



The Impact of Anthropomorphic IP on Purchase Intention: An Empirical Study of PD's "Xiao Wanzi"

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ABSTRACT: Rising customer acquisition costs have driven brands to cultivate private communities for user retention. This study investigates the mechanism underlying PD's anthropomorphic IP (IP An), Xiao Wanzi, to examine how IP An shapes Purchase Intention (PI) via brand relationship building. Based on a survey of 300 valid samples, hierarchical regression analysis and Bootstrap testing reveal that Brand Relationship (BR) fully mediates the relationship between IP An and PI. Specifically, while the IP's visual and behavioral traits attract attention, their conversion into purchase decisions is entirely contingent on the cultivation of trust and emotional intimacy. These findings challenge the assumption that IP appeal directly drives sales, offering beauty brands strategic insights for optimizing private-domain conversion through relationship-centric IP operations.

KEYWORDS: Anthropomorphic IP (IP An), Brand Relationship (BR), Customer Relationship Management, Purchase Intention (PI), Xiao Wanzi

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, customer acquisition costs on mainstream ecommerce platforms have risen persistently, prompting enterprises to transfer public domain users into private communities for long-term user retention. Private domain operation has thus become a central strategy for managing customer relationships, tapping user value and cultivating brand equity. In practice, however, many brand communities suffer from inadequate user trust, fragile emotional connections and weak relational adhesion, alongside low purchase conversion efficiency. These flaws prevent brands from boosting user identification and PI via steady customer ties (Wei, 2026). Against this backdrop, PD leverages IP An "Xiao Wanzi" and granular community operations to narrow the psychological distance between the brand and consumers, and has grown into a benchmark for customer relationship management and private domain conversion within the beauty sector. By 2023, the number of WeChat groups under Xiao Wanzi Perfect Lab had surpassed 1,000. However, the underlying mechanism through which this IP An exerts an influence on consumers' PIs via customer relationships and brand identification has yet to receive systematic empirical investigation.

In response to this research gap, the present study selects PD's IP An "Xiao Wanzi" as its core research object. This paper clarifies how IP An shapes consumers' PIs within private communities, and identifies whether BR acts as the mediating mechanism of such influence. Existing research on PD has mostly adopted the macro four Ps marketing framework, while this study takes a unique micro analytical perspective. It centers on the exclusive IP Xiao Wanzi and carries out an in-depth analysis grounded in customer relationship management theory.

In terms of approach, this study first reviews the theories of anthropomorphic marketing and BR to formulate hypotheses, then collects data through a questionnaire survey, and finally conducts statistical analysis using SPSS to examine whether the data support the proposed hypotheses, with the aim of providing practical reference for the private-domain operation of domestic beauty brands.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

This study primarily examines the influence of an IP An in private domain settings on PI, an issue that involves the construction of relationships between consumers and brands. To better support the subsequent model building, four key theoretical perspectives are highlighted. The first is "brand community" theory, because private domain operation is essentially community operation; the second is "anthropomorphic marketing" theory, which is foundational to explaining the effect of the "Xiao Wanzi" IP; and finally, "customer relationship management" and "BR" theories are employed to explain the intermediate conversion process from IP to purchase.

2.1.1 Brand Community

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) first introduced the concept of “brand community,” defining it as a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand. They identified three core markers of brand community: consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Consciousness of kind refers to members' mutual identification; rituals and traditions denote the shared behavioral customs formed within the community; and moral responsibility captures members' willingness to safeguard the community and the brand. McAlexander et al. (2002) further extended this concept, conceptualizing the brand community as a network of relationships surrounding the customer, including the relationship between customer and brand, customer and company, customer and product, and customer and other customers.

2.1.2 Anthropomorphic Marketing

Anthropomorphic marketing refers to the practice of endowing a brand or product with human characteristics so that consumers perceive it as possessing human attributes. The dimensions of anthropomorphic marketing primarily encompass an external dimension and an internal dimension. The external dimension involves imitating human features in visual design, such as anthropomorphic packaging and cartoon imagery; the internal dimension entails adopting humanized language and behavioral patterns in communication to convey emotion and personality. In private-domain settings, internal anthropomorphism fosters an emotional bond between brand and consumer through sustained interaction. The present study therefore focuses on the influence of internal anthropomorphic marketing on customer relationships within brand communities (Golossenko et al., 2020).

