commitment.

Table 6 Indirect effects and mediation analysis

Dependent variables	Independent variables	DE	IE	TE
Brand trust	eWOM	.085	-	.085
	Brand experience	.616	-	.616
Brand loyalty	eWOM	-.260	.052	-.207
	Brand experience	.608	.379	.987
	Brand trust	.615	-	.615

Table 6 presents the results of the mediation analysis by examining the indirect effects among the constructs. The findings indicate that brand trust does not mediate the relationship between eWOM and brand loyalty, as the indirect effect is not statistically significant. Therefore, H6 is not supported. In contrast, brand trust significantly mediates the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty. The indirect effect is positive and statistically significant, indicating that brand experience influences brand loyalty through the development of trust. Therefore, H7 is supported.

Overall, the results highlight that experiential mechanisms operate through both direct and indirect pathways, whereas informational inputs do not effectively translate into trust-based effects in this context.

4.7 Discussion

The findings provide a clear explanation of how brand loyalty is formed among Generation Z consumers in the functional beverage market. Overall, the results support the proposed model, particularly the roles of brand experience and brand trust as primary drivers of loyalty.

Brand experience is found to be a key determinant of both brand trust and brand loyalty, supporting H3 and H4. Consumers who perceive a brand as engaging, reliable, and meaningful are more likely to develop trust and maintain long-term commitment. This finding is consistent with prior studies suggesting that experiential interactions strengthen both trust and enduring consumer–brand relationships (Puteri et al., 2025; Na et al., 2023; Bae & Kim, 2023; Jantharapraphaporn & Wanarat, 2020). In addition, brand trust significantly enhances brand loyalty, supporting H5

and reinforcing its role as a central mechanism in sustaining consumer commitment (Azis et al., 2023; Sumarmi & Wijayanti, 2023).

In contrast, the role of eWOM is less straightforward. The results show that eWOM does not significantly influence brand trust, leading to the rejection of H1. Moreover, although eWOM has a statistically significant effect on brand loyalty, the relationship is negative and contrary to H2. Therefore, H2 is not supported. This finding suggests that exposure to online information may not reinforce brand commitment and may instead encourage comparison across alternatives, ultimately weakening loyalty.

This unexpected negative effect can be explained by the characteristics of Generation Z consumers, who are highly digitally literate and increasingly skeptical of online information. Their frequent exposure to large volumes of content may reduce the perceived credibility of eWOM, particularly in environments saturated with promotional and influencer-generated messages. As a result, online information may trigger critical evaluation rather than trust formation or loyalty reinforcement.

The findings also highlight the importance of the research context. Functional beverages are health-related products associated with higher perceived risk, which increases the need for reliable and credible evaluation. In such contexts, consumers appear to rely more on experiential validation than on externally generated information. Direct or observed experiences provide more tangible and trustworthy evidence of product performance, making them more influential in shaping both trust and loyalty.

The mediation results further clarify the underlying mechanism. Brand trust mediates the relationship between brand experience and brand loyalty, supporting H7. This indicates that experiential interactions influence loyalty both directly and indirectly through trust. In contrast, brand trust does not mediate the relationship between eWOM and brand loyalty, leading to the rejection of H6. This suggests that informational inputs do not effectively translate into trust-based commitment in this context.

Taken together, the findings reveal a consistent pattern across the model. Brand experience plays a more dominant role than eWOM in shaping brand loyalty, operating through both direct and indirect pathways. In contrast, eWOM demonstrates a limited and context-dependent influence, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between experiential and informational mechanisms in understanding consumer behavior.

4.8 Research limitations:

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample is limited to Generation Z consumers in Bangkok, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other geographic areas or demographic groups. Second, the study employs a cross-sectional research design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships over time. Future research may benefit from longitudinal approaches to better capture changes in consumer behavior. Third, the data were collected using self-reported measures, which may be subject to response bias. In addition, the use of a single survey instrument raises the possibility of common method bias, although procedural controls were applied to mitigate this issue.

5. Recommendations and Contributions

5.1 Practical implications and recommendations for future research

The findings of this study provide important practical implications for firms operating in the functional beverage market, particularly those targeting Generation Z consumers in Bangkok. The results highlight the central role of brand experience in shaping both brand trust and brand loyalty. Accordingly, firms are encouraged to prioritize experience-centered strategies by ensuring consistent product quality, sensory appeal, and functional performance. These factors are critical in reinforcing consumer confidence and fostering long-term relationships.

In addition, transparency in product-related communication should be emphasized. Clear and credible disclosure of ingredients and health-related claims can enhance perceived reliability and support the development of brand trust, especially in health-related consumption contexts where perceived risk is relatively high.

While eWOM remains an important component of digital marketing, the findings suggest that its influence is not uniformly positive. The observed negative relationship between eWOM and brand loyalty indicates that exposure to online information may, in some cases, encourage comparison across alternatives rather than reinforce commitment. This implies that firms should use eWOM as a complementary rather than a primary mechanism for building loyalty. Digital communication strategies should therefore be closely aligned with actual consumption experiences to minimize discrepancies between online messaging and perceived product performance.

It is important to note that these implications should be interpreted within the specific context of Generation Z consumers in Bangkok and may not be directly generalizable to other populations or product categories.

For future research, further investigation is needed to examine whether the relative roles of experiential and informational mechanisms observed in this study hold across different contexts. Comparative studies across regions, product categories, or generational cohorts may provide deeper insight into the boundary conditions of these relationships. In addition, incorporating constructs such as perceived risk, brand authenticity, or digital skepticism may help explain the context-dependent role of brand trust as a mediating mechanism in loyalty formation.

5.2 Contributions and benefits of research

Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to the brand loyalty literature by empirically distinguishing between experiential and informational pathways to loyalty formation among Generation Z consumers in the functional beverage market. It advances theoretical understanding by demonstrating the selective mediating role of brand trust, which operates strongly through brand experience but less consistently through eWOM. From a practical perspective, the findings provide actionable guidance for brand managers by emphasizing experience-centered and trust-based branding strategies over reliance on digital communication alone. Additionally, the results offer context-specific insights for improving the credibility of health-related communication, particularly within the functional beverage market.

6. Conclusion

This study identifies the key factors influencing brand loyalty among Generation Z consumers in the functional beverage market. The findings demonstrate that brand experience plays a central role in shaping both brand trust and brand loyalty, while brand trust further strengthens loyalty as a key relational mechanism. In contrast, eWOM

shows a limited and inconsistent influence, as it does not significantly contribute to trust formation and is negatively associated with brand loyalty.

The findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between experiential and informational mechanisms in understanding consumer behavior. In this context, experiential factors appear to be more influential than informational inputs in shaping trust and long-term commitment. From a managerial perspective, firms should prioritize authentic and consistent brand experiences rather than relying solely on digital communication strategies. However, these findings should be interpreted within the context of functional beverages among Generation Z consumers in Bangkok.

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