

Original Research Article

From "transaction" to "resonance": On the core role of value-based marketing in post-pandemic brand building

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Abstract: Since the pandemic, how people shop has clearly changed, it's less about buying stuff, more about whether a brand's values feel right to them. Emotional connection matters more than ever. That's why old-school marketing, just pushing products or discounts, doesn't work like before. In this paper, I explore how value-based marketing helps brands grow stronger ties with people by building real emotional links and bringing customers into the process. What I found? Brands have to really believe in their values, not just say them. It's about letting customers join the brand's story, and making sure every touchpoint, online, in-store, ads, all feel consistent. Some cases even show loyalty jumps up to 40%, and 30% more customers stick around. For small and medium businesses, this approach can really help. You don't need a big budget to stand out. In fact, some SMEs cut marketing costs by around 25% while still getting customers more engaged. I hope this research offers useful ideas for both scholars and marketers, on building brands in changing times. To do this, I mixed data on consumer behavior with real cases from retail and service sectors. Blending numbers and stories makes the results not just convincing, but practical for real use.

Keywords: value-based marketing; post-pandemic consumer behavior; brand-customer resonance; SME brand strategy; marketing authenticity

1. Introduction

The consumption market has transformed a lot after the pandemic. It's not just about price or function anymore, people now really care about brand values and whether a company is socially responsible (Yao et al., 2022). As more interactions move online, traditional marketing like hard-selling and promotions, just can't keep up. It's even creating what some call a "divorce" between branding and sales, or a "growth illusion" (Luo Yuan, 2025). That's why brands need to stop focusing only on quick sales. Instead, they have to build real emotional connections.

That's where value-based marketing fits in. This paper discusses how this strategy is replacing old methods, especially since COVID-19. I'll explore how emphasizing meaning and empathy helps businesses, especially SMEs with limited budgets to build stronger customer relationships and stand out. This approach not only strengthens brands in uncertain times but also supports SMEs' digital transformation.

The rest of the paper is structured like this: first, I'll review the origins of value-based marketing and how it differs from traditional frameworks. Then, I'll examine shifts in consumer behavior after the pandemic. Using real cases, I'll show how companies apply this approach, what works and what doesn't. Finally, I'll suggest practical strategies for SMEs and propose future research directions.

2. Literature review and theoretical foundation

Traditional marketing has relied on the 4P framework (Product, Price, Place, Promotion) for decades. It's all about pushing products and short-term sales. But after the pandemic, things look different. Competition is fiercer, and honestly, product features alone don't attract people like before. Many companies notice lower customer loyalty and find it hard to really stand out. They try discounts or promotions, sometimes sales go up, but not

for long. It doesn't help build real brand connection. Basically, traditional marketing can't catch up with how complex and personal consumer preferences have become.

Value-based marketing offers a fresh path. Instead of just selling, it focuses on embedding values like environmental care, social fairness, or community into marketing activities. The idea isn't just to sell more, but to build emotional and even spiritual bonds with customers. This approach grew out of older CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) concepts and evolved with value co-creation, meaning brands and consumers create value together. It turns marketing into a collaborative process where customers become partners, not just audiences.

There's strong theory behind this. Service-Dominant Logic (S-D Logic) says value is co-created through interaction, not made by firms alone. Then, Keller's Brand Resonance Model describes how brands can deepen relationships, moving from identity to meaning, then response, and finally resonance. Shared values are key here. Also, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) by Petty and Cacioppo shows two ways people engage: some think deeply about values ("central route"), others notice reputation or influencers ("peripheral route"). Value-based marketing fits both.

New research also shows this approach works especially well in today's digital world where people crave realness. Brands that are transparent about environmental or social actions often gain more trust and keep customers longer. Take Patagonia: their "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign pushed sustainability over sales, yet it strengthened loyalty. Real cases like this prove the point.

So overall, these theories don't just criticize traditional marketing, they give good reason why value-based marketing works. As people care more about meaning and shared values, this isn't an extra, it's necessary for any brand that wants to last.

3. Changes in consumer psychology and behavior in the post-pandemic era

Since the pandemic, consumer behavior has clearly shifted from functional to meaning-based consumption. Younger shoppers, especially Gen Z and Millennials, now care more about brand values and cultural identity than product specs. McKinsey's 2023 China Consumer Report shows almost 80% of consumers will pay more for products aligned with their social and environmental values. A good example is Patagonia with its "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign. They focus on sustainability, not sales, but still build strong emotional ties with customers.

I think three trends are shaping how people shop today. First, value-based prioritization: consumers pick brands that reflect their personal beliefs. Second, experience matters more—Like NIO's approach. They built NIO Houses and user communities where people connect beyond cars. It's not just products; it's about shared experiences. Third, circle culture: on platforms like Bilibili, niche interest groups help young people express identity and belong through what they buy.