2.1.3 Customer Relationship Management Theory

Customer relationship management (CRM) integrates the customer-centric philosophy into software systems, combining modern information technology with business philosophy and managerial thought to form a new management mechanism aimed at improving the relationship between enterprises and their customers (Hu et al., 2019). The core objective of traditional CRM is to maximize customer lifetime value by enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty. In the digital era, the scope of CRM has expanded beyond transaction-record management and after-sales service handling to encompass omnichannel user experience management and socialized relationship maintenance.

2.1.4 BR Management Theory

Like interpersonal partners, brands can build long-term emotional bonds, value recognition and behavioral commitments with consumers. The core of this mechanism lies in stabilizing lasting consumer ties via trust and reciprocity alongside sustained interaction (Meng & Wang, 2026). Against the backdrop of digital transformation and community engagement, the scope of this theory has expanded past conventional transaction maintenance to include community communication, ritual experience and value co-creation. It highlights the shift of consumers from passive receivers of brand messages to active participants in BR. This theory offers a vital theoretical foundation for exploring how brands develop deep emotional bonds with their users (Duan & Xiong, 2026; Peng et al., 2026).

2.2 Literature Review

Existing research has begun to explore the marketing effects of brand anthropomorphism. Aggarwal and McGill (2007) demonstrated that when a product is endowed with human-like features, consumers perceive it as human beings and elicit positive emotional responses. Fournier's (1998) BR theory similarly shows that consumers form relationships with brands just as they do with people.

However, most extant research has focused on anthropomorphic design at the visual product dimension or anthropomorphic communication via a single social media account, while empirical research exploring how IP An influences customer relationships in private community contexts remains scarce. In the field of brand community research, McAlexander et al. (2002) emphasized the impact of community interaction on customer loyalty, yet few studies treat IP An as an independent participant in community interaction.

Accordingly, this study takes PD's “Xiao Wanzi” as a case to unpack the underlying mechanism by which an IP An affects customer relationships within brand communities.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES AND MODEL CONSTRUCTION

3.1 Research Hypotheses

3.1.1 The Effect of Brand Anthropomorphism on PI

In private domain traffic operations, an IP An first captures consumers' immediate attention through its visual and behavioral cues. According to the S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) paradigm and cognitive psychology,

anthropomorphic appearance (e.g., the girl-next-door persona of “Xiao Wanzi”) and anthropomorphic linguistic style can effectively lower consumers' cognitive thresholds, rendering brand information more readily identifiable and memorable. Such immediate appeal can arouse positive emotions, generating short-term brand favorability that directly triggers potential trial and purchase impulses. In other words, an IP An inherently fulfills an “emotional persuasion” function capable of bypassing complex decision processes to act directly on PI. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is proposed as follows:

H1: A brand's IP An positively influences PI.

3.1.2 The Mediating Role of BR

Although an IP An can create immediate appeal, long-term conversion relies more on deeper psychological connections. From the perspective of private domain customer relationship management, “Xiao Wanzi” turns consumers' initial favorable impressions of the IP into deep brand identification through sustained interaction and lifestyle-focused operations. Consumers regard the IP as a “close friend” or “companion”, and this perception encourages them to build trust, identification, and intimacy with the brand to form high-quality BR. This high-quality BR further strengthens consumers' PIs. BR thus serves as a core transmission pathway for the effects of IP An. Hence:

H2: BR mediates the relationship between the brand's IP An and consumers' PIs.

3.2 Model Construction

Drawing on anthropomorphic marketing, BR theory, and CRM research, this study constructs a conceptual model. PD through the refined operation of the IP An “Xiao Wanzi,” narrows the distance between brand and consumer via concrete persona-based interaction, distinguishing itself in the private domain operation of domestic beauty brands and serving as a paradigmatic case of optimizing customer relationships and driving conversion through IP building. Accordingly, the variables are defined as follows: the independent variable is perceived IP An, operationalized through three dimensions—appearance anthropomorphism, behavioral anthropomorphism, and emotional anthropomorphism; the mediating variable is BR, measured across the three dimensions of trust, identification, and intimacy; and the dependent variable is consumer PI. The model specifies two causal pathways. First, perceived IP An directly influences consumers' PI. Second, the IP An cultivates consumers' trust, identification, and intimacy toward the brand, fostering a high-quality BR that, in turn, enhances PI—constituting the indirect mediating pathway of “perceived IP An → BR → PI.”

To preclude individual differences among respondents from confounding the empirical results, gender, age, consumption level, and prior purchase experience of PD cosmetics are incorporated as control variables. Data collected via questionnaire will be used to empirically test the direct effect of IP An on PI and the mediating role of BR. The resulting research model is depicted in **Figure 1**:

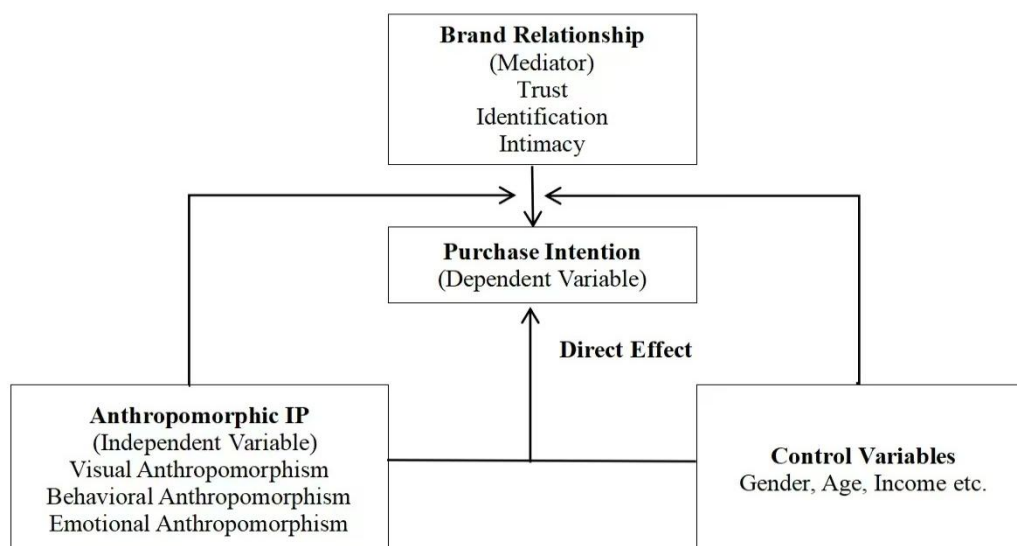


Figure 1 conceptual model of the relationships among IP An, BR, and PI

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Research Design

4.1.1 Research Objectives

This study aims to verify Hypotheses H1 and H2, namely that IP An positively influences consumers' PI in brand communities, and that BR plays a mediating role in this relationship. Specifically, this study adopts empirical data to clarify two influencing paths. First, the appearance, behavioral, and emotional anthropomorphic characteristics of the private-domain IP "Xiao Wanzi" directly drive consumers' PI. Second, IP An can foster consumers' trust, identity, and emotional closeness, optimize BR quality, and further promote consumers' PI through improved BR.

4.1.2 Data Collection and Respondents

To test the hypotheses proposed above, this study adopts a questionnaire survey research design. Since PD's core user groups reside in private communities, the brand's existing and potential consumers were chosen as survey respondents. Questionnaires were released online via the Credamo platform. To guarantee data validity, attention check questions were inserted into the survey instrument; samples with unreasonably short completion times or repetitive patterned answers were eliminated. The retained valid data were then utilized to conduct the subsequent model tests.

4.1.3 Variable Measurement

The measurement scales adopted in this survey were mainly adapted from well-established domestic and foreign literature, with moderate revisions tailored to the practical context of PD's IP An "Xiao Wanzi". All questionnaire items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale.

Specifically, the independent variable of perceived IP An, covering visual, behavioral and emotional dimensions with five items in total, drew on the scale developed by Golossenko and Pillai (2020). The mediating variable BR, consisting of five items measuring trust, identification and intimacy, was adapted from the scale designed by Akrouf and Nagy (2018). The dependent variable PI contained three items referenced from the classic scale proposed by Dodds et al. (1991). In addition, demographic variables including gender and age were incorporated into the analysis as control variables.