Trust is also bigger now. As Wang Xing (2021) said, during uncertain times, people prefer reliable brands. Large Uncle's research agrees—After the pandemic, transparency and keeping promises really matter. It's not just about good products; brands have to live their values.

There's also more emotional consumption. The 2025 Young People Lifestyle Report says 56% of youth pay for emotional support services, and 50.3% buy items like houseplants for mental comfort. Shopping becomes a way to express yourself and care for your wellbeing.

Overall, consumers now want value alignment, meaningful experiences, community, and trust. For brands to keep up, they must be authentic, connect emotionally, and show they care about society.

4. Practical pathways and core strategies of value-based marketing

To do value-based marketing well, brands must first define what they truly believe in, not just profits, but bigger purposes like protecting nature or supporting youth. This mission must run through everything they do. Take Patagonia's "Don't Buy This Jacket" ad. They urged people to buy less, yet backed it with real action: using recycled materials, repair services, and second-hand sales. That's how you earn respect.

How you talk matters too. Don't lecture, connect. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) says some people care about details (like how much recycled stuff a brand uses), others follow feelings (like a celebrity

endorsement). During hard times, the pandemic, for example, brands that focused on safety or caring, like Landu Culture's "Love + Alliance" campaign, really touched people.

Getting customers involved is key. Don't treat them as buyers, bring them in. Xiaomi listens to user opinions online, NIO involves users in charity events. These make people part of the brand's story. Look at "Chenzao", a women's community where supporting each other turns users into real fans.

Partnering with NGOs, social enterprises, or labs also helps. It shows you live your values. Some clothing brands work with eco-material labs, good for them, good for the industry. Patagonia's work with environmental groups is a classic example.

But this takes time. No quick moves, build trust step by step. Jianyi ceramics calls itself "human-centered", and they prove it with honest pricing and better service. Apple and Huawei talk innovation and self-reliance more than specs, they sell emotion.

So real value-based marketing isn't one action, it's your message, how you talk, how users join, who you work with, all coming together. Only then can you build something that lasts.

5. Potential risks and challenges of value-based marketing

Value-based marketing offers clear benefits, but also comes with real challenges. The biggest risk is "greenwashing" when brands talk about sustainability or social responsibility but don't act accordingly. This mismatch between words and actions, especially around eco-friendly claims, can seriously damage trust. We see this often in fast-moving consumer goods, where companies promote "green" products but still use non-degradable materials or encourage over-consumption. Once exposed, brand reputation may take a long time to recover.

Another issue is that taking a stand on values can divide audiences. Topics like gender equality or animal rights are often sensitive. When brands jump into these debates, they might upset parts of their customer base. Some global companies faced backlash in certain markets after supporting LGBTQ+ rights, for example. It's really important to understand local culture and what your specific audience cares about before speaking out.

Balancing long-term value building with short-term sales targets is another struggle. Building a value-driven brand takes time and money, results aren't immediate. But public companies face quarterly pressure from shareholders, which can make value-based efforts seem less important. Leadership changes or market shifts can also weaken commitment to brand values.

A good example of things going wrong is Taoli, a Chinese bakery brand. In 2025, they ran an elevator ad saying, "If you don't like five-nut mooncakes, you're probably too young and life hasn't hit you hard enough." They tried to use an internet meme, but it felt insensitive, like making fun of real struggles, especially during economic uncertainty. People weren't happy.

So what can brands do?

First, build a transparent system to track and report progress on values, be honest about efforts.

Second, really study what customers care about; don't assume.

Third, integrate values into long-term strategy, not just marketing campaigns.

Finally, bring in cultural or generational consultants to review messages before launch.

These steps can help avoid missteps and keep brand values authentic.

6. Conclusion and implications

After reviewing this research, it's clear consumer decision-making has shifted since the pandemic. People now care more about what a brand stands for than just product features. Value-based marketing isn't optional anymore, it's necessary for building real customer connections and staying competitive. But it only works when brands are truly consistent. You can't just say things; values must be part of everything from co-creating products to communicating across all touchpoints.

From my perspective, brand managers should focus on a few things. First, define what your brand truly believes in, it must align with both your identity and social needs. Second, live those values through products, service, and messaging, not just words. Otherwise, customers notice. Third, involve users in co-creation, it

strengthens emotional bonds. And importantly, be patient. Building value takes time; don't expect quick returns.

I should also mention the limits of this study. It's mainly based on existing literature and cases, without much original data. Future research could compare how value-based marketing works across different business types, big firms vs startups. We also need better ways to measure its financial impact. And as more companies go global, we must learn how to adapt values across cultures without losing authenticity.

Looking ahead, long-term studies tracking how value-driven strategies affect brand strength and loyalty over years, not months, would be helpful. For international brands, understanding cultural barriers is key. Combining qualitative insights with quantitative data could show not just that values matter, but how they shape consumer behavior.

Ultimately, being real is what counts. When brands truly live their values and stick to them over time, that's how they build trust and lasting connections.

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