4.2 Pre-survey and Scale Revision

4.2.1 Pre-survey Sample Description

To verify the validity and applicability of the measurement scales, this study first conducted a pilot survey, from which 30 valid questionnaires were collected. Demographic statistics of the pilot sample revealed that female respondents accounted for 76.7% of participants, while the 18–25 age group made up 40.0%. A total of 86.7% of respondents had prior purchasing experience with PD. The overall sample profile largely matched the characteristics of the brand's target consumers, indicating that the pilot data possessed preliminary reference value.

4.2.2 Reliability and Validity Testing

Data analysis of the pilot survey (Table 1) demonstrated that the Cronbach's α coefficients of the three scales all exceeded 0.8, the KMO values met the required criteria, and Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded significant results. These outcomes indicated that the preliminary questionnaire exhibited satisfactory reliability and validity. Nevertheless, item analysis revealed that item AN3 within the perceived IP An scale had a low correlation with the total score ($r < 0.3$). The original item "Xiaowanzi seems to have its own intentions" may have had low correlation due to unclear meaning or cultural differences. To guarantee measurement accuracy, this study revised this item to "Xiaowanzi can imagine things independently" with reference to the original scale and expert feedback. The revised questionnaire was adopted for the formal large-scale survey.

Table 1 Reliability and Validity Test Results of the Pilot Scales

Scale	Items	Cronbach's α	KMO	Bartlett's Test
IPAn	5	0.800	0.757	<0.001
BR	5	0.862	0.830	<0.001
PI	3	0.881	0.745	<0.001

4.3 Formal Experiment Data Analysis

Based on the pre-survey results, item AN3 of the perceived IP An scale was revised to form the formal questionnaire. A formal survey was subsequently conducted via the Credamo platform, yielding 300 valid samples. The formal survey data were primarily used to test the research hypotheses and verify the mediating role of BR between perceived IP An and consumers' PIs.

4.3.1 Descriptive Statistics

A total of 300 valid questionnaires were collected. As shown in **Table 2**, female respondents accounted for 73.3% of the sample, participants aged 18–25 made up 34.0%, and 87.3% of respondents had prior purchase experience of PD products. Respondents between 18 and 40 years old constituted 87.6% of all participants, while 86.0% stated that they paid close attention to beauty and skincare products. The sample profile was largely consistent with the brand's real target customer base, demonstrating adequate representativeness and meeting the prerequisites for subsequent reliability and validity tests, correlation analysis, and regression analysis.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	80	26.7
	Female	220	73.3
Age	Under 18	1	0.3
	18-25	102	34.0
	26-30	79	26.3
	31-40	82	27.3
	41-50	25	8.3
	51-60	7	2.3
	Over 60	1	1.3
Purchase Experience	Never purchased	38	12.7
	Purchased once	58	19.3
	Purchased 2–3 times	136	45.3
	Purchased 4 times or more	68	22.7
Attention to Beauty	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
	Disagree	6	2.0
	Somewhat disagree	17	5.7
	Neutral	19	6.3
	Somewhat agree	96	32.0
	Agree	115	38.3
	Strongly agree	47	15.7

4.3.2 Reliability and Validity Testing

SPSS was used to conduct reliability and validity analysis to verify the reliability and validity of the scales and to ensure that each item authentically reflected respondents' attitudes. The results are presented in **Table 3**.

Reliability: The IP An scale yielded a Cronbach's α of 0.837, the BR scale a Cronbach's α of 0.850, and the PI scale a Cronbach's α of 0.722. All three scales exceeded the 0.7 threshold, indicating satisfactory internal consistency and passing the reliability test. Notably, the reliability of the revised IP An scale improved relative to the pre-survey.

Validity: The KMO values of all dimensions exceeded 0.7 (maximum 0.85), the p-values of Bartlett's test of sphericity were all below 0.01, and the cumulative variance explained surpassed 60%, demonstrating adequate inter-item correlation and acceptable construct validity. Compared with the pre-survey, the Cronbach's α of the IP An scale increased from 0.800 to 0.837, indicating that the revised scale possesses good internal consistency and stability. All scales met the research requirements and were deemed suitable for subsequent statistical analysis.

Table 3 Reliability and Validity Results

Scale	Items	Cronbach's α	KMO	Bartlett's Test
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4.3.3 Correlation Analysis

The results of Pearson correlation analysis (see **Table 4**) illustrated that perceived IPAn was significantly positively correlated with BR ($r = 0.502$, $p < 0.001$); perceived IP An had a significant positive correlation with PI ($r = 0.371$, $p < 0.001$); BR was significantly positively correlated with PI ($r = 0.813$, $p < 0.001$). The correlation direction of all variables was consistent with theoretical expectations, which satisfied the preconditions for regression analysis and mediating effect testing.

Table 4 Pearson Correlation Analysis of Key Variables

Variable 1	Variable 2	Pearson r	p	Significance
IP An	BR	0.502	<0.001	**
IPAn	PI	0.371	<0.001	**
BR	PI	0.813	<0.001	**

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.

4.3.4 Regression Analysis and Mediation Test

To further examine the mediating effect of BR between perceived IP An and PI, hierarchical regression analysis was utilized to test the research hypotheses. The regression outcomes are shown in **Table 5**.

Main Effect Test: Model 1 revealed that perceived IP An exerted a significant positive effect on PI ($\beta = 0.371$), with the model R^2 being 0.138. This indicated that perceived IP An explained 13.8% of the variance in PI, which verified Hypothesis H1.

Mediation Effect Test: Model 2 confirmed that perceived IP An significantly predicted BR ($\beta = 0.502$, $p < 0.001$). Crucially, in **Model 3**, the inclusion of BR rendered the direct path from IP An to PI non-significant ($\beta = -0.049$, $p > 0.05$). The emergence of a negative coefficient is statistically indicative of a potential suppression effect, further confirming that the IP's influence on purchase decisions is fully transmitted through relationship cultivation. Without the mediator, the IP's standalone appeal holds negligible predictive power. The model's R^2 rose to 0.685, confirming a substantial improvement in explanatory power.

In accordance with the mediation evaluation criteria of Baron and Kenny, after controlling the mediator variable, if the independent variable's effect turns insignificant with its coefficient decreasing while the mediator's coefficient remains significant, a full mediating effect is confirmed. Therefore, BR serves as a full mediator between perceived IP An and PI, which supports Hypothesis H2. The overall model R^2 is 0.685, suggesting acceptable model fit.

Table 5 Hierarchical Regression and Mediation Test Results

Model	Variable	β	t	Sig.	R^2	Adj. R^2	F
1	(X→Y)				0.138	0.138	47.568
	IP An	0.371	6.897	0.001			
2	(X→M)				0.252	0.249	100.221
	IPAn	0.502	10.011	0.001			
3	(X+M→Y)				0.685	0.685	322.455
	IP An	-0.049	-1.265	0.207			
	BR	0.838	21.508	<0.001			

Bootstrap supplementary test: To further verify the robustness of the mediating effect, this study performed Bootstrap analysis with 5000 sampling iterations via the PROCESS macro. As presented in **Table 6**, the indirect effect of BR was significant (indirect effect = 0.421, 95% CI [0.333, 0.516]), whereas the direct effect of perceived IP An on PI was non-significant (direct effect = -0.049, 95% CI [-0.124, 0.027]). This finding confirmed that BR exerted a full mediating effect in the path from perceived IP An to PI, which lent support to Hypothesis H2.

Table 6 Bootstrap Mediation Test Results

Effect Type	Effect Value	Boot SE	95% CI	Decision
Indirect	0.421	0.046	0.333, 0.516	Significant
Direct	-0.049	0.039	-0.124, 0.027	Not Significant
Total	0.372	0.054	0.266, 0.478	Significant

Note: Bootstrap resamples = 5,000; confidence intervals are bias-corrected (CI).

4.4 Discussion

4.4.1 The Single-Pathway Role of IP An in Private-Domain Operations

This study found that the impact of perceived IP An on consumers' PI is mainly realized through BR. This reveals the dual roles of IP An in private domain operations: (1) acting as a "magnet" to attract consumer attention via its intuitive appeal (significant effect in **Model 1**); (2) serving as a "bonding agent" to establish long-term connections through continuous

interactions. This conclusion differs from prior research that only focused on the visual attractiveness of IPs, underscoring that the relationship-building function of IPs is more critical than visual attractiveness in private domains featuring frequent user-brand interactions.

4.4.2 BR as the Core Conversion Pathway

Notably, upon introducing BR, the direct effect of perceived IP An was fully suppressed (the coefficient became non-significant). Statistically, this indicated that BR absorbed the vast majority of the IP's explanatory power over PI. This implies that managers cannot sustain long-term conversion by relying solely on the “cuteness” or “amusement” of the IP image; only by translating IP interaction into genuine brand emotional connection can the leap from “traffic” to “sales” be achieved.

RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Conclusions and Prospects

This study takes PD's private-domain IP “Xiao Wanzi” as the research object, collects 300 valid samples through questionnaire surveys, and explores the influence of perceived IP An on consumers' PI as well as the mediating effect of BR. The main research conclusions are summarized as follows:

5.1.1 The Apparent Direct Effect of IP An on PI

Initial correlation analysis (Model 1) revealed a significant positive association between IP An and PI ($r = 0.371$, $p < 0.001$), seemingly supporting H1. However, this direct effect was fully absorbed by the mediator in the subsequent regression model. This implies that while the anthropomorphic traits of “Xiao Wanzi”—its visual appearance and behavioral persona—serve as effective initial stimuli to lower cognitive thresholds, they do not directly trigger purchase behaviors. The initial correlation observed is essentially a reflection of the strong relational pathway, rather than a standalone direct driver of sales.

5.1.2 The Promoting Effect of IP An on BR

Analysis results demonstrated that perceived IP An exerted a significant positive impact on BR ($r = 0.502$, $p < 0.001$). This finding implies that when the private-domain IP “Xiao Wanzi” displays distinct personal traits and conducts continuous social interactions with consumers, it can effectively reduce consumers' psychological defense and strengthen their sense of trust, identity and closeness toward the brand. This result verifies that IP An serves as an effective tool for establishing high-quality BR within private domain scenarios, and it also provides empirical evidence for brands to address the problem of insufficient user stickiness in private domain operations.

5.1.3 The Mediating Mechanism of BR

The full mediation effect underscores a critical insight: in private-domain contexts, IP An function not as direct sales promoters, but as relational infrastructure. The transmission path follows a strict IP characteristics → BR quality → purchase decision logic. The trust, identity, and emotional closeness (the dimensions of BR) act as the necessary conversion mechanism. Without establishing this high-quality relationship, the IP's cuteness or friendliness alone fails to translate into tangible purchasing power. This validates the core argument that successful private-domain operation relies on converting traffic into relationships.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications

5.2.1 Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contributions of this study lie in exploring how anthropomorphic IP characters affect consumers' purchase decisions and BR through in-depth analysis of consumer psychology, which provides empirical evidence for subsequent relevant research. Meanwhile, this research helps enrich the research on the anthropomorphic marketing dimension within brand community theory and expands the application scope of customer relationship management theory in private domain community scenarios.

5.2.2 Managerial Implications

The practical significance of this study is to offer actionable suggestions for community building and marketing promotion of similar brands by analyzing the successful practice of “Xiao Wanzi”. In addition, it can serve as a reference for peer brands in IP design as well as customer relationship maintenance.

5.3 Research Limitations

First of all, this study only selected BR as the mediating variable, and did not incorporate other potential predictors of PI such as price perception, brand image and product reputation into the research model. Hence, there is still room to further improve the explanatory power of the model. Secondly, all research data were collected via online questionnaires. Respondents' answers might be influenced by their subjective perceptions and hypothetical survey contexts, which leads to certain deviations from their actual consumption behaviors in real scenarios.

5.4 Future Outlook

Future researchers can expand the sample size to enhance the representativeness of the conclusions. Additional variables such as product type and price perception can be incorporated to refine the research model, together with extra mediating and moderating variables. Furthermore, follow-up studies could collect offline sample data to further validate the findings of this study from the perspective of consumers' actual purchasing behaviors.

